University of Bath

UNIVERSITY OF BATH

PHD

Civil society activism in authoritarian contexts: (re)structuring state-society relations in Vietnam

Vu, Ngoc Anh

Award date:
2017

Awarding institution:
University of Bath

Link to publication

Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:
openaccess@bath.ac.uk

Civil society activism in authoritarian contexts: (re)structuring state-society relations in Vietnam

ANH NGOC VU

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Bath

Department of Social & Policy Sciences

April 2017

COPYRIGHT

to my mum and dad for asking me to pursue my dream
with freedom, compassion and love

and to my little nephews Bin, Zen, and Tom and
my little niece Soc
for being the light of my life

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

There is a sizeable lacuna in the literature on civil society activism in authoritarian contexts. My research aims to address this gap by offering a conceptual framework that covers two contrasting forms of activism, i.e. NGO- and citizen-led activism. In particular, the thesis provides a detailed ethnographic account of both NGO- and citizen-led activism in Vietnam and reflects upon the politics of evolving state-society relations in the same country. Analytically, drawing on the relational approach to civil society and mainstream social movement theories, the research focuses on legitimacy, autonomy, as well as formality and informality as the defining characteristics of civil society activism. This framework is applied in the context of Vietnam but arguably can be applied in other authoritarian contexts. This is because these concepts are not only grounded in theories, for they are validated and triangulated through my data collection and analysis.

In relation to the NGO-led activism, the thesis showcases a detailed process through which a local NGO orchestrates mobilisation to help local ethnic minorities claim forest land from the state institutions. In relation to the citizen-led activism, the thesis examines a recent broad-based citizen-led movement (the Trees Movement) established to oppose the government's decision to cut down thousands of large old trees lining the streets of Hanoi and to demand government accountability. Whilst the latter displays a transient, time-bound, issue-based and more antagonistic form of activism, the former illustrates a more sustainable, collaborative, embedded form. Both case studies seek to generate regulatory legitimacy for their activism by appealing to the official state agenda and discourse. Yet, critical differences exist between their legitimation strategies. Whilst the NGO focused on generating pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy, the Trees Movement was more concerned with generating normative legitimacy.

In seeking to understand civil society activism in Vietnam, this thesis challenges mainstream civil society theories (liberal tradition) that portray an autonomous and conflictual state-society relationship. It also challenges dominant social movement theories (political process theory) that focus exclusively on the dynamics of overt confrontation with the state. By embracing and problematising different forms of civil society activism, the thesis argues that civil society groups under authoritarian regimes like Vietnam, regardless of whether they are formal and registered or informal and unregistered, have to orchestrate their activism within the state agenda and discourse. Since state authority under authoritarianism remains strong and resilient in the face of a strengthening civil society, being embedded in the state is critical because it offers some guarded room for manoeuvre for civil society groups to accomplish collective goals.

Existing scholarship on civil society activism in Vietnam has focused on either state or society-led change. This has led to two different narratives: one around the notion of a strong state and the other around the notion of a vibrant civil society. The thesis contests these polarities and argues that a strong state is not synonymous with state effectiveness and accountability, and that a vibrant civil society does not necessarily lead to positive social outcomes such as political reform or democratisation. Crucially as civil society activism grows and takes on innovative forms, the strength of the state seems also to be growing.

This thesis rejects the tendency that exists in much of the current literature to downplay NGO-led engagement at the expense of more antagonistic forms of activism, such as public protests and social movements. Existing accounts also tend to treat each form of activism separately. My research looks at the two forms comparatively and recognises their differences as well as their similarities, their opportunities and their challenges. The central argument is that the growth and expansion of civil society activism are intricately intertwined with political authority and power. The thesis shows that civil society in Vietnam is a vibrant, diverse and evolving space. Its future development and evolution will depend on its ability to successfully navigate the political and social space made available to it.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CBO   Community based organisation

CCERD   Centre for Community Empowerment and Rural Development

CPV   Communist Party of Vietnam

IA   Independent activist

MO   Mass organisation

SFC   State forest company

TM   Trees Movement

VFF   Vietnamese Fatherland Front

VNGO   Vietnamese non-governmental organisation

INTRODUCTION

"Long live the glorious Communist Party of Vietnam", an official banner designed in red and yellow, can easily catch one's eyes when setting foot into any government building in Vietnam. Like citizens living under other single-party regimes, many Vietnamese nowadays have become immune to this ruling communist slogan. Waking up at dawn, buzzing through the streets thick with traffic and noise on their motorbikes in search of daily subsistence, fortune, opportunity, or greater wealth, most Vietnamese have other things to be concerned about rather than the glory of the party or the fate of unelected leaders. Since the downturn of the national economy in 2008, a year that marked the end of an extended period of rapid economic growth (Beauge, 2010), the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has been beset by a host of socio-economic, political and environmental problems. These include, for example, rampant corruption in state-owned industries, industrial strikes over shrinking wages, and farmers' protests about destitution and eviction from their property. In particular, the recent rise of the so-called anti-China nationalist movement in Vietnam, led by intellectuals and supported mostly by urban youth, albeit fragmented and fragile, has openly challenged the close relationship that the CPV has established with Beijing (Vu, 2014). All of these issues constitute a huge challenge for the ruling party.

In retrospect, the *doi moi* (reform) policies of 1986, a response to the economic crisis of the time, have helped the country to reduce poverty (e.g. from 60 percent to 20 percent in the past twenty years) and achieve a high economic growth rate of 6-7 percent per year (World Bank, 2012). The CPV, however, has still held firmly onto its commitments to uphold the Marxist doctrinism and one-party rule. Despite the economic progress, the reality of market-oriented development, compounded with socialist commitment, has unleashed political tensions which make state-society relations highly complex. Since its establishment in 1930, the CPV has dominated state politics and social affairs. In a famous dictum, Lord Acton (1887, n.p.) once said, "Absolute power demoralises. Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely". In Vietnam, the entrenched one-party rule (with no tolerance towards the emergence of an opposition party) has become a fertile ground for political elites to buy and sell power.

After *doi moi,* international donors and International Non Govermental Oraganisations (INGOs) arrived in the country with money to experiment with a myriad of development models. The advent of these external actors, coupled with the internal economic dynamism, brought many apparent benefits including the emergence of new societal actors, including local NGOs and other forms of civil society organisation, claiming to represent new interests in society (Sidel, 1995; Kerkvliet, 2001). In particular, a wide range of new associational groups have been seeking space from the state, constituting one of the most exciting, dynamic sectors in the changing political landscape of Vietnam (PPWG, 2016). This phenomenon has enabled a major restructuring of state-society relations in Vietnam.

Figure 1. "Promote success and eagerly move forward" (Workers and farmers, two vanguard forces on a propaganda poster during the American war)
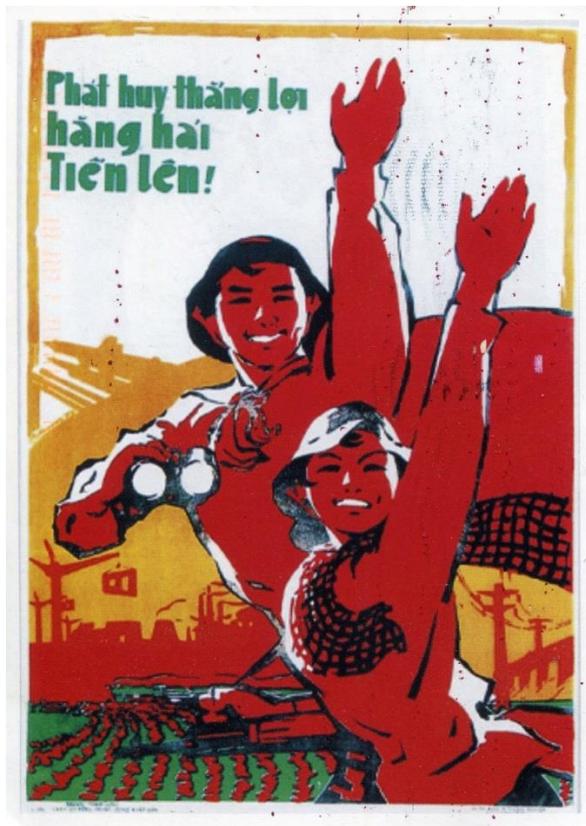
(Source: Invent the Future, 2015)

During my fieldwork in Vietnam in 2014-2015, there were several critical associational events, both online and offline, that I, as a researcher, felt fortunate to observe. These included demonstrations against the lack of government accountability, wasteful construction projects, police violence against civilians and

the visit of Xi Jinping, the Chinese President. Observing these events allowed me to gain greater insights into the changing civic space, which, albeit still limited, continues to expand. As one of my respondents, an experienced independent activist, put it:

> "2015 is an eventful year of civil society activism in Vietnam. We can see it as a year of fierce fighting between the ruling power and burgeoning civil society groups, including, both registered NGOs and independent organisations. They are working towards a more accountable government, a more liberal society with democratic practice to be exercised and human rights to be upheld." (Interview, 15 June 2015, Hanoi).

Generally, Vietnamese from diverse backgrounds are becoming more vocal about socio-economic and political issues (Wells-Dang, 2014). This is explained partly by the widespread use of digital tools and social media platforms where civilians and civil society groups can mobilise and act. A foreign scholar of Vietnamese politics expressed the view that a state-led civil society or state corporatism no longer reflects the changing political landscape of contemporary Vietnam, for it fails to explain the dynamics and complexity of civil society activism (Interview, 06 December 2014, Saigon).

Vietnam's politics are changing at a faster pace than its ruling party is prepared to admit and predict (London, 2016), which can be witnessed in the opening up of contested space, both in the virtual sphere and real life. Civil society is moving dynamically towards pluralism, with the expansion of urban intellectuals, educated youths, rights activists, bloggers and the growth of grassroots movements, in parallel with traditional forms of engagement carried out by registered NGOs. In particular, the increasing grassroots activism is accentuating the 'contested' nature of civil society activism that has been long obscured by the rhetoric that civil society in authoritarian regimes like Vietnam is either co-opted or suppressed. These forms of civil society activism showcase different dimensions of associationalism and also different types of political pressures, each of which has an important role to play in effecting change and (re)structuring state-society relations in Vietnam.

Social change is a ubiquitous narrative across the country, but the nature and politics of this change remains far from conclusive and this topic is much understudied. Despite the positive economic effects of *doi moi*, there is a question mark over whether this change will carry over into the political sphere. Deviating

from the economics of change, there are certainly significant factors concerning the politics of change that need to be captured. It is therefore incumbent on the scholarly community to understand analytically the evolving state-society relations under the single-party rule of Vietnam.

In order to understand the dynamics of change pertinent to state-society relations, it is important and useful to look carefully at the institutions associated with promoting that change. This thesis aims to contribute to this understanding by looking at the phenomenon of civil society activism carried out by both local NGOs and civilian actors. My research explores contemporary civil society activism in Vietnam and reflects on the politics of the evolving state-society relations in that country. This is achieved through an analysis of two different forms of activism, i.e. NGO-led and citizen-led activism, with an examination that locates them in a wider historical context. I examine in detail both forms of activism and then analyse comparatively their characteristics, limitations and opportunities. This comparison, rooted in my analytical framework, facilitates a wider consideration of civil society activism in authoritarian contexts.

In particular, the primary focus of the study involves tracing and exploring the processes through which civil society groups with different organisational structures, degrees of autonomy and positions of legitimacy orchestrate collective action. Given these differentiated elements, I examine how these groups organise and situate themselves in the relationships that they respond to and become enmeshed within. In the same vein, I explore the strategies and tactics they deploy to legitimate their actions, how they establish different kinds of coalitions and networks, and how they appeal to the interplay of both formal and informal channels to exercise their activism.

Regarding the NGO-led activism case study, I place emphasis on its processes of legitimation, its coalition building and its strategic recourse to structural links at different levels in order to achieve its mobilising objectives, rather than focusing on the normative qualities and characteristics pertinent to the NGO. Meanwhile, with regard to the citizen-led activism case study, I shed light onto a recent organic grassroots movement staged by Hanoians, who organised themselves into informal groups/networks, with the use of digital and technological tools, to oppose the

government's arbitrary decision to cut down thousands of large old trees lining the city streets.

Conceptually, I argue that it is not appropriate to apply dominant civil society theories that are rooted in Western contexts to examine the dynamics of change pertinent to state-society relations in authoritarian regimes, such as Vietnam. It is already well documented that state-society relations under any political system are never static and established; instead they are continually negotiated over time as the actors involved respond to and pursue different causes and motives (Devine, 1999). State-society relations in Vietnam are evolving and run counter to many assumptions underpinning the dominant theories. In seeking to understand civil society activism in Vietnam, this thesis challenges mainstream civil society theories that position civil society autonomously from the state. It also challenges dominant social movement theories that focus exclusively on overt forms of political contention. By embracing and problematising different forms of civil society activism that are rooted in local realities and practice, I argue that civil society groups in authoritarian contexts like Vietnam, irrespective of their institutional characteristics, have to couch their activities within the state agenda and discourse in order to exercise their activism. When state authority under authoritarianism remains strong and resilient in the face of a strengthening civil society, being embedded in the state remains crucial, because it offers a relatively guarded space for civil society groups to accomplish collective goals.

There is a sizeable lacuna in the literature on civil society activism in authoritarian contexts. The existing scholarship is fragmentary and lacks a strong theoretical paradigm. Hence, my research aims to address this gap by offering a conceptual framework that covers both NGO- and citizen-led activism. The relevant concepts developed in the thesis (legitimacy, autonomy, as well as formality and informality of activism) capture the dynamics and intricacies of these different forms of activism. They are not only grounded in theories, for they also represent the most distinctive features growing out of local realities of associationalism in Vietnam. This analytical framework is also resonant to varying degrees with civil society activism in other authoritarian regimes. In addition to its conceptual contribution to the literature on civil society activism in authoritarian contexts, this work also

contributes to existing literature on legitimacy, autonomy and (in)formality in particular.

The major finding of my research is that under authoritarian contexts the distinction made between NGO-led and citizen-led activism may not be that strong since there are significant similarities in the way these different activisms are articulated and operationalised. This is considered a significant contribution to the existing literature on civil society activism in non-democratic or less liberal regimes.

The thesis rejects the tendency that exists in much of the current literature that has paid more attention to contentious forms of activism such as public protests and social movements at the expense of traditional form of NGO-led activism. The existing accounts also tend to treat each form of activism separately, but my study examines both of them with equal focus. The thesis argues that a more nuanced understanding of evolving state-society relations can emerge from an approach that lays equal emphasis on these different forms. In addition, through a rigorous empirical study of the Trees Movement, the research provides novel in-depth understanding of how civilians exercise public contestation under the one-party rule of Vietnam. It offers a timely bottom-up account of a citizen-led movement and points to the potential significance of critical green activism in restructuring state-society relations in Vietnam, with the role of social media being discernible.

The following research questions were formulated to assist me in attaining my research objectives.

> *First,* what organisational forms do civil society groups adopt and how are these positioned in relation to the state?
> *Second*, what strategies of engagement do civil society groups adopt in order to achieve their goals?
> *Third,* how do the contrasting forms of civil society activism illuminate the evolving state-society relations in Vietnam?

These questions opened much space for me to discover and triangulate different empirical perspectives. They helped me explore the most distinctive dimensions of civil society activism in Vietnam, which I formulated under the key themes I indicated previously, i.e. legitimacy, autonomy of activism along with formality and

informality of activism. Taken concurrently, they also allowed me to reflect upon the evolving state-society relations in Vietnam.

To address these research questions, I followed ethnographic research complemented by observation, marginal participation, numerous qualitative interviews, verbal and non-verbal communications and sometimes simply being in the right place at the right time to capture critical moments. My two in-depth case studies focused on two locations far away from one another, one in Hanoi, which is home to the national government offices and the largest hub of local NGOs, whilst the other is in a rural area of a poor province in the central region, Quang Binh. Hence, I had to move physically not only between these two places, but also across many parts of the country, both rural and urban including Saigon, Danang, Hue, Ha Tinh, and Nghe An to meet the right people at the right time so as to gain important insights for my research.

The thesis has been divided into six chapters, a conclusion and this introduction. In Chapter one, I provide a historical overview of the dynamics of contemporary civil society in Vietnam, as well as an analysis of the dominant conceptual approaches used to understand state-society relations in Vietnam. In relation to the latter, I focus specifically on the 'strong state versus vibrant civil society' debates.

Chapter 2 covers theoretical discussions and subsequently, the construction of the analytical framework of the thesis. In this chapter, I first critically review the major theoretical debates about civil society activism in authoritarian contexts. Then, I highlight a number of key analytical concepts drawn from the literature that had particular relevance for my empirical research namely *(i)* legitimacy, *(ii)* autonomy of activism, and *(iii)* formality and informality of activism. The selection of these themes was theoretically informed and subsequently validated and triangulated through my data collection and analysis.

Chapter 3 details methodologically how my research process evolved and progressed. It traces how I negotiated case studies, collected data, refined research questions and addressed research challenges as well as how I dealt with ethical issues. It reveals how the whole research experience progressed and I highlight

certain critical moments when I, as a researcher, had to believe in my vantage point or my 'insider knowledge' to decide to embark on a different path, in order to enhance the novelty and significance of my research.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 discuss my empirical findings. Specifically, Chapter 4 showcases the Trees Movement (TM), a recent broad-based citizen-led movement established to oppose the government's decision to cut down thousands of large old trees lining the streets of Hanoi. This case study represents an autonomous, antagonistic form of civil society activism, which stands in stark contrast to the NGO-led activism, the second in-depth case study presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed account of the complex processes, whereby different civil society groups orchestrated collective actions to request the government to stop cutting down the trees and also to demand it to be deliberative and accountable. Drawing on the TM, I argue that citizen-led activism, an emerging form of civic engagement, is likely to play a critical role in effecting change and (re)structuring state-society relations in Vietnam. This is because it signals to the political elites that ordinary civilians are able to orchestrate rightful civic actions to oppose unpopular and unaccountable state decisions and policies. The chapter also signals the rise of a critical green public sphere, in which the use of digital tools and social media is undoubtedly of importance in organising collective action. The chapter ends by discussing how the government responded to the movement groups through the analytical lens of three dimensions of power provided by Lukes (1974).

Chapter 5 analyses another form of activism that is embedded in the state and led by a registered NGO. It focuses on the case study of a local NGO, named Centre for Community Empowerment and Rural Development (CCERD). It details how CCERD orchestrated mobilisation to help local ethnic minorities claim land. This case study is an embodiment of NGO-led activism that seeks to engage in critical activism through collaborative approach. Its mobilisation finally put the local government in position where the latter was compelled to deliver progressive policy outputs to the local landless poor. This case study also informs us about the local politics in Vietnam, where the state apparatus is not homogeneous and the violation of the national directives and policies is pervasive at all levels. I use this case to argue that

by taking advantage of their embedded connections to the state, working within and through bureaucratic structures, manipulating structural links, as well as strategising the interplay of formality and informality of activism, VNGOs are carving out more room for themselves to manoeuvre in critical actions.

Chapter 6 directly engages in the comparative analysis of two different forms of civil society activism embodied in the two in-depth case studies. In order to do this, the chapter uses the domains developed in the analytical framework (i.e. legitimacy, autonomy of activism along with formality and informality of activism) as the basis for these comparisons. In so doing, the intersections and contrasts of both forms of civil society activism are discerned and analysed in depth. Intermingled with this analysis is an endeavour to locate these forms of activism in a wider historical context in order to understand how these forms can potentially restructure state-society relations in Vietnam. The chapter argues that civil society groups in authoritarian contexts like Vietnam, regardless of their organisational structures, positions of legitimacy or degrees of autonomy, have to couch their activities within the state agenda and discourse to orchestrate collective action.

Whilst the Trees Movement portrays a case study where discrete informal civilian groups organised themselves and stood up to the state and displays a transient, time-bound and more antagonistic form of activism, the NGO case study illustrates a more sustainable, collaborative, embedded form. As such, the two case studies represent two relatively contrasting forms of civil society activism and also different episodes of contentious politics in Vietnam, ranging from dialogue to advocacy through to contention.

The conclusion of the thesis summarises the major findings of my research and addresses the research questions. It also reflects on the broader implications of the thesis findings and locates its contribution within the existing literature on civil society activism in authoritarian contexts.

Chapter 1: State-society relations in Vietnam

1. Introduction

> "[…] no… no… they (i.e. the Communist Party of Vietnam) claim to the world they are committed to upholding the Marxist ideology, but how they are treating civil society in reality is totally opposite to what they claim. If they truly followed Marx, they would never see civil society as an instrument of peaceful revolution, because Marx believes in civil society and doesn't talk about civil society like that. […] They want to combine communism and capitalism… how?... it sounds like they want to combine water and fire… how? It's impossible. […] and it's absurd to think that economic liberalisation can be successful in the absence of political liberalisation. […] political reform or this country is going nowhere? (Interview, 20th May 2015, Hanoi).

In the late 1980s, the collapse of the central-planned economy imposed by the Communist party of Vietnam (CPV) led to a serious economic crisis and hyperinflation (775% in 1986) (Vuong, 2014). The daunting unbearable reality caused the CPV to put in place reform policies. It has been almost thirty years since Vietnam embarked on a so-called 'socialist–oriented market economy', also known as *doi moi* (Renovation). The reform has transformed the country economically and socially, bringing millions of people out of poverty and raising people's living standards (UNDP, 2016). It has also resulted in a major restructuring of society evidenced in the emergence and rise to prominence of new societal actors such as local NGOs (Sidel, 1995). This has opened up new spaces of engagement for non-state actors seeking social change and policy impact (Kerkvliet, 2001). Yet, Vietnam has still held firmly onto its commitment to a socialist path and one-party rule. The state's open-door policies, viewed by many as an anchor for a more liberal society to cling on to, are considered as synonymous with the retreat of the authoritarian state. This may be the case, but to date there has been no systematic research on this.

Taking a closer look at the political context of Vietnam, local realities reveal that beneath the exterior of a so-called political transformation lies the destiny of a whole nation that is believed to have the potentials and capacities to become a rising dragon and yet is undergoing a crisis of social trust, a breakdown in traditional

social values and standards, and escalating inequality. Often, this state of affairs is associated with allegations of epidemic corruption, powerful vested interests, state-sponsored crony capitalism and overall, a flawed political system. The unusual marriage of socialist commitments with capitalist aspirations has unleashed a myriad of paradoxes that make the issue of state-society relations highly complex. It places theorists and thinkers in a quandary about where exactly the CPV is leading the country and how it can reconcile such a combination. Some sceptics even go so far as to say that for the past thirty years the social transformation in Vietnam has been incarcerated owing to the fact that the country has gone straight from collectivisation to crony capitalism with not much in between, and they doubt that those who have benefited so much from the system have any incentive to dismantle it (Pilling, 2017).

This chapter examines the empirical context and critically assesses existing academic accounts of social and political change in Vietnam. State-society relations in Vietnam are in flux, which can be evidenced in the new emerging forms of civil society actions ranging from engagement by registered NGOs to critical activism by independent activists and dissidents through to grassroots movements. These forms of activism constitute different slants of the associationalism in contemporary Vietnam, nevertheless since *doi moi* generally only NGO actions have been more focused upon and grassroots movements have been understudied for various reasons with political sensitivity being the most discernible one. My research fills this gap by offering two contrasting case studies representing different forms of civil society activism in Vietnam that serve to assist me in examining the changing dynamics of state-society relations in the country.

The chapter starts by providing a historical overview of Vietnamese civil society, with a particular focus on how and why Vietnamese NGOs (VNGOs) emerged. Then, it describes critical periods of Vietnamese civil society development along with insights into the activism initiated by independent groups.

The second part of the chapter sheds light on two main perspectives growing out of the existing literature on state-society relations in Vietnam namely, *a strong state vs. vibrant civil society*, in other words, state- or society-led change will be the focus. It outlines the key points of these two perspectives and locates them

historically in the evolving political landscape of Vietnam. While regarding the former, the role of the state is advocated, whereby a more tolerant state-society relation is ascribed to decisions taken by the state, under the latter, it is believed that society is an incubator/driver of change. There has, however, been relatively little rigorous analysis into the relative merits and weaknesses of the state- or society-led change perspectives, especially in relation to the dynamics of evolving state-society relations. Mapping out these perspectives with substantial historical cases is foundational for exploring contemporary civil society activism in Vietnam as well as locating it in a wider historical context.

As the millennium came and went, scholars and commentators long struggled to understand evolving state-society relations in contemporary Vietnam. Whilst recent studies, albeit peripheral, have endeavoured to unravel the complexity of restructuring state-society relations, there is no academic or policy consensus on the shape and meaning of these relations. There are a number of key questions unanswered. Is the party state or civil society strengthening? Does civil society genuinely have room to manoeuvre in a country that is conventionally considered an authoritarian state? Is the emergent space for civil society action contingent on the incremental relaxing of the party state? What are prospects of change arising from different forms of civil society activism? What are the potential risks and opportunities that each form entails? Through explicating the different forms of civil society activism found in Vietnam, my thesis contributes new insights to the existing literature regarding these concerns in authoritarian contexts.

2. Vietnamese civil society

Before presenting an historical account of civil society (*xã hội dân sự)* in Vietnam, it is worth mentioning how the term is defined in the Vietnamese context. Conceptually, attempts to define civil society have persisted throughout history with little consensus, which is due to the high complexity pertaining to its relationships with the state (Chandhoke, 1995). When the term of Western traditions was imported to Vietnam through the international development discourse in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the period coincident with historic events including the collapse of the Eastern European communist regimes and the

Tiananmen Square in China, it was shunned by the CPV. That is, the term 'civil society' is almost never used in state official documents and in the mainstream media in Vietnam. No official legal or policy documents refer to this term in its entirety. State officials are fearful of or averse to using the term in formal forums, except in some informal conversations with researchers such as myself. However, they are more willing to discuss specific issues, such as 'how associations have to follow registration procedures', 'mass organisations are helping their represented groups', or 'how donors should work with local governments'. The pressure to use this term, Hannah (2007) indicates, was placed on the Vietnamese state by the donor community, since the international development discourse in the 1990s was advocating the strengthening of civil society and there was a need to translate into Vietnamese donor documents that use the English term extensively.

Whilst the term civil society remains unrecognised in the official state discourse, this is not to say that the dynamics of associationalism pertinent to Vietnamese society is to be downplayed. The section that follows, provides a historical overview of civil society development in Vietnam, whereby the evolving dynamics of associationalism is illuminated. I present the historical development of civil society in Vietnam before and after *doi moi*, followed by an explanation of the reasons underlying the emergence and development of VNGOs.

2.1. Civil society in the pre-doi moi period (before 1986)

A large body of English-written scholarship on the Vietnamese civil society demonstrates that only after *doi moi* did civil society emerge to the fore in Vietnam (Nguyen Hung Quoc, 2013). Tracing history, a few local studies, however, indicate the early emergence of Vietnamese associationalism, which perhaps dates back to after the dismantling of primitive communism and has evolved since that time (Thang van Phuc *et al.,* 2002). A frequently quoted Vietnamese proverb, "Healthy leaves cover torn leaves" *(lá lành đùm lá rách)*, is indicative of the traditional practice of sharing and mutual support within the Vietnamese traditional society.

During the feudal era (i.e. before 1858[1]), some signs of civil society were observed, whereby some forms of association were existent namely, family clans, fraternities (e.g. carpentry, bamboo hat makers), associations of mutual conscience, religious- or spiritual-based groups, gender-based or art-based groups. Despite the feudal state of most dynasties not being much interested in managing these groups, they somehow recognised the potential contributions of these groups towards a better and stable society.

A good example of civil society practice during the feudal and colonial periods could be found in the organisation and structure of a village, which was by nature a self-governing and self-controlling institution. This structure is highlighted by local historians as an early form of the Vietnamese civil society. The 'village' associationalism constitutes a typical feature of the Vietnamese culture prevalent not only in the traditional society, but also in Vietnam today. What is this village culture and why is it considered an early form of Vietnamese civil society?

The prolonged foreign occupations (French colonialism 1858 – 1945) in the country through centuries induced a practice in which the local leadership and local people were to coalesce together to oppose foreign rulers. Local rulers, especially those at the lowest level, were basically among the oppressed subjects and hence, they wanted to promote rather than hinder democratic village traditions (Pham Binh Son, 1997; Pham Van Bich, 1999). Traditionally, a village was regulated by customs, customary rules, or commune charters, and managed by a committee of representatives nominated by its communities (i.e. a form of direct democracy). Self-control meant that each village was responsible for its own affairs independent from the control of the state administration apparatus and state laws, whilst self-governing referred to rights to participation in decision making exercised by each community in the village. Notable regarding the course of national construction and defence, was the existence of two systems operating in parallel, i.e. village rule and state law (Le Van Quang and Van Duc Thanh, 2003). The latter was a conglomeration of universal institutions regulating society at a nation-wide scale, and compulsory for all to exercise, whereas the former exposed its effects within the village boundary. During feudal times, village rules were regarded sub-law

---

[1] The French troops landed in Vietnam in 1958 and started their almost 100-year colonisation in the country.

institutions, albeit informal and downplayed by the feudal state. Evidence, however, shows that in many instances, where both the state laws and the village rules were involved to address village-related issues, triumph, more often than not, went to the institutions at the lower level. This traditional practice still resonates with present-day society and offers a good reference for explaining why various central-level policies fail to be enforced at local levels. That is, in many instances local governments bypass superiors' rules to realise what they wish to attain. Koh (2001) relates this phenomenon to Parkinson's disease, whereby the central government considered as the brain located in Hanoi cannot always control the movements of its body parts throughout the whole country.

Historical evidence has also revealed that Vietnam had a rich associational life in the early 20th century during the French colonisation (Bach Tan Sinh, 2011). This period witnessed a proliferation of individually established associations and social movements conducive to social activities and revolutionary cause *(ibid)*. The period between 1858 and 1945, saw a series of national liberation and class struggles. Voluntary associations were formed to fight against the oppression by the ruling power. These groups extended their operation beyond their fraternities, hamlets or villages, with some even reaching out the provincial and national level. Critical to this era was the birth of a number of political associations aimed at mobilising and educating people to rise up to fight for national liberation. Remarkable were the associations led by reformist intellectuals in early 1900s such as *Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục* (aka Tonkin Free School) founded by Phan Chu Trinh in 1907; *Duy Tân hội* (aka Vietnam Modernisation Association) – a revolutionary organisation (1904-1912), *Việt Nam Quang Phục Hội* (aka Vietnamese Restoration League) in 1912, and the *Dong Du Movement* (Visit the East) in 1906, all created by Phan Boi Chau. Notably, *Việt Nam Quang Phục Hội* was established with the agenda of overturning French colonial rule and putting in its place a democratic republic, but it was repressed soon after it was created. However, it had a strong impact upon subsequent anticolonial organisations (Marr, 1971). Most associations established in this period were urban-based and worked actively until 1945.

According to Nguyen Lenh (2013), prior to the first Constitution of the Vietnamese State in 1946, there existed almost thirty organisations, with political purposes and working either openly or secretly based on the objectives and ideologies of each.

These political organisations (not socio-economic oriented organisations) tended to call themselves associations, parties, fronts, leagues, unions, or alliances. To name some, *Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội* (League for the Independence of Vietnam), *An Nam Cộng sản Đảng* (An Nam Communist Party), *Hội Việt Nam Cách mạng Thanh niên (*The Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League), *Đảng Dân chủ Việt Nam* (Democratic Party of Vietnam*), Đảng xã hội Việt Nam* (Social Party of Vietnam), Đại Việt Quốc gia Liên minh (Dai Viet National Alliance) and *Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam* (Communist Party of Vietnam). Except for the Social Party of Vietnam, the Democratic Party of Vietnam and the Communist Party of Vietnam, all were dismantled by 1945 (the year Vietnam declared its independence).

The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) was established in 1930 and since then it has been committed to upholding the Marxim-Leninism and Hochiminh's ideology. Accompanying its establishment, the CPV established the mass organisations (MOs) that functioned as its extended arms stretching to the grassroots level to undertake party propagation and mobilise mass support for class liberation and national liberation. The MOs during this period included the Vietnam Women's Union, Farmers' Union, Youth's Union, and Children's Union. In rural areas, home to nearly 90 percent of the population at that time, farmers organised themselves into informal groups to develop agricultural, business and cultural activities, such as cultivating, harvesting groups, family business groups, folk-dance groups, or groups for mass education purposes. Likewise, associational activities in urban areas were no less active in comparison. Student-led groups emerged with various purposes, including entertainment, sports, or academic. Additionally, there were also religious associations that focused on humanitarian and charitable activities (Thang Van Phuc *et al.,* 2002).

In 1945, Vietnam declared its independence and was named the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The Article 10 of the first Constitution 1946 stipulates that "citizens have the right to freedom of speech, freedom of publication, freedom of organisation and assembly, freedom of religion, freedom of residence, as well as commuting domestically and abroad" (Nguyen Si Dung, 2013). This constitution, for the first time, officially recognised fundamental human rights and the pivotal role of a law-based state in securing such rights. In particular, there was no single line in

this constitution referring to the leading role of any political organisations, including the CPV.

The Geneva Accords of 1954 officially recognised Vietnam as an independent nation, officially putting an end to almost one hundred years of French occupation of the country. It also temporarily divided Vietnam into two parts with different regimes, i.e. the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North (i.e. under the control of the CPV) and the National Republic of Vietnam in the South (i.e. non-communist and aided by the United States and its allies). In the southern part, the National Republic of Vietnam (1954 – 1975) continued to apply a multi-party system with eight political organisations in total working both legally and illegally during the period 1954-1975.

Regarding international NGOs (INGOs), some local sources reported that there were roughly 60 INGOs actively working in Vietnam until late 1974, half of which were American organisations mainly based in the South and focusing on humanitarian projects, whilst there were only four humanitarian organisations in the North (Dang, 2009). Some path-breaking INGOs of that period were CARE, Catholic Relief Services, and the International Rescue Committee. These NGOs mainly delivered assistance for people who emigrated from the North to the South in the 1950s *(ibid).*

After the South government collapsed and the American War (or Vietnam War) ended on 30 April 1975, the CPV declared its monopoly of power over the whole country. From the reunification to *doi moi* (1975-1986), most civil society activities were then terminated, with the existing organisations either being shut down or incorporated into a number of MOs and INGOs gradually reduced their work and withdrew from the country for the safety of their expatriate staff (Dang, 2009). During this period, associational activities were limited to party-owned MOs. Unfortunately, whilst many of the activities of the southern NGOs contributed to a vibrant civil society before 1975, understanding regarding these is problematic because their activities were almost undocumented and a large part of the material that there was, went missing during the periods of ups and downs in the country.

In brief, Vietnam historically used to have a relatively dynamic associational life before the reunification (1975). It can be seen that civil society activities of this period could fit into the dominant civil society theory, for their activism was inclined to challenging the feudalist and imperialist state, rather than accommodating it.

2.2. Civil society after 1986

The milestone of *doi moi* policies initiated in 1986 brought about socio-economic change for the country. Development aid and FDI quickly arrived, enabling the emergence of new societal actors who sought to take on new roles. Noticeable among these new societal actors, was the proliferation of local registered non-governmental organisations (VNGOs) in the mid-1990s, a term that many Vietnamese had never heard of at that time. Additionally, recently there has been a growing number of independent activists, rights activists, bloggers, informal civil society groups and networks, exercising contestation both online and offline.

It is argued that it will be misleading to continue to label Vietnam's state-society relations as a mono-organisational model in the aftermath of *doi moi* (Vinh, 2006). Specifically, Will (2006) argues that civil society actors in Vietnam have become more adept at organising themselves into building new relationships with the government of different levels conducive to addressing governance deficits and development challenges.

What are the components of civil society in Vietnam? Substantial scholarship on the topic indicates that using the liberal view that regards 'state' and 'society' as distinct spheres to examine civil society in Vietnam would miss out several important actors, activities and events inhering in civil society (Kerkvliet, 1995). Associations in Vietnam are structured in a way that they are made to entangle with the state, if they wish to seek organisational legitimacy. So, in order to overcome the limitations of the liberal perspective, the existing scholarship on Vietnamese civil society tends to place emphasis on processes, functions and activities that those organisations accomplish rather than on their organisational structures.

Since the term 'civil society' is not used in the official discourse, nor is it easy to distinguish associations in Vietnam, development agencies operating there tend to define it in a way that is adaptive to a particular project or development approach (Hannah, 2007). For example, CIVICUS, in its initial assessment of civil society in Vietnam, adopts a broad definition that includes various types of organisations that are not necessarily seen as integral parts of civil society in Vietnam, i.e. "the arena outside the family, the state and the market where people associate to advance common interests" (see Figure 2) (CIVICUS, 2006, p.31). With this definition, civil society includes all kinds of activities through which people come to organise, associate and seek to influence the wider community. It also indicates fuzzy boundaries between civil society and other sectors, shifting the focus from organisational structures to functions and actions of civil society members and organisations.

Figure 2. The fuzzy boundaries of the civil society arena in Vietnam
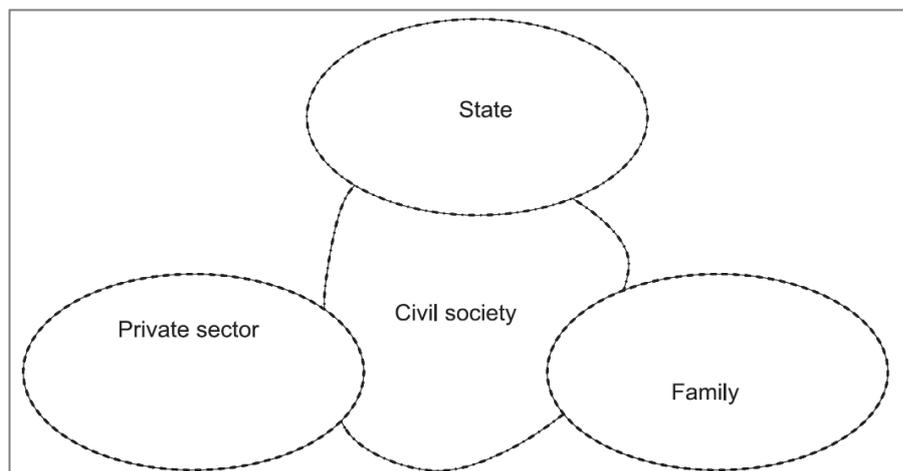
(Source: CIVICUS, 2006, p.32)

Amid a high density and a wide variety of associations in Vietnam, it is necessary to provide a typology of these associations. According to CIVICUS (2006) there are seven main categories: (1) Mass organisations (MOs); (2) Umbrella organisation; (3) Professional associations; (4) VNGOs; (5) informal groups, (6) faith-based organisations; and (7) INGOs (see Table 1). Nevertheless, within the scope of the research I only focus on VNGOs and MOs for their most relevance to the in-depth studied cases of the research.

Table 1. Main categories of associations in Vietnam

Categories	Type	Relation to the state
A. Mass organisations (MOs) 1. Vietnamese Fatherland Front (VFF): umbrella mass organisation of all umbrella organisations	1. Socio-political	Under the party-owned VFF
2. Women's Union	2. Socio-political	
3. Farmers' Association	3. Socio-political	
4. Youth Union	4. Socio-political	
5.WarVeterans Association	5. Socio-political	
6. Trade Union	6. Socio-political	
B. Umbrella organisations 1. Red Cross		Under VFF
2. Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA)	2. Umbrella for professional associations and VNGOs	
3. Business Associations	3. Chamber of Commerce	
4. Union of Arts and Literature (VUALL)		
5. Old Age Association		
6. VUFO – Vietnam Union of Friendship Organisations		
7. Cooperative Alliance		
C. Professional Associations	History, Physics, Mathematics, etc.	Under Ministries, VUSTA, or local governments
D. VNGOs	Issues-based organisations; Charity; Research NGOs; Consultancy NGOs;	Under VUSTA, Ministries, local governments

	Educational NGOs; Health NGOs, etc.	
E. Informal Groups	Micro-credits, credit cooperatives, credit and saving groups, neighbourhood groups, recreational groups, informal groupings, etc.	some belong to Women's and Farmers' Unions; some unregistered but known to the administration
F. Faith-based organisations	Buddhist (approx. 9 million) Catholic (6-8 million) Hoa Hao: 1.5 million Cao Dai: 1.1 million Protestant: 600,000	Under VFF And some not registered
G. International NGOs	Funded from abroad, providing support to government and CSOs; 530 INGOs operating in Vietnam, 150 have offices	INGOs through PACCOM (People's Aid Coordinating Committee). PACCOM is under the VUFO indicated above

(Source: CIVICUS, 2006, p.34)

The Vietnamese Fatherland Front (VFF) and other MOs

After *doi moi,* Vietnam's society embraced more new actors such as NGOs, CBOs, and informal groups. Despite the associational life being no longer solely dominated by party-owned MOs, it is not the intention that their presence will diminish. Under the one-party rule of Vietnam, all MOs (i.e. socio-political organisations in Vietnamese definition) and all socio-professional associations and umbrella organisations (e.g. Lawyers Association, Writers Association, Historians Association, etc.) have to be placed under the party-owned Fatherland Front (VFF) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Position of VFF
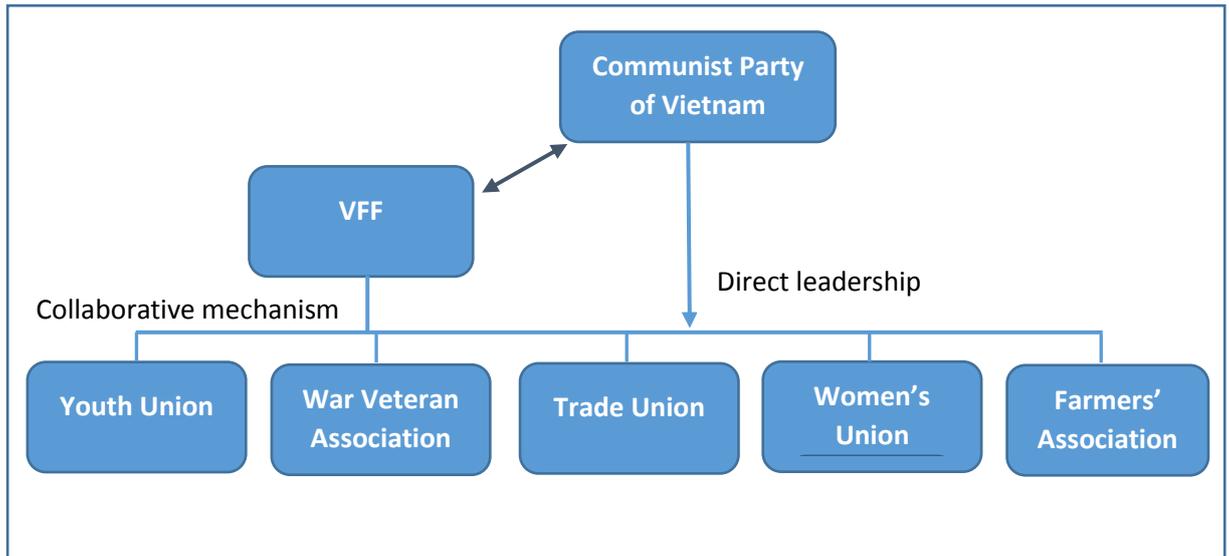
The VFF:

> "[…] is an integral part of the political system of Vietnam and under the direct leadership of the Communist Party. It is a political platform for people to express their wills and aspirations, for gathering and intensifying the national unity, […] a venue for consultation, co-ordination and unity of action of its member organisations, making contributions to safeguarding national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity". *(Article 1, Law of the Vietnam Fatherland Front 1999).*

The position of the VFF in the political system as well as in society is clearly safeguarded in the Article 9 of the Constitution. It is an umbrella of MOs and a number of officially sanctioned religious groups (e.g. the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam is the unique Buddhist association recognised by the Vietnamese government and put under the VFF). Its main functions since established heavily focus on propagation of party state policies at all levels. Recently, along with its member organisations, it has been involved in state poverty reduction programmes and humanitarian initiatives, for example, in propagandising and mobilising funds to support the local poor and those affected by natural calamities, in programmes such as 'Day for the poor' and 'Fund for the poor'. Notably, it has recently been tasked with organising public participation, consultation and providing critique of the party guidelines and state policies. The CPV grants these roles only to its

established MOs and not social organisations outside its auspices. The newly assigned roles by the VFF pose a question mark concerning how it is able to critique the party directives when it is one of its affiliates. In terms of religion, the VFF has the right to determine which religious groups will be given official recognition (Law of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, 1999).

Currently, the VFF has 44 members including MOs, umbrella organisations, and other professional, political and social organisations. The CPV is also a member of the VFF and directs comprehensively its work. All MOs have head offices in Hanoi and branch offices in every province, even extending to the commune level (the lowest government level) (VFF, 2016). MOs are established by the Party and are heavily dependent on state funding. Their cadres of all levels from central to communes have public servant status and they receive a salary from the state budget. Funding to MOs comes from different sources, including the state budget (that accounts for the biggest share of total), charges and membership fees along with other external sources (VEPR, 2015). The total annual expenditure of MOs takes up 1.7% of the national GDP, which is twice the budget estimate for the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health *(ibid).* With an oversized apparatus as such, the expenditure on infrastructure and the personnel of the VFF and MOs have sparked public criticism in the midst of alarming public debt and economic downturn.

MOs operate nationwide with their dense networks extending to the grassroots level (see Table 2 for their membership). During times of war, they were an effective instrument for state propagation and mass mobilisation. After *doi moi*, they were given favourable conditions to reform themselves, e.g. taking on new roles in delivering social services to improve their members' welfare (Sakata, 2006). Their new roles in service delivery and their nationwide coverage opened up opportunities for them to attract donor funding and in fact, many INGOs have sought to work with MOs rather than VNGOs to take advantage of their large networks. For example, the Women's Union receives several funding resources from donors and INGOs to conduct micro credit programmes for poor women in both urban and rural areas. This practice consequently crowds out VNGOs and puts them in a tough competition for funds.

Table 2. MOs - Membership

	Managing agency	Number of members (million persons)
Farmers' Association	CPV	10.4 (2013)
Women's Union	CPV	15.3 (2012)
War Veterans' Association	CPV	2.7 (2014)
Youth Union	CPV	7.0 (2012)
General Confederation of Labour (Trade Union)	CPV	7.1 (2011)

(Source: VEPR, 2015, p.23)

Vietnamese NGOs: legal status, emergence and development

VNGOs' legal status

Legitimacy is a common concern among Vietnamese CSOs, because the term 'civil society', as previously indicated, remains absent in the official legal documents in Vietnam. This means that the state has yet to admit it officially. Likewise, the term 'non-governmental organisation' (NGO), was (at least until recently) difficult to use in Vietnam. There is no existing law that stipulates Vietnamese NGOs under the term 'non-government', which sounds similar to 'anarchy' (*vô chính phủ*) in the Vietnamese language. Because of this, activities outside of the state's auspices were viewed as being anti-state or anarchy, rather than as something sound or good. The existing institutional arrangements do not allow them to enjoy a clearly-stated legal status as a non-governmental organisation. Hence, these organisations tend to seek refuge in the forms to which they do not actually belong, such as scientific and technological organisations, institutes, research centres or foundations to overcome the registration threshold (Taylor *et al.*, 2012). In order to be able to survive, a religious institution, for example, has to register as a scientific, technological organisation, or a non-profit organisation has to register as a business.

VNGOs are currently controlled under a grid of confusing administrative decrees. Most regulations regarding them were created in ad-hoc ways, meaning that they were issued simply as a temporary measure to cope with an increasing number of associations. Several decrees have been put in place with an aim to tighten associational activities further (e.g. Decree 88). There is a notable gap between what is stipulated in the Constitution and the presence of legal documents that aims to realise such constitutional rights. For instance, the 2013 Constitution's Article No 25 clearly stipulates that citizens have the right to freedom of speech, association, access to information, and to demonstrate, but there is no law in place enabling people to exercise these rights.

It is required that associations (e.g. local NGOs) are registered with the state-affiliated bodies such as government departments, people's committees, Ministry of Home Affairs, Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA), or the Southeast Asia Research Associations of Vietnam, so as to obtain legal status. No registration means no legal status and no legal status means organisational legitimacy is precarious. Whilst there is no existing official document stating that unregistered organisations or organisations without legal status are officially considered illegitimate, widespread evidence shows that they face multiple difficulties, for example, in working with the government or in receiving and raising official funds. As a common practice, the state will not work with these organisations. However, registration is often accompanied with uneasy requirements needing to be met by VNGOs. There are numerous instances where associations have failed to procure registration. A self-help group of deaf and dumb people, for example, could not procure a registration after three years of persistent efforts, and a social welfare establishment providing support for abandoned children in Ho Chi Minh City managed to obtain registration after almost twenty years of being rejected (PPWG, 2016). Registration becomes even harder for the associations with large membership, especially for those in the southern provinces, where the central government tends to keep a tighter grip on the associational activities (e.g. the Scout Association currently has a couple of thousands of members, but has not been granted the license to operate officially). This is because southern people used to enjoy a more democratic regime during the American war, which has led to the CPV becoming more suspicious and exercising its greater control.

Looking at the Table 1, one might argue that VNGOs register with VUSTA and VUSTA is under the umbrella Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), so VNGOs belong to VFF. Hence, one might assume that belonging to VFF should be enough to secure NGO legitimacy, because the former is a powerful actor. However, it needs to be clarified that this kind of 'belonging' is normative and in fact does not safeguard VNGOs from being questioned or intimidated by the police. VNGOs seek registration with VUSTA or other state-affiliated agencies for organisational legitimacy, but it does not entail state funding. Local NGOs in Vietnam are not funded by the state. Unlike China or Russia, where the state does provide funding for some types of local NGOs, the Vietnamese state lacks capacities and resources to do so. Registration is simply a tool exercised by the state to control local NGOs.

Nevertheless, despite barriers to registration prevailing and the term 'civil society' not being recognised officially, CSOs continue to emerge, either registered or unregistered. In fact, a huge number of community-based organisations (CBOs) and informal networks exist and operate without seeking registration. Regular citizens, with increasing civic awareness realise that they have the right to do what is not prohibited by law and there is no existing law stipulating that they are not allowed to associate.

So, the concern whether civil society has to be admitted by the state becomes irrelevant, because with or without legal registration, civil society still exists alongside the state and market (iSEE, 2016). The existence and development of civil society is not reliant on the recognition (by law) of the state, but rather, it depends on the recognition of a pluralistic society that is open to criticism and opposition *(ibid)*.

There is no consensus in the current data regarding the number of VNGOs. The reason for this lies in the fact that there are variations in understanding and categorising VNGOs, most salient is the debate between donor communities, local academics and scholars over whether to include party-owned MOs in the civil society sector. According to different sources of data, the number of registered VNGOs (excluding MOs) has been estimated, to date, as ranging between 1,300 and 2,000 (Thang Van Phuc, 2011). Meanwhile, Wells Dang (2011) observes an increase from fewer than 200 in the late 1990s to an estimated 1,700 today. These

organisations work in various areas, such as reducing poverty, improving people's access to quality education, providing healthcare and clean water, HIV prevention, gender equality, natural resources, capacities building and governance.

There is also no official statistics which provides an exact number of existing CBOs in Vietnam, but some studies reveal that they vary from 100,000 to 200,000 (KEPA, 2011) in different forms, such as interest groups, credit co-operatives, credit and saving groups, informal farmers groups (e.g. water-user groups, livestock farming groups) or mutual assistance groups. Meanwhile in urban areas, there are a variety of groups (neighbourhood, cultural, recreational, and others). Most of these CBOs are small-scale, voluntary, self-sufficient and self-governed (KEPA, 2011; Sinh *et al,* 2011).

Whilst some CBOs seek their legal registration through the articles under the Civil Code, a large number are not registered. Farmer groups, for instance, can be established by the MO, the Farmers' Association, or by farmers themselves, who associate together to provide mutual assistance with no need to be officially recognised and formally structured. Members of urban-based informal groups are much younger and many of them have grown up in the times of internet and social media. Having more access to new digital technological tools and different sources of information, their awareness and knowledge has improved and as a result, they aspire to having a more liberal society.

VNGOs' emergence

VNGOs are, by and large, argued to be the product of *doi moi* policies (Gray, 1999), but this argument needs to be examined in more detail. Drawing on the existing literature I bring to the fore four main reasons underlying the emergence of VNGOs.

***First*,** socio-economic changes resulting from the *doi moi* policies prompted the CPV to realise that in order to avoid the risk of the political crisis observed in Eastern Europe and to maintain its legitimacy, it was essential to put in place some measures aimed at so-called political reform to some certain level, albeit only as a façade. To achieve this, the Vietnamese government promoted administrative

decentralisation under the comprehensive public administration reform (PAR) programme (Gray, 1999). This was officially put forward at the Eighth Plenum of the Seventh Party Congress in 1995, which concertedly addressed four key reform areas (institutional reform, organisational structures, civil service reform and public finance) (Painter, 2005). One of the objectives of the PAR programme was to downsize the huge ineffective administrative apparatus (Turley, 1993), which resulted in cutting funding for certain party-owned socio-political associations including some MOs. The cut in funding was based on the role and importance of organisations. For example, MOs such as the Youth's Union, the Women's Union along with religious and cultural organisations, such as Writers' and Artists' Associations and the Buddhist Sangha were all put on the list of 'maintained funding'. Those less important in the view of the party state (although they did not state this explicitly), e.g. scientific and technical institutes and professional organisations inclusive of architects as well as doctors, saw their budgets cut. The budget cuts that were encountered by these organisations were because in the new context of a more liberal economy the party believed that these organisations could sustain themselves through self-financing. After the budget cuts these organisations were relabelled 'NGOs', so that they could enter into the competition with the 'real' NGOs for international donors' funding. Under the new form as NGOs, there was, however, little or no change in their objectives, methods or personnel (Gray, 1999). As a result, the 'relabelled NGOs' became one of the reasons for the increase in number of VNGOs.

Second, the arrival of international donors and international NGOs was accompanied by the experiment of a myriad of new development models/programmes. These actors sought to work with local partners, especially non-state institutions such as local NGOs. VNGOs, therefore, proliferated following this trend. During the early 2000s, given the characteristics of donors' funding programmes, most VNGOs engaged in direct intervention activities (i.e. mainly livelihood development). Apart from being considered local partners, VNGOs were targeted also because donors expected that providing support for them and grassroots organisations would result in an enhanced civil society that could be conducive to building a more accountable democratic government (Harper, 1996). VNGOs, Hannah (2007, p.124) contends, "must perform a complex dance between domestic and international ideas of development and civil society", since they have to accommodate and compromise with both international development agencies

and the Marxist-Leninist state's suspicion towards the presence of organisations outside its auspices.

Third, accompanying the positive socio-economic changes were negative effects, e.g. emerging development issues, widening inequality, and environmental deterioration. Since *doi moi* these issues have become more severe, which the state could not address by itself owing to a lack of capacities and resources. As a result, CSOs, including VNGOs, quickly filled this space and worked in conjunction with the state towards fulfilling state development policies (Hannah, 2007).

Finally, the controlling Vietnamese state cannot neglect global political pressures, which constitute the last reason. It is worth mentioning that unlike many developing countries elsewhere, Vietnam is acknowledged to have high country ownership over its development programmes (World Bank, 2012). Yet, under the increasing pressure of global institutions, a requirement in their aid programs directed to the partner government indicates that local CSOs must be involved as co-implementers to deliver the programme. This trend also gave an impetus for the emergence of VNGOs. Tolerating the growth of registered NGOs also allows the authoritarian state to convey to the wider society that they are complying with the international discourse on civil society, which in turn helps it enhance its legitimacy.

VNGOs' development

VNGOs emerged in the advent of *doi moi,* and there are some trends observed in their operation throughout different periods of development.

VNGOs' direct intervention projects were common up until 1995. Activities of this period were heavily donor-driven and organisations were mainly headed by retired public officers, who knew how to take advantage of their personal connections with the bureaucratic structures and quickly appeal to the high influx of donor aid. Between 1995 and 2005, there was, however, a shift from direct intervention to building the capacities of local communities and local authorities.

Since 2005, a rights-based approach has largely been applied by VNGOs, whereby they have become more concerned about effecting policy impact and social change. Many VNGOs' leaders during this period used to work for INGOs, being well-educated, and many have overseas degrees. After acquiring a great deal of experience from working with INGOs, they decided to move out to establish their own organisations. These organisations have gradually evolved from the image of passive, donor-driven organisations to asserting their position in negotiations with donors and INGOs. Some good examples of this trajectory include Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE) or Centre for Social Initiatives Promotion (CSIP). They also have paid greater attention to engaging with the media to enhance their image and reach out wider society. A good example in effecting social change by VNGOs can be seen in LGBT rights protection area (iSEE, 2015). From being prejudiced and ridiculed on TV, in movies, and in the media, the LGBT community has become socially recognised and respected, with same sex marriage no longer being prohibited in Vietnam.

Moreover, very recently VNGOs have started encroaching into areas that used to be considered taboo ten years ago, such as human rights and anti-corruption. These 'sensitive' topics are today no longer distant from the perception and activities of VNGOs. Through international development organisations (e.g. UNDP, the World Bank), VNGOs have begun to participate in monitoring national-level macro indicators (e.g. the Public Administration Performance Index – PAPI). Notably, they have engaged in monitoring the implementation of human rights commitments by the government, such as the compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (United Nations Vietnam, 2015) and Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), (NGO Group for the CRC, 2012). Through informal networks, VNGOs set up alliances to advocate for legislation to be in line with the principles of human rights.

Drawing on Hannah's (2007) continuum model (Figure 4), all civil society roles presented in this spectrum can be found in present-day Vietnam ranging from implementing state policies, to monitoring state performance to civil disobedience to regime opposition. VNGOs' engagement in relation to this continuum nearly all pertained to roles in the middle and right hand side.

Figure 4. Civil society roles
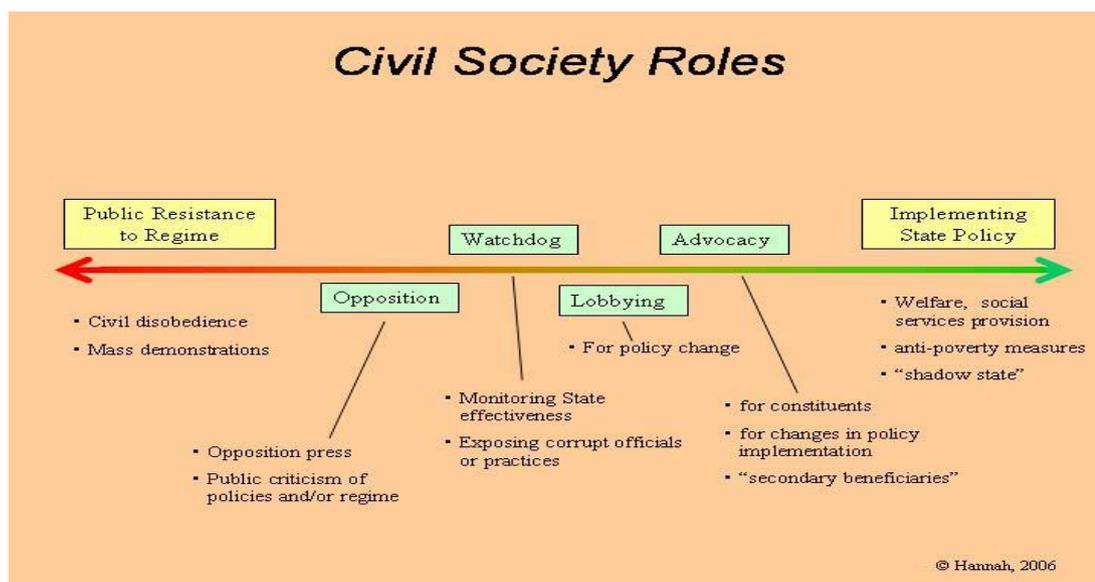
(Source: Hannah, 2007, p.209)

On the left end of the spectrum, Thayer (2009) is among the few scholars who focus on independent CSOs that overtly challenge the state. He overlooks civil society groups that are set up by or register with the state and casts doubt on their ability to challenge the state. He emphasises more on highly-politicised CSOs (i.e. regime-adversary civil society), which are committed to fighting for democracy and human rights.

The rising number of independent rights groups and activists in recent years is more critical of the leadership of the CPV. In particular, the use of digital and technological tools (e.g. Facebook) has yielded a large number of bloggers who use social media as an alternative platform to express their criticism. Wells-Dang (2014) observes that the proliferation of critical bloggers has sparked the political interest of young intellectuals and contributed to the increased youth awareness of socio-political issues in urban cities. He particularly points out that when one blog is shut down, tens of others arise to fill its space. Noticeably, their activism does not only prevail on social media, for it also extends to real life practice through street protests on various issues, such as the anti-China invasion into the disputed waters or environmental protection.

In present-day Vietnam, public protests are more witnessed than before, yet London (2009) warns that the scale and frequency of these oppositional activities should not be equated with the advent of liberal democratic civil society in Vietnam, since the fundamental conditions for democratisation are still absent. He adds that on the part of the state, its repression is either harsh or half-hearted, based on the nature of each specific case. Nevertheless, he notifies that "the very fact public protests are allowed to occur indicates the nature of authoritarianism in Vietnam has its nuance" (London, 2009, p.394).

In a nutshell, the first half of the chapter has presented a historical overview of civil society development, VNGOs along with the other main categories of associations in Vietnam. In the next part, I contextualise state-society relations in Vietnam given the existing scholarship of the topic, whereby two main perspectives: vibrant civil society and a strong state are discussed, whilst locating them historically in the changing political landscape of Vietnam. My research is tasked with exploring contemporary civil society activism in Vietnam and reflecting on the politics of the evolving state-society relations in that country. An illustration of the two perspectives, with substantial historical cases, is aimed at providing a background for my arguments pertaining to the changing dynamics and complexity of state-society relations in Vietnam, which I set out in this thesis.

3. State-society relations in Vietnam

3.1. A vibrant civil society?

> "Groups and forces in society beyond the reach of the state not only exist but their activities from time to time influence what authorities decide" (Kerkvliet, 2001, p.269)

Much of the existing scholarship on state-society relations in Vietnam contends that narratives of change are determined by societal actors, i.e. social change is initiated from below and from social pressures crystallized in civil society (Kerkvliet, 2005; Koh, 2001a, 2001b; Vasavakul, 2003; Wells-Dang, 2010, 2011; Thomas, 2011). Drawing on the literature, I bring to light four main pathways that societal actors use to effect change, which I concretise into 'the less to more organized

continuum', including everyday politics of resistance, fence breaking, public protests, and civil society networks (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Different pathways employed by societal actors
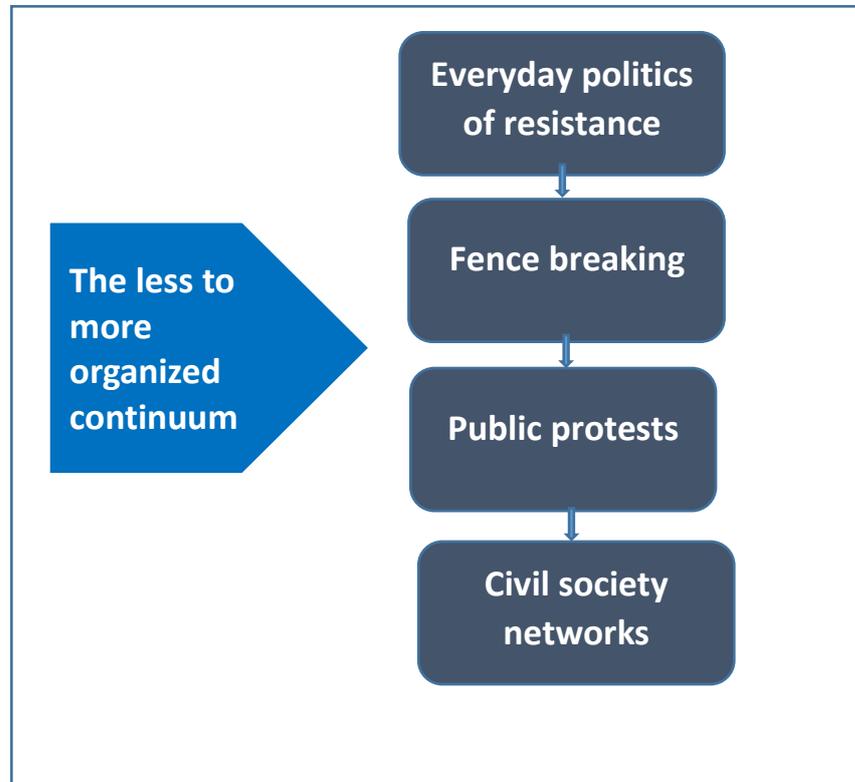
Everyday politics of resistance

Drawing on the most influential study by James Scott (1985) on everyday forms of resistance, Kerkvliet (1995b, 2005, 2009) offers a unique account of how powerless peasants in the one party-dominated state of Vietnam can reverse national policy. Central to his argument is '*everyday politics'* matters. By everyday politics, he refers to the way in which people live, work, and go about doing – or not doing – the things they are supposed to do. Everyday resistance involves little or no organisation. The collapse of the large-scale collective farming programme imposed by the CPV prior to *doi moi* with no presence of violent uprising or any type of organised opposition is a vivid manifestation of the cumulative effects of everyday politics.

By the 1950s, the CPV officially initiated the collectivisation, whereby the means of production (e.g. land, livestock, and irrigation facilities) were collectivised and put under the management of cooperative leaders; peasants from different families and neighbourhoods were enticed, cajoled, and sometimes forced to work together in teams and production brigades in cooperatives, which ran counter to their habitual family-based production (Kerkvliet, 1995b). Villagers were reluctant to collectivise their land and other means of production. Immense efforts were made on the part of the party to accelerate large-scale collective farming and cooperatives. At the same time, the state took absolute control of the market for agricultural inputs and products. The central authorities insisted that the peasantry needed to keep faith in collectivisation, since it was a unique proper path to socialism. However, the state-led collective production totally collapsed in the early 1980s and eventually the CPV was pressurised into abandoning collective farming and permitting family farming (Kerkvliet, 2009).

The collectivised agricultural production broke down, because it encountered prolonged hesitation, objection, and surreptitious resistance by villagers. Everyday resistance became weapons of the voiceless, powerless peasants in rural Vietnam aimed at reversing the national collectivisation policies. The policy reversal occurred without social upheaval, or violence, or even organised opposition. 'No one mourns for the father of everyone' (*Cha chung không ai khóc*). As this Vietnamese proverb implies, villagers showed their everyday resistance through lackadaisical work (because whether they did the job diligently or not, they received the same number of workpoints) and other transgressions, such as circumventing the system to continue their family production covertly, or secretly encroaching upon collective fields to do their own farming, or stealthily harvesting rice from collective fields to quietly oppose abusive officials (Kerkvliet, 2009).

Kerkvliet ironically pictures this resistance of powerless peasants as a stealthy slap in the face of the collectivisation policy and the authorities who imposed it *(ibid).* "By what they did and did not do and how they used their labour and other resources over which they retained some control, peasants in collective cooperatives were essentially manipulating collectivization policy" (Kerkvliet, 2005, p.30). Villagers' everyday resistance resulted in the policy change, thus showing that their actions led to the ruling power responding by abolishing collectivisation.

How can such small acts make differences? It is due to the very nature of those acts, Kerkvliet explains. Specifically, they are non-confrontational, leaderless and surreptitious, which makes them difficult for the authorities to tackle.

Fence breaking

Adam Fforde is the protagonist bringing attention to the fence breaking *(phá rào)* practice observed in Vietnamese society. This term became widely used by local people after *doi moi*, which refers to violations of orthodox socialist norms or regulations and rules set up by the party state, in order to expand space for autonomous activities (Fforde, 2005). Fforde is also one of the prominent sceptics of the idea that Vietnam is a strong state. He contends that "the essential problem in Vietnam is a weak state, rather than a state that is too strong" (Fforde, 2005, p.174). The weakness stems mainly from the unreformed communist political institutions in face of changing contexts globally and locally. As a result, the party is unable to control society like before (Fforde, 2013).

Scholars such as Vasavakul (2003), Koh (2001), and Thomas (2001) offer detailed accounts of fence-breaking practice, whereby they focus on understanding why this phenomenon prevails in Vietnam. A number of explanatory factors they point out include, *inter alia*, the politics of a divided party, factionalism and malfunctioning policies merely aimed at protecting the political interests of the ruling power.

In his analysis of illegal housing construction[2] in Hanoi, for example, Koh (2001) showcases widespread offences by local people against the construction rules of the housing regime in the post-1975 period. Under the socialist housing regime, private construction was discouraged through limitless administrative procedures and requirements concerning licences and permits. It took local residents several months, even years to obtain the necessary construction documents. At the same time, the state also wanted to provide housing for residents but their efforts were so poorly exercised. In order to overcome the bureaucratic obstacles, local people

---

[2] Illegal housing construction means: any activity that involves building a house or making any extension or renovation to either the interior or exterior of the house or the flat without official licences or permits. It is estimated that if strictly following this protocol, 90 percent of all housing construction in Hanoi would be classed 'illegal' (Koh, 2001, p.340).

in Hanoi boldly built or renovated their flats and houses without permission or certificates (Koh, 2001). The breakdown of the housing regulations in several quarters of Hanoi was due to the fact that residents united to circumvent the impracticable housing rules, which unexpectedly induced more illegal construction, rather than resolving the problem. Local residents resorted to pleading, lobbying, using personal connections or bribing officials at the relevant authority levels, in an attempt to accomplish their construction.

The fence breaking in housing construction in Hanoi eventually effectuated the negotiation space for both local residents and local officials when the central rules were overlooked, and both sides colluded with one another to achieve what they wished. This practice is resonant with what Hayton illustrates, "Whenever local officials have to choose between national instructions and local demands, it's usually the local that wins" (Hayton, 2010, p.74). This means that local officials tend to overlook central rules if their personal needs are met by ignoring such rules and colluding with local people. Koh (2001) concludes aptly that the final state policies in Vietnam are shaped in a way that the state makes policies with probably little political challenge from below, but the local officials and local people reshape those policies through interactions. The party state could inflict its will upon local officials, but evidence shows that the latter is also the channel for society to negotiate state policies and even influence the party state to alter the rules so as to legitimise their alleged acts.

Tilly and Tarrow (2006) contend that ordinary people in authoritarian states tend to be obedient, compliant and only when political opportunities are open to them, do they rise up. This somehow does not ring very true in the case of Vietnam, where generations of people who throughout wartime were familiarised with guerrilla warfare to fight against the foreign invasions, are now employing these tactics again to deal with impractical state policies. This practice is nicely reflected in a common Vietnamese proverb, "Adversity births wisdom" *(Cái khó ló cái khôn).*

Public protests

In authoritarian one-party states like Vietnam, where free expression and political dissent is restricted, public protests are seen as highly unusual because they easily invite state repression. Yet, this phenomenon has become pre-eminent since 2011

when the anti-China nationalist movement burst out. In recent times, people have been taking to the streets over various issues such as workers' well-being, farmers' land loss, or the environmental crisis.

Land protests of varying scales are perhaps among the most prevalent public contestation in Vietnam nowadays. The nation has undergone a double transition from central planning to a market economy and from low-income to middle-income status (Mishra, 2011). Along this development path, however, greater numbers of farmers and workers – two pillars of the revolutionary cause - have become increasingly excluded and impoverished. Land conflicts have broken out across Asia, in China for example, but in Vietnam they have a particular resonance. Recalling the past, it is not difficult to realise that all the national liberation struggles in Vietnam were fought mostly in the name of the peasantry, those who were the central force of mass revolutions. Yet, in the aftermath of the reunification (1975), they have become the most vulnerable group under the rhetoric of modernisation and industrialisation. Land grabs as the results of the collusion between political elites and corporates, are pervasive across the country, whereby using force by the local authorities to seize farmers' land, ironically, has become commonplace (RFA, 2016). Land confiscation has sparked small-scale protests on an almost weekly basis and large-scale ones from time to time.

The peasant upheaval in Thai Binh in 1997 and the unrest in the Central Highlands in 2001-2004 were both sparked by unbearable violations of land rights and officials' corruption. In 1997, thousands of peasants in Thai Binh province took to the streets to protest against corrupt local government officials, who were unresponsive to peasants' economic grievances (Human Rights Watch, 1999). This rural unrest shook the Hanoi leadership and caused them to review the provincial bureaucracy. As a result, 600 party officials were sacked (including the top two, these being the provincial secretary of the Communist Party and the chairperson of the provincial people's council) and a total of 1,900 party members were disciplined (Luong, 2005). In early February 2001, another unrest also burst out in the provinces of Daklak and Gia Lai in the Central Highlands, where tens of thousands of ethnic minority people converged and demonstrated in the provincial capitals as well as in some district towns and communes over land and religious issues (Luong, 2003). Concerning the latter, it was widely covered in the international media, for it tapped into the religious and ethnic issues in a strict sense and human rights abuses in a broader one. However, the former had more repercussions for the party, as it

occurred in Thai Binh, a highly accredited revolutionary cradle of the CPV during the wartime (Wells-Dang, 2010; Luong, 2003).

These rural unrests were indicative of the fact that political contestation in Vietnam was no longer limited to the officially approved channels or state-established associations (Kerkvliet, 2001). The state could not rein in society as they had before and the latter was able to find ways of circumventing its diktats. These incidents eventually caused the party to issue Directive 30-CT/TW, which was aimed at promoting the democratic participation of communities at the commune and district levels as well as at state-owned enterprises (Thayer, 2008). In 2007, this document was upgraded to an Ordinance aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability of local governments so as to be in line with the long-standing state-propagandised rhetoric: "people know, people discuss, people execute, and people supervise" (Sinh, 2003, p.4). Nevertheless, there is no existing research on how these documents are being implemented in reality. Land protests at local levels, Wells-Dang (2010) states, have become a common feature of contemporary Vietnamese politics. Arbitrary land grabs, evictions, forced relocations and unjust compensation, all in all, have been triggering public anger, social distrust and undermining the CPV's legitimacy.

There is recently a rising phenomenon that seems more threatening for the ruling communists, i.e. unexpected alliances between landless farmers and urban independent activists (many of whom are bloggers). With the activists' support, the information regarding confrontations between evicted farmers and security forces, which is not covered by the mainstream media, is quickly and widely disseminated on social media (e.g. Facebook, twitter). The rural landless farmer-urban activist alliance signals a significant episode of public contestation in Vietnam, which constitutes an emerging challenge to the political hegemony.

Workers' protests against shrunken wages and deteriorating working conditions are exhibiting increasingly larger numbers in contemporary Vietnam. Miserable workers and landless farmers are now subject to a downward spiral of deprivation. Industrial zones, private housing, entertainment complexes or golf courses have been erected directly on the farming land of farmers. After being evicted from their land, many children of these farmers have to choose to work in these factories under degrading conditions and many workers who go on strike come from landless farmer households.

It is necessary to note that independent trade unions are not allowed in Vietnam and the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (national trade union centre) normatively represent the interests of workers, being under the direct leadership of the CPV. They are simply an integral part of the party state apparatus and receive substantial income as a levy on state employers, regardless of trade union membership, and have substantial property and commercial interests. It is just a wishful thinking that the trade union in Vietnam is willing to be involved with or encourage greater labour activism. In many labour disputes, they tend to contain workers rather than defending their rights (Clarke and Pringle, 2007). It is equally notable that scholarship on labour activism in Vietnam is extremely rare. The existing account contends that pressure for change in the trade unions is unlikely to come from within their own apparatus and thus, it is necessary to shift focus to pressures from outside, specifically to the pressures of worker activism from below (Clarke and Pringle, 2007; Kerkvliet, 2010).

Kerkvliet, so far, is among the very few scholars who provide a detailed account of labour activism in Vietnam. Worker pressures, Kerkvliet (2010) demonstrates, has brought some positive results for workers in the short run and sometimes in the long run. In some instances, the government has had to make amendments to the legislation; for example, the Social Insurance Law in 2015 was finally amended after large-scale workers protests across many parts of the country. Kerkvliet also observes that repression against workers on strike seems inconsequential, because as he explains, they simply confine their concerns to their working conditions and the CPV somehow still perceives workers as well as farmers as the classes whose interests it is committed to represent since it was established (Kerkvliet, 2010).

Civil society networks

Fence-breaking is simply a social response, where people take advantage of policy impracticalities or loopholes to make them work towards fostering their own benefits. Wells-Dang introduces a more organised form of civil society action, i.e. "civil society network", which he defines as "the joining together of organisations and individuals to influence power around a shared conception of the common good" (Wells-Dang, 2010, p.98). He, however, explains that not all networks are civil society networks, since they do not have a public or advocacy component (Wells-

Dang, 2011). Drawing on network theory, he seeks to re-theorise civil society, arguing that it should be viewed "not as a sector or an arena but as a political process of collective action and alliance-building" (Wells-Dang, 2011, p.45).

Advocating this view, Wells-Dang brings onto the scene the mobilisation process waged by civil society networks that involved actors from civil society and some parts of the state in the campaign to counter the Hanoi People's Committee's (i.e. Hanoi government) conversion plan for Reunification Park into Disneyland in 2007. The fifty-hectare park is the largest public one, considered as the lung of the city, and holds so much meaning for Hanoians in terms of green space as well as in terms of culture and history. Defenders of Reunification Park formed a network consisting of architects, current or retired government officials, academics, journalists, environmentalists and bloggers. They had recourse to various channels to realise their objectives, including spreading numerous well-written articles in mainstream newspapers and on websites, organising conferences as well as creating alliances with different key stakeholders involving the state, media, NGOs and international organisations. However, they did not publicly criticise or confront government officials. Being aware of the division within the city elites regarding access to benefits from the park project, the advocates strategically took advantage of this by using their professional connections to approach those who had no way of receiving penny from the project, or those who stood aside, or those who were critical. The mobilisation by civil society networks was eventually successful, i.e. the city government put on hold the private developer's proposal. Notably, the advocates did not rely on one stand-alone approach, for a variety of tactics and strategies that complemented one another were engaged with to pressure on the city authority's decision. Wells-Dang is among the main scholars that believe in change being initiated by societal actors, he states that "political changes are taking place within the complex and actually existing political system and society [...]. As Vietnam edges toward a more open polity, change will come first from the rice roots[3]" (Wells-Dang, 2010, p. 109).

From everyday politics of resistance, fence-breaking, public protests to civil society networks, they are illustrative of different types of civil society expressions in contemporary Vietnam in order to deal with policy impracticalities and unaccountable decisions to bring about change. Societal actors of these expressions

---

[3] The term 'rice roots' used by Wells-Dang is synonymous with grassroots.

eventually attained success for what they fought for. Influenced by this society-led change approach, my thesis attempts to understand evolving state-society relations in Vietnam by looking at different forms of civil society activism initiated by both formal (registered) and informal (unregistered) groups. However, my research tries to examine the dynamics and intricacies of state-society interactions and interconnectedness between the two rather than focusing only on either society or state alone. In particular, I will examine how different civil society groups organise and situate themselves in the relationships that they respond to and become enmeshed within.

3.2. A strong state?

"When political change occurs in Vietnam, […] a broadening of the political space is likely to come from change within state institutions, rather than from the rise of an assertive civil society as imagined in the West" (Gainsborough, 2002, p.707)

"Vietnam, however, is a unique case because the impetus for political reform has not come from groups such as the urban middle class, students, or the military, but from within the elite ranks of the Vietnam Communist Party itself, frustrated at the pace and scope of development." (Abuza, 2000, p. 1)

The above quotations are illustrative of the state-led change perspective, whereby the narratives of change in Vietnam are considered to be shaped by the state. Thayer (1992) points out that the CPV leaders understand that they have to make some needed change given the evolving context after *doi moi,* and they are negotiating among themselves the pace and scope of that change (Thayer, 2010).

A large body of scholarship on state-society relations in Vietnam argues that the impetus for change derives from within the state rather than from society (Gainsborough, 2010; Abuza, 2000; Landau, 2008; Vuving, 2010). The logic of this argument lies in that under the one-party rule of Vietnam, the state-society divide is conceptually ill-defined, therefore, in searching for the impetus of change, it is important to look into 'within' the state, because this is where most important

contestations often occur (Landau, 2008, p.254). Casting light on the different sections within the state structure, Vuving (2010) argues that whilst reformers occupy a small minority in the system, they are influential enough to initiate change, albeit to a limited degree, if they come to ally with selective civil society groups outside the state apparatus. Similarly, Wischermann (2011) indicates that the impulse for change primarily derives from reformist minds within the state, but cautions that these processes of change happen at an incremental pace and regime subversion is not an expected or attempted outcome.

Marston (2012) also champions the important role played by the reformist minds in the state structure by providing insight into the highly controversial case of Bauxite Mining in Vietnam's central highlands. In April 2006, the government's approval of the Chinese companies' large-scale bauxite reserves mining plans in the Central Highlands sparked public criticism. The most vocal critiques were scientists, intellectuals, senior communist party officials, the National Assembly deputies, a national figure who was a war hero and some registered NGOs. These actors came together in an informal network to counter this mining project. Most salient in the advocacy campaign was the role of the elites who were the reformers in the party, Marston notices. Whilst he acknowledges the initiatives of these civil society networks in expressing discontent, he raises his concern over their dependency on certain parts of the state apparatus for their advocacy campaign.

Most discernible in the 'strong state' perspective is perhaps Gainsborough, one of the leading representatives of the rising post-Vietnam War generation of scholars. He brings in-depth insight into the contemporary politics of Vietnam through his intensive account of the Vietnamese state. In problematising the state, he seeks to examine the nature of the reform that the CPV has undertaken since the early 1990s. He highlights that whatever change the 1986 reform has entailed needs to be mirrored within the state itself. He vividly argues:

> "Instead of looking for the emergence of a robust civil society standing as a bulwark against state power, as much of the literature does, one should rather look at what is occurring within the state" (Gainsborough, 2002, p.705).

Gainsborough explicitly contends that "the idea that one should look for a broadening of political space within the state rings very true for Vietnam" (2002, p.706). The rising emergence of new social groups and associations of many kinds

varying from registered NGOs to religious dissent, dissident intellectuals, youth disillusionment, to workers' protests and rural unrest, can be a real phenomenon of a dynamic society up to a point. However, he places his stronger emphasis on the state institutions, which he believes are the main arena of struggle, shaping the extent of change and the widening of political space. He brings to light some of the major political debates of the reform era, such as centralisation and decentralisation, equitisation of state-owned enterprises, the relationship between the party and the government, and the more influential role of the National Assembly, to justify his thought-provoking argument.

Putting the equitisation of state-owned enterprises under scrutiny, he explains the real logics behind the *façade* of the so-called economic liberalisation put forward by the ruling Communists. In particular, equitisation – the sale of state assets - should not be seen as a retreat of the state from the economic front, but rather, it is an interventionism by which the political elites continue to control new owners, enrich themselves and maintain power in the face of external pressures to introduce reforms (Gainsborough, 2009). They employ the rule of uncertainty to exercise their power. 'Uncertainty' should not be simply referred to as the weakness in state management, instead it is what it should be and it is the rule of the game that the party state manipulates to make it justifiable for its discretionary decisions. In his in-depth study of Vietnam's local state in two provinces Lao Cai and Tay Ninh, he points out how the state institutions after equitisation have not only continued to play a central role in regulating economic activities, for they have also become active participants in economic activities through the running of state and private firms (Gainsborough, 2007).

Equally interesting, in terms of dealing with high-profile corruption cases (e.g. the Tamexco case[4] and the Thai Binh farmer uprising discussed above) by the political centre, Gainsborough unravels the reason why the state devotes so much energy to prosecuting such cases. On the face of it, prosecuting corrupted state officials can earn the political centre a higher legitimacy in the public's eyes and thus, help sooth down public anger. However, instead of perceiving this action as an appraisable endeavour by the state in anti-corruption efforts for the public good, he considers it as the best evidence for an angry central state that wants to "discipline the lower levels in a climate of increased decentralisation" (Gainsborough, 2010, p.54). Under

---

[4] The Tamexco case was a high-profile corruption case that took place in southern Vietnam in 1997 in which the party and state officials of city- and district- levels were tried in court on charges of alleged corruption.

pressures from neoliberal institutions, the party state has reluctantly put decentralisation in place. Nevertheless, amid the increasing fear of losing control over the lower levels, they have resorted to using decentralisation as a governing tool, whereby it is manifested as taking back control. Decentralisation is in fact recentralisation.

Gainsborough is sceptical of the emergence of a robust middle class in Vietnam. This class has not emerged to challenge the state because, he contends, they are embedded within close relations with the state. The outcome that Vietnam will move towards Western-style liberal democracy is least likely to happen, for the authoritarian state of Vietnam remains dissociated from society and relatively impervious in relation to external ideas and influences (Gainsborough, 2010).

The suspicion of the Marxist Leninist state towards civil society in Vietnam still prevails nowadays, although it has diminished to some degree. Nevertheless, its response has become more uncertain, unpredictable and non-uniform, and its openness is not consistent across government levels (i.e. more open at the central level and less so at the lower levels), nor is it between government agencies at the same level (i.e. more openness observed regarding those agencies interacting frequently with NGOs and CSOs). The phrase 'civil society as a tool of peaceful evolution or a conspiracy of regime subversion' is often used by the state propaganda brigade when referring to challenging groups in circumstances where they take to the streets to protest against unacceptable government policies.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has provided the background understanding of the empirical context of my research. Social change is a ubiquitous narrative in Vietnam, but the nature and politics of this change remain far from conclusive and generalisations of state-society relations in Vietnam very often rely on thin evidence.

The chapter has mapped out the historical development of Vietnamese civil society from the pre-*doi moi* period to the aftermath of *doi moi*, as well as the two dominant perspectives on state-society relations in Vietnam with substantial historical cases. The existing scholarship advocates either state- or society-centred approach to researching state-society relations in Vietnam. In the light of these

approaches, narratives of change are considered to be shaped either by the state or society. These polarities seem to lack appreciation of the dynamics underlying the state-society nexus and will be contested in this thesis. My research offers an ethnographic detailed account of different forms of civil society activism that seeks to contribute towards a deeper appreciation of the dynamics, intricacies, and intermingling pertinent to state-society relations in the changing political landscape of Vietnam. In realising this, I develop three distinctive notions: legitimacy, autonomy and (in)formality in order to examine how civil society groups characterised by different institutional characteristics and different embedded connections to the state, express, organise and orchestrate activism while negotiating with the state. At the same time I also examine how the state behaves and responds to civil society actions.

Through my empirical analysis, I argue that in Vietnam a strong state is not synonymous with state effectiveness and accountability, and that a vibrant civil society does not necessarily lead to positive social outcomes such as political change or democratisation. Crucially as civil society activism grows and takes on innovative forms, the strength of the state seems also to be growing. The central argument is that the growth and expansion of civil society activism are intricately intertwined with political authority and power. The thesis shows that civil society in Vietnam is a vibrant, diverse and evolving space. Its future development and evolution will depend on its ability to successfully navigate the political and social space made available to it.

Chapter 2

Civil society activism in authoritarian contexts

1. Introduction

The ultimate aim of my research is to explore contemporary civil society activism in Vietnam and to reflect upon the politics of evolving state-society relations. This is achieved through a comparative analysis of two contrasting forms of civil society activism deeply rooted in local realities, and an examination that locates these forms of activism in a wider historical context. In order to do this, I have focused my analytical lens on different civil society actions and strategies from below, played out by both local NGOs and informal civilian groups, rather than searching for how dominant civil society theories associated with normative values are applied in Vietnam. Through in-depth ethnographic research, I was in a strong position to write about the meaning and outcomes of one of the most significant episodes of public contestation in Vietnam in recent years: the movement to save Hanoi's trees in 2015. This case study embodies autonomous citizen-led activism, which stands in stark contrast to my second in-depth case study, centred on activism led by a local NGO. The two case studies have illustrated different types of civil society activism emerging from the authoritarian one-party context of Vietnam.

In this endeavour, drawing on major theoretical debates of civil society activism under authoritarian regimes, this chapter sets out the analytical framework I have applied in this thesis. Globally, it is well documented that authoritarian states are reconfiguring the way they rule, which can be evidenced in their selective strategies for dealing with associationalism, whereby they perform varying degrees of tolerance to different forms of civil society activism (Lewis, 2013; Cavatorta, 2012). Associationalism under the authoritarian rule is no longer limited to classic forms of activism led by formally organised groups (i.e. NGOs) (Cavatorta, 2012). The resilience of authoritarianism, coupled with emerging forms of civil society activism, has informed a new trend of scholarly research on civil society activism in authoritarian contexts. Nevertheless, the existing literature remains fragmentary and lacks an established conceptual paradigm.

I conducted a review of civil society literature, in general and civil society activism in authoritarian contexts, in particular, from the early days of my PhD. My research was driven by the eclectic approach, meaning that I opened my theoretical exploration to different trajectories and selectively incorporated what proved to have the most explanatory power in relation to my empirical findings. More specifically, initially my research was intentionally focused on domains of action led by local registered NGOs. However, while engaging directly with the empirical work in Vietnam (for further details of my research's evolution please see Chapter 3), I came across a compelling phenomenon emerging from the local context, i.e. a form of collective action arising from the grassroots level, which I considered as a social movement and which I could not afford to ignore. To understand this phenomenon, I needed to draw on the social movement literature. During the course of my fieldwork I persisted in tracing back and forth between these two bodies of literature in the hope that there would be some key analytical themes emerging from these theories, which would help me formulate my analytical framework sufficient to capture my empirical findings.

In what follows, I first review critically the main theoretical debates on civil society activism under authoritarianism. I then elucidate a number of key analytical concepts emerging from this theoretical review, which had particular relevance for my empirical findings: *(i)* legitimacy, *(ii)* autonomy, and *(iii)* formality and informality of activism. These elements proved most analytically relevant and broad enough to account for the dynamics and intricacies of civil society activism, thus facilitating reflection on changing state-society relations in Vietnam.

2. Civil society activism in authoritarian contexts

Whilst the notion of civil society has regained currency in recent decades, what it means and how it is defined in varied institutional settings continues to be an unresolved debate. In parallel with the resurrection of 'civil society' concept, since the late 1980s, there has been an increasing phenomenon of the so-called resilience of authoritarian regimes (Merkel, 2010). Across many parts of the world (e.g. Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Arab World, Eastern Europe), authoritarianism has

evolved and new variants have emerged, even though it is still largely grounded in the root of its authoritarian rule, such as 'electoral' or 'competitive authoritarianism', 'semi-authoritarianism', or 'liberalised autocracy' (Bogaards, 2009). The rise of new forms implies that the ruling power under authoritarian regimes skilfully puts in place some degree of institutional pluralism, albeit at the abstract level (e.g. participatory decision making, public consultation, open parliamentary hearings, tolerance to some forms of associationalism), whilst in fact concurrently holding firmly to authoritarian principles (Brooker, 2009). Non-democratic regimes, as Cavatorta (2012) points out, have introduced a handful of institutional reforms propagandised as the promotion of democracy over the last two decades, however such reforms seem not to have led to any significant structural change in the nature of authoritarianism. Despite some form of rule of law and human rights legislation being introduced into such systems, they are simply a disguised reality of authoritarian consolidation (Ekman, 2009). This practice further complicates state-society relations under these regimes.

Whilst civil society activism in authoritarian contexts has triggered academic attention and paved the way for the development of a new wave of research, the existing literature on this topic remains limited in terms of ideas. A large amount of scholarship focuses on the circumstances of stand-alone singular country contexts and little attempt has been directed towards approaching the topic from a comparative politics perspective. Cavatorta (2012, p.2) introduces the concept "activated citizenship" in order to highlight the fact that classic civil society activism with its emphasis on formal organisations and structures is unable to capture the complexity of how society expresses itself in authoritarian states where other forms of engagement emerge and rise to more pre-eminence, ranging from individual writings to mass participation and from seemingly non-political events, such as artistic expression, to political engagement. All these forms are indicative of the dynamics of civil society activism, as well as having implications in respect of changing state-society relations in authoritarian regimes (Cavatorta, 2012).

The rendezvous between non-democratic political systems and varying forms of associations and engagements outside the state apparatus along with the growth of grassroots activism, are helping to make state-society relations under these regimes more complex, thus making them more difficult for dominant civil society theories

to explain. Despite the variability of approaches to researching this topic, there are a number of common observations within this emerging literature. In the following sections I detail these commonalities.

2.1. Weakness of the liberal perspective

Much of the scholarly work on civil society activism under authoritarianism contradicts the dominant liberal perspective that portrays civil society as a distinct sphere from the state and as a site of confrontation to state hegemony (e.g. Teets, 2014; Hannah, 2007; Cheskin and March, 2015).

Civil society theory in modern times has been dominated by the political liberal tradition that is deeply rooted in Tocquevillean thinking. For Tocqueville, civil society is supposed to restrict state power; emancipation can only be pursued and attained in the associational sphere outside the state. In other words, freedom belongs to civil society and coercion, either autocratic or paternalistic, belongs to the state. Consequently, he draws attention to the need to create an autonomous space for associational life in order to avoid state despotism (Vinod, 2006). The Tocquevillean view has been advocated by liberals and embraced by development agencies over the past decades, especially with respect to the discourse of aid conditionality, the rhetoric of governance reform and NGO support.

Salient to liberalism is its emphasis on autonomy as a pre-requisite conducive to a functioning and robust civil society. Proponents of this view strongly ascribe civil society with a role in promoting and consolidating democracy. This view prioritises a polarity between state and civil society, stressing the need to create and sustain a sphere of individual and social interaction free of state intervention (Chandhoke, 1995). Beckman goes so far as to claim that "the liberation of civil society from the suffocating grip of the state has become the hegemonic ideological project of our time" (Beckman, 1993, p. 20). Liberals' emphasis on the state-society divide also implies that the former is inherently coercive, whilst the latter is non-coercive and

hence, it tries to maximise the role of civil society in resisting the expansive state (Parekh, 2004).

The most commonly used definition of civil society, which is enmeshed with liberal thinking, derives from Larry Diamond's work: "the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules" (Diamond, 1994, p. 5). Diamond's definition focuses on civil society in relation to autonomy and the degree of separation from the state, whereby he indicates that actors in civil society need the protection of an institutionalised legal order to guard their autonomy and freedom of action. This autonomy, he argues, is necessary for civil society in order to restrict state power as well as to legitimate state authority (Diamond, 1994).

The structural 'autonomy' of civil society privileged by liberalism has received a wave of criticism from scholars working on civil society activism under authoritarian rule. This is because the concepts of state or society, in isolation from one another, become too analytically simplistic and obscure the dialectic and complex relationships between the two sectors. Moreover, local evidence regarding associationalism in these contexts challenges this normative value. In fact, civil society and the state under these regimes enmeshed within a grid of heterogeneous relationships ranging from co-optation to collaboration, from complementariness to ambivalence as well as from antagonism to contention (Farrington and Lewis, 2014). Civil society organisations in many instances opt for giving up some degree of their autonomy to be incorporated into the authoritarian state in the search for opportunities and funding (Foster, 2001). Local NGOs are incentivised to seek incorporation into the state to get access to state subsidies and political connections, which facilitate them to accomplish their organisational and development goals (Heurlin, 2010).

In problematizing state-society relations in China, Spires (2011, p.2), for example, examines the nexus between unregistered grassroots NGOs and local government through bringing insights into what he refers to as "contingent symbiosis". This kind of relationship, he explains, emerges when the unregistered NGOs and local government covertly agree on an arrangement potentially beneficial to both, in which the former is allowed to work to help the latter address local needs and the

latter will ignore the former's illegality as long as they do not encroach onto sensitive and fuzzy areas, such as democratisation or political representation or areas that might invite public criticism towards local officials' misconduct (Spires, 2011).

Rejecting the liberal perspective of civil society is one of discernible observations pertaining to the emerging literature on civil society activism in authoritarian contexts. The simplistic view of civil society found in liberal tradition is ill-equipped to understanding the complexity and the changing dynamic of state society relations under these contexts, such as Vietnam where patterns of state-society interactions run counter to many of the assumptions underpinning this Western model of civil society.

2.2. Linkage between civil society and democratisation

The myth that 'civil society activism is conducive to democratic change' seems most contested in the existing literature of the topic (Cavatorta, 2012; Lewis, 2013). This myth implies that where authoritarian rule exists, the rise of civil society activism is always conducive to democratisation, in other words to weakening authoritarian state power (Hyden, 2010).

One of the main factors leading to this assumption can be traced back to the historical experience of democratic transformation in Eastern Europe and Latin America in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the aftermath of the breakdown of formerly communist nations, civil society was brought back to the fore by liberals as an engine of political change. Historical events of that period enhanced liberals' belief that the advanced western liberal democratic model could be transplanted into the global south (Parekh, 1992). Civil society was then seen as having the democratising and emancipatory power to render political change and bring down oppressive regimes (Cavatorta, 2012). This liberal assumption places civil society in opposition to the state and obscures many other forms that prevail in state-society relations under non-democratic regimes. In critique of this idealistic view of civil society, Chandhoke (2007) demonstrates that civil society, once constructed and autonomous from the state, cannot defend itself and its existence does not mean

that its actions will automatically be transformed into the triumph of democratic projects.

Much scholarship on civil society activism under authoritarianism contests this idealistic normative "civil society-as-democratization" (Lewis, 2013, p.327). Evidence shows that, instead of promoting democratisation, civil society turns out as enhancing authoritarianism on varying levels by promoting development goals set out by the state (Koh, 2000; Spires, 2011). Despite the growth of grassroots activism and public contestation, the enduring authoritarianism in China, Vietnam, Singapore, Central Asia, East Asia and the Arab world, has led many to go so far as to state that civil society organisations in fact are enhancers of authoritarianism. This is because they are appropriated as a useful tool by the ruling regimes to deal with the international community under the pressures of liberalisation (Cavatorta and Durac, 2010).

Examples of civil society activism conducive to reinforcing the authoritarian state are not few in number (e.g. Hsu, 2010; Spires, 2011; Koh, 2000; Jamal, 2007). Wischermann *et al.* (2016), who examine whether Vietnamese civic organisations are supporters of or obstacles to democratisation, found that those most engaged in social service delivery were helping to legitimise and uphold the authoritarian structures and discourses. They argue that these organisations undermined citizens' individual and collective self-determination and autonomy.

In another regard, the scholarship sceptical of the democratic role of western - funded official civil society also accounts for a notable part of the literature on civil society under authoritarianism. Looking at civil society experiences in the Arab Spring, the masses revolted and took to the streets, but the role of traditional NGOs, such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the largest civil society organisation in Egypt, was trivial owing to their reluctance to join demonstrations from the early days and their unwillingness to offer logistical support to the uprising (Challand, 2011; Cavatorta, 2012). Challand (2011), in particular, is critical of the effectiveness of the international aid channeled to democratisation in the Arab world. He demonstrates that opposition to the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa had nothing to do with donor aid earmarked for the so-called democratisation or civil society promotion programmes in these countries. The

absence of official advocacy groups and donor-driven NGOs in the street protests across the region was equally remarkable (ibid).

2.3. Advocating a relational approach to civil society

Since the normative values implied by the dominant western civil society model are highly controversial, especially in authoritarian contexts, much of the emerging scholarship on this topic has shifted focus away from looking at civil society in terms of organisational structures to approaching it from the relational approach (e.g. Uphoff and Krishna, 2004; Lorch, 2006; Wischermann, 2011; Silva, 2006). Specifically, rather than seeing civil society as a pre-established static object with prescribed values that would correspondingly predetermine the way it interacts with the state and the politics, the relational perspective looks at it in terms of social processes and relations with other objects, examining how it is constructed after such interactions (Elias, 1999 cited in Silva, 2006). In so doing, civil society is not assumed to have a pre-established nature, devoid of historical, cultural and socio-political characteristics, but rather, it is approached in its specificity and complexity (Silva, 2006). Drawing on the sociological relational perspective, much of the scholarship of civil society activism under authoritarianism focuses on civil society in terms of its social interactions and actions rather than as a fixed entity. In other words, this is a shift from looking at what civil society is to what it does in relation to state institutions.

In the light of this approach, Uphoff and Krishna (2004), for example, offer a unique continuum of institutions and organisations coming from either society or the state that are stretched along the two continua of embeddedness - to - autonomy (see Figure 6 below). Through this continuum, they indicate that a variety of institutions and organisations that promote civil society purposes do not necessarily dissociate from or run counter to the state. They explain how institutions such as the legislature, are necessarily embedded within the state, but in order to be effective they must be linked with non-state institutions and organisations. Likewise, organisations and institutions at the right end of the continuum such as NGOs and grassroots organisations, may not be very efficient in strengthening civil society if they work in isolation from other supporting institutions. Uphoff and Krishna (2004)

argue that in order to understand how strong or weak civil society is, it is paramount to look at the full set of sectors and branches and to examine how these are operating and relating to one other, rather than simply looking at the actors at the extremes of the continuum. Only looking at those most dissociated and autonomous from the state will confine our understanding of how much potentiality and opportunity for effecting power that individuals have within that political system. It will, moreover, overlook the array of actors located in the middle range of the continuum who also have capacities and opportunities for power and influence.

Figure 6. Civil society organisations and institutions as a continuum of interaction among non-state institutions and with state institutions

State Institutions		Societal Institutions/Organisations		
Core	*Interface*	*Interface*	*Semi-Autonomous*	*Autonomous*
S1. Executive	S4. Legislature	1. Political parties	4. Business sector	8. Trade unions
S2. Administration	S5. Judiciary	2. Media	5. Religious organization	9. Professional associations
S3. Armed forces and police	S5. Sub-national governments	3. Local governments	6. Foundations	10. Non-government organisations
			7. Universities	

Embedded in the state --Autonomous from the state

Autonomous from society ---Embedded in society

(Source: Uphoff and Krishna, 2004, p. 361)

In a similar way, drawing on a sociological understanding of civil society, in his extensive accounts on Vietnamese civil society, Wischermann (2010, 2011) introduces a model of 'Civil society action' (CSA), which views it as a specific mode of social action and interaction within a given society and not a fixed entity. Civil society action is seen as "a relationship (between people; between people and the state and/or the economy; between various actors' practices and what constitutes those practices, value- and/or norm-wise, etc.)" (Wischermann, 2010, p.9). In particular, Wischermann contends that civil society action is not only found in the sphere of civil society, for it is also within the state itself as long as the action it pursues is supported by actors in civil society. He explains further how civil society action (with mutual recognition as the core and defined in operational ways as

implying respect, empathy/sympathy, compromising and sticking to rules once agreed upon) can be found among those state agents who, for example, issued the law against domestic violence and that against the discrimination of PLWHIV (people living with HIV). In issuing these laws, the state received support from local NGOs and experts. So, civil society action can be a specific type of interaction that takes place in the public sphere as well as in others (Wischermann, 2011).

A range of scholars advocate the understanding of civil society "as a continuum and not as a buffer zone" (Uphoff and Krishna, 2004, cited in Wischermann, 2010, p.8), which embraces a variety of actions, roles, attitudes and behaviours that pertain to civil society (e.g. Coston, 1998; Fisher, 1998; Young, 1999; Najam, 2000; and Hannah, 2007). Deviating from viewing civil society as a fixed structural entity ontologically distinct from the state, the 'continuum' approach provides a more nuanced view of state-civil society relationships, whereby civil society organisations and the state are intermingled in "a complex and multi-layered network of material transactions, personal connections, and organisational linkages" (Lewis, 2013, p.326). Under this approach, it is envisaged that there will be transgressions between standpoints insofar as the continuum allows, meaning that civil society actors are not always satisfied with the existing position they are entitled to.

In another context, Cheskin and March (2015) provide a unique continuum of contention under the semi-authoritarian regime of Russia, which includes forms of consentful as well as dissentful contention within civil society. Stretching along the behavioural and motivational axes are a range of motivations varying from consentful to dissentful and also a range of behaviours from compliant to contentious. Within this grid, combinations can include consentful contention (i.e. behaviour is contentious, but the motivations are consentful), dissentful contention (contention with anti-regime motivation), consentful compliance (compliance backed by firm ideological motivation), and dissentful compliance (begrudging compliance that lacks ideological motivation). They argue that this model opens up much room for shedding light onto state-society relations in Russia, where dissentful contention is not always overt and people tend to show either consentful or dissentful compliance (Cheskin and March, 2015).

2.4. Civil society and contestation

The reductionist view of the liberal perspective is detrimental to understanding analytically changing state-society relations in nondemocratic regimes; much of the scholarship on the topic therefore appeals to a more sophisticated approach, the Gramscian perspective. The reasons for adopting Gramsci lie in that he conceives civil society as a contested sphere with a discursive nature, and that he transforms the simplistic form of state dictatorship into state hegemony over society through domination and consent (Fontana, 2002; Ramasamy, 2004; Landau, 2008).

Hegemony in Gramsci not only rests on coercion, but also consent (Buttigieg, 1995). In the hegemonic project located within civil society, the ruling classes endeavour to convince the ruled classes to accept the way in which society is developing, as well as use coercion upon them at times when some sections seek to counter the system that oppresses them (Chandhoke, 1995). Moreover, Gramsci suggests that "states that do not possess civil societies are more vulnerable than those that do possess them" (Chandhoke, 2007, p.611). In order to build consent in society, the state, according to Gramsci, needs to establish mechanisms and legitimate institutions deeply entrenched in that society (Fontana, 2002). Appealing to both popular consent and coercion is a powerful governing tactic that enables authoritarian regimes to sustain their survival.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony can be evidenced in many contemporary authoritarian systems. In Vietnam, for example, an expression of state efforts in building consent in society is the presence of large-scale state-owned mass organisations that function as extended arms of the state stretching from the centre to grassroots levels to carry out party propagation and to mobilise mass support for its agenda. Yet, the state, from time to time, uses coercive measures (e.g. physical attacks, house arrest, detainment, intimidation, or livelihood destruction) to suppress opposition from those who seek to challenge its political hegemony.

Also in the light of the Gramscian perspective, Wiktorowicz (2000) showcases a vivid picture of how civil society is appropriated in the state hegemonic project in the Middle East, where authoritarianism is seen as having been upgraded (Heydemann,

2007). CSOs in this region, once established, are entangled into a web of bureaucratic practices and mechanisms that contain them and concurrently enable the ruling elites to monitor and regulate associational activities. Wiktorowicz adds that, in applying this mechanism, the state seeks to undermine potentialities of civil society challenging its regime authority, whilst at the same time tactically co-opting CSOs to make them become a vehicle for controlling society, rather than an engine for democratic change *(ibid).*

Elaborating upon Gramsci, Landau (2008) identifies that civil society in Cambodia functions as an important force in realising the state's hegemonic project by enhancing political legitimation of the authoritarian government through shaping public opinion and building consent, whilst simultaneously leaving space for state coercion and repression. Freedom of assembly and association is constitutionally safeguarded, but many leaders of trade union movements have been exposed to physical attacks, murders and death threats. The government issues various legal documents deliberately worded in vagueness to clamp down on publications and editors who criticise top leaders in the National Assembly and the government (Landau, 2008).

Another critical element of Gramsci's approach is that civil society accommodates both hegemony and counter-hegemony, which implies a discursive nature inherent in civil society (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In its discursive nature, the seeds of counter-hegemony (i.e. contention, competition, and struggle) can also grow. The ruled classes could converge and organise themselves to resist political hegemony. Counter-hegemonic forces in the authoritarian state can be seen both in the real and virtual spheres. In Vietnam, for instance, farmer protests for land expropriation, workers' strikes against deteriorating conditions, and street protests in the anti-China nationalist movement as well as environmental campaigns, are scaling up. An accelerating number of bloggers and internet activists are adopting digital and modern technological tools to criticise and oppose the wrongdoings of public officials and unpopular government policies.

The discursive nature of civil society shows how Gramscian readings foresee the potential to oppose the state via civil society, a role advocated by liberals. Nevertheless, civil society according to Gramsci is more sophisticated than this, in

the sense that there are both the domains of hegemony and counter-hegemony, whereas liberals only recognise the latter.

To some certain degree, the Gramscian approach is useful for elucidating some important episodes of state-society relations in authoritarian contexts. Nevertheless, there are some significant phenomena concerning the nexus between these two actors, which fail to be captured by Gramsci. For example, there is strong evidence that under authoritarian systems political debates and contestations are found within the state itself rather than within civil society, which is believed by Gramsci to be a sphere of contestation (Landau, 2008). Similarly, it is observed elsewhere that some components of civil society have succeeded in circumventing the political hegemony by appropriating the existing formal system to make it work for their organisational objectives (Foster, 2001). This resonates with the phenomenon in which non-state associations sacrifice some degree of their autonomy to seek incorporation into the authoritarian state, so that they can gain access to funding and political connections for their short-term and long-term strategy. The umbrella organisation in Vietnam, VUSTA (Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations), for example, is considered an official representative of many local NGOs, but it has striven with much effort to be closer to the state, rather than to its members, so that it can enjoy more power and benefits due to this closeness (Interview, 12 December 2014, Hanoi).

State-society relations in authoritarian contexts are restructuring with greater intricacy. Moreover, civil society activism, as illustrated, is not marching toward democratisation as its sole cause. It is therefore incumbent on the research community regarding this topic to pay equal attention to the different forms and outcomes of activism that prevail in civil society in authoritarian contexts. Overemphasis on traditional NGOs or a particular form of action or the normative values of civil society often leads to narrow empirical focus and precludes analytical thinking about civil society activism under these regimes.

2.5. Beyond civil society

As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, I followed an eclectic approach to conduct the theoretical review of my thesis, and using this allowed me to respond quickly to the new phenomena emerging from the field. In addition to having good understanding of civil society theories, it was necessary that I open my exploration up to social movement theories to examine whether and if so, how they are relevant to my case studies. In reviewing the literature on civil society activism in authoritarian contexts, it became clear that many accounts adopted dominant analytical dimensions of mainstream social movement theories, in varying degrees, to investigate different episodes of public contestation (e.g. Kuah-Pearce and Guiheux, 2009; Zuo and Benford, 1995; Schock, 1999; Beinin and Vairel, 2013).

The rise to prominence of collective action from below in many authoritarian political systems such as Vietnam, China, Burma, or Russia has contested further the conventional civil society framework in explaining the emerging phenomenon. It has also necessitated the search for an alternative conceptual framework that is sufficient to understand analytically the emerging forms of contestation (public protests or social movements). In addition, empirical evidence elsewhere (e.g. the success cases of democratic transition in Tunisia, Egypt, or Libya [Pace and Cavatorta, 2012]) shows that state hegemony, co-optation of civil society, NGOs or development focus within the traditional civil society framework fails to deal with bottom-up social movements. Likewise, donor-funded NGO-led activism constitutes just one element within the whole landscape of civil society activism, for many other types of such activism are often present in authoritarian regimes. Accordingly, different analytical dimensions of mainstream social movement theories are employed to examine the dynamics of emerging public contestation in authoritarian states, including contentious collective actions, political opportunity structures, mobilising structures, and framing processes (political process), and symbolic features and collective identity-building processes (new social movement theory). I will particularly discuss these concepts to explore why and how they have been applied to explain grassroots collective actions in these contexts.

Political process theory (PPT) was developed by the leading American theorists of social movements in the contemporary period (e.g. McCarthy and Mayer Zald,

1977; Tarrow, 1994; McAdam, 2010; Tilly, 2015). PPT, the dominant paradigm in the study of social movements and contentious politics (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004), by and large, follows a state-centric approach, whereby the state is perceived to affect both the distribution of power and resources in society and to define possibilities for challenge. Social movements under PPT transform social contests in which they operate (Smith and Fetner, 2009). Shifting focus away from factors internal and external to the movement, PPT provides an extensive account of the emergence of the movement (McAdam, 2010). Social movements under this theory are defined as "collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities" (Tarrow, 1994, p.4). They emerge "when expanding political opportunities are seized by people who are formally or informally organized, aggrieved, and optimistic that they can successfully redress their concerns" (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004, p.17).

This model overlooks the role of intense grievances and extensive resources, which its proponents consider less important to the rise of social movements, and instead it places emphasis on the opening of political opportunities as a requisite that gives rise to social mobilisation (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004). Moreover, the model focuses exclusively on movements engaged in political conflict, especially on direct confrontation between insurgents and authorities. Under PPT, overt confrontation is considered to constitute the crux of the dynamics (Gamson, 1983 cited in Morris and Herring, 1987).

The founding scholars of PPT (Doug McAdam, Sydney Tarrow, Charles Tilly) to some certain extent, agree upon the three vital components shaping the emergence and development of movements, including: the political opportunity structure, mobilising structures, and framing processes. Among them the political opportunity structure stands out most dominant.

Political opportunity structure: Despite being one of the most influential concepts in dominant social movement theories, political opportunity structure entails much ambiguity and pliability, for it can be ascribed to anything exogenous to a social movement organisation (Gamson and Meyer, 1996).

Political opportunity structure, in Tilly and Tarrow (2015, p. 49), "refers to features of regimes and institutions (e.g. splits in the ruling class) that facilitate or inhibit a political actor's collective action and to changes in those features" and "it emphatically includes not only opportunities but also threats". When these opportunities and threats accumulate and combine, at a certain point, they will result in changes in regimes, such as democratisation *(ibid).* Accordingly, Tarrow (1994, p.85) argues that the reason lurking behind people's embarkation on contentious politics, derives from the dimensions of political environment, in other words political opportunities, which "provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectation for success or failure".

The terms 'political opportunity structure' and 'political opportunities' are often used interchangeably under PPT, which has induced some confusion (Meyer, 2004). It would be flawed to understand political opportunities in terms of 'structure' (or structural change), because they do not mean the same thing and often refer to differing things. If it is mentioned as being an 'opportunity', in what sense it is structural; if it is an 'opportunity structure', what makes it political? (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004). What is more problematic is the concept's lack of specificity, which leaves researchers struggling to figure out which aspects of the political environment affect the rise of social movements and in what way this rise is affected (Meyer and Minkoff, 2004). McAdam (1996, p.26) brings forth a list of dimensions of political opportunity, which he believes to be highly consensual:

1. The relative openness or closure of the institutionalised political system
2. The stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity
3. The presence or absence of elite allies
4. The state's capacity and propensity for repression

Within this consensual list, the political opportunity structure (POS) takes into account the changing exogenous political opportunities prevailing in the political environment, i.e. the likelihood for a movement to arise is conditional on the emergence of changes in the political system (i.e. the state). As a consequence, the movement's success or failure, or the social movement agency, as Morris (2000) puts it, rests largely in the hands of external actors, thereby overlooking the capacity of the challenge group(s) and the mobilisation process of the movement.

On one level, some agree that changes in political opportunities are associated with changes in the tactics of social mobilisation, whilst on another, confusion continues to exist, because very little is understood regarding the passage from opportunities into collective action (Meyer and Minkoff, 2004). Chapter 4 of the thesis will provide an in-depth account of how the mobilising groups transformed political opportunities into collective action in the Trees Movement.

Mobilising structures, as defined by McAdam *et al.* (1996, p.3), are "those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action". Salient to this concept is an emphasis on the flexible use of both formal and informal institutions/networks/channels, and the combination of diverse constellations of actors that are explicitly organised around movement goals and others that are organised for other purposes in contemporary social movements (McCarthy, 1996 cited in Smith and Fetner, 2009). In the Trees Movement (Chapter 4), as will later be seen, the mobilising groups strategically navigated both formal and informal channels to orchestrate collective action.

Framing processes emerged when the political process theorists increasingly realised that cultural dynamics are important for understanding the course and trajectory of social movements (Benford and Snow, 2000). Equally noticeable is that social movements, in turn, have become a critical force of cultural dynamics in the shaping of new identities and ideologies (Swidler, 2000 cited in Brown, 2004).

Frames are understood as "schemata of interpretation" – they help to organise and strategise events meaningfully and guide actions (Gamson, 1992, cited in Benford and Snow, 2000, p.614). However frames are not simply a rough aggregation of discrete behaviours and perceptions, for they themselves are also the outcome of negotiating shared meaning *(ibid).* The concept of framing, in other words incorporates a variety of factors, including collective identities, repertoires of contention, beliefs, meanings, political ideology and discourse, as well as cultural practices, which once established will allow social movement actors to legitimise their activities and accelerate mobilisation process (Benford and Snow, 2000). Given this situation, framing processes provide an analytical lens for understanding why people participate in the social movement and also why movement actors (i.e. activists) decide to act in the way they do (Brown, 2004). The analysis of the Trees

Movement will illuminate how the challenging groups appropriated the existing formal discourse to construct their identities and the meanings of their mobilisation to generate legitimacy, how they framed their mobilising strategies and repertoire of actions to recruit participants to intensify collective pressure on the government.

Nevertheless, the existing scholarship of civil society activism in authoritarian contexts contends that whilst the explanatory terms as above discussed are useful for explaining factors that give rise to social movements and specific moments of contention, the model places too much emphasis on the movements targeted at the state or overt forms of political contestation (Cheskin and March, 2015; Goodwin and Jasper, 2004). The state is treated as a unit of analysis, the action of which is a determinant factor shaping movement emergence, dynamics and outcomes (Voss and Williams, 2012). As a result, only movements and forms of activism that directly confront the state are favoured. The model also tells us very little about the agency of challenge groups, leadership, the mobilisation process, dynamics, interactive sequences, etc. during the course of movements. The prism of this emphasis consequently dismisses a range of forms of civic mobilisation/activism which confrontation with the state is not always overt and straightforward, which is a common practice of the public sphere in many authoritarian regimes including Vietnam.

3. Understanding civil society activism in Vietnam's authoritarian one-party context

As above discussed, there are certain limitations concerning dominant civil society theories as well as social movement theories. Discussions on civil society traditionally are NGO- and development- focused, meanwhile, civil society activism under authoritarianism goes far beyond NGOs and a donor-driven agenda. The traditional civil society framework, as a result does not facilitate the examination of emerging forms of activism (e.g. public protests or social movements) in authoritarian regimes. Against this backdrop, some dominant explanatory terms of social movement theories have been applied to examine these new forms. This theoretical landscape, however, proves more suitable for analysing overt forms of

contention. Critically, these two grand theoretical bodies of literature do not talk to one another, each being utilised without much reference to the other.

Much of existing accounts on civil society activism in Vietnam focus on formal organisations (NGOs) and their actions (e.g. Irene Norlund, 2007); Ben Kerkvliet, Nguyen Quang A and Bach Tan Sinh, 2008; Joseph Hannah, 2007; or Joerg Wischermann, 2003 & 2013). In particular, research on this topic written by Vietnamese scholars is extremely limited and the available scholarship is again either focused on the structural organisations of civil society (e.g. Bui The Cuong, 2005) or the socio-economic functions of civil society organisations (Bach Tan Sinh, 2003 & 2011).

Equally notable is a significant lacuna in research on grassroots citizen-led activism in Vietnam. Recently, there are some emerging accounts on non-NGO and non-hierarchical forms of activism, such as Wells-Dang (2010 & 2011), with a focus on informal civil society networks and political space claimed from below; Carl Thayer (2009) on independent oppositional civil society groups, which he refers to as political civil society; Morris-Jung (2015) on online petition movements; and especially a large contribution by Ben Kerkvliet on workers' protests (2010), farmers' protests (2014a), as well as his unique account on dissidents (2014b).

My thesis does not place a singular focus on either NGO-led activism or citizen-led activism, but rather, it is set out to pay equally significant attention to these contrasting forms. Therefore, it is a crucial task for me to develop an analytical framework that enables me to examine and compare both forms analytically. Drawing on the above theoretical discussions of civil society activism in authoritarian contexts, validated by my empirical encounters, there are three key concepts I will use as the analytical framework to look across both forms of activism of the research. In what follows, I outline three overarching themes namely, legitimacy, autonomy, and formality and informality of activism which prove most analytically relevant and combine to enable me to explore contemporary civil society activism along with reflecting on the politics of state-society relations in Vietnam. The selection of these themes was theoretically informed and subsequently validated and triangulated through my data collection and analysis. These themes became more acute during my comparative accounts and resonated

strongly with the distinctive features of civil society activism in Vietnam, where state-society power relations are evolving and restructuring. This framework, covering both forms of activism, also offers important conceptual contributions to the existing literature of the topic. I next explain in further detail why I have selected these themes for my research, and how relevant they are, both theoretically and empirically.

3.1. Legitimacy

Legitimacy pertinent to various organisational structures of civil society under authoritarianism is precarious. Conceptually, unlike autonomy, legitimacy receives little attention in dominant civil society theories, because under the liberal framework civil society is normatively associated with pre-established values. There remains a scholarly gap in research on legitimacy regarding civil society activism in authoritarian contexts. In addition, the existing literature on legitimacy stresses more on NGOs than on social movements. The 'legitimacy' theme in this thesis is conceptually grounded in the relational approach (discussed in 2.3) and mainstream social movement theories. In the first place, the relational perspective shifts focus away from the notion of a pre-established nature of civil society and recognises the need to analyse how civil society expresses itself in specific contexts, as well as how its actors are constructed and situate themselves in the relationships that they respond to and become enmeshed within. The adoption of relational thinking also enables us to look at processes of social interaction and mobilisation, as well as the ties that such interactions generate. Using this approach to understand how civil society expresses itself in specific contexts and in terms of the intricacies of relationships they have with the state, 'legitimacy' emerges as an integral part of the processes through which civil society expresses and relates itself to the state. I will examine how civil society groups generate and maintain legitimacy for their organisational structures and for their collective actions.

Second, the 'framing processes' of social movement theory (discussed in 2.5) is the term that resonates with legitimacy: "frames help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action" (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 614). They incorporate a variety of factors namely, collective

identities, beliefs, meanings, political ideology and discourse, as well as cultural practices, which once established allow collective actors to legitimise their activities, to garner bystanders' supports and to accelerate the mobilisation process *(ibid)*.

Legitimacy can constrain or stimulate different actors' ability to act. I chose legitimacy as a key dimension to examine the two case studies because it is a long-standing issue among CSOs in Vietnam. This insight grows out of researching a wide array of secondary data and my empirical encounters. Specifically, the term 'civil society', as mentioned in the previous chapter, is unused in any official documents in Vietnam, meaning that the state has continued not to admit its official existence. The Law on Association, which is expected to create an enabling framework for the associational activities in Vietnam, has long been delayed for approval, being subject to over twenty five years of revision. In general, the institutional preconditions for associationalism in the country are widely lacking. The two case studies of the registered NGO 'CCERD' and the citizen-led Trees Movement are the main components of Vietnamese civil society, but they differ in many respects, namely organisational structure to position of legitimacy, degree of autonomy, as well as methods of activism. So, generating and maintaining legitimacy emerges as a top concern underpinning their strategies of social mobilisation in both cases.

Legitimacy has inhabited centre stage among contemporary social and political scientists for decades, but there is limited definitional consensus on the concept partly because it is applied to almost every dimension of social life and has been employed by various actors at all levels. Much current scholarship on legitimacy builds on Weber's idea of social order, whereby he argues that "a social order is legitimate only if action is approximately or on the average oriented to certain determinate 'maxims' or rules" (Weber, 1978 cited in Johnson *et al*, 2006, p.55). That social order is sustainable, Weber explains, if it is grounded in the continuity of its members' beliefs in its legitimacy (Miller, 1972).

Generally, a social entity is considered legitimate "if it is in accord with the norms, values, beliefs, practices and procedures accepted by a group" (Zelditch, 2001, p.33). Edwards (2001, p.147) defines legitimacy as "the right to be and to do something in society – a sense that an organisation is lawful, admissible, and

justified in its chosen course of action". Drawing on Weber, Douglas (1986) argues that to achieve legitimacy an institution needs "a formula that founds its rightness in reason and in nature" (Douglas, 1986 cited in Johnson *et al.*, 2006, p.56). With particular regard to legitimation, Douglas contends, it is a process by which institutions are linked to a broader cultural framework of beliefs, those regarding the reason and nature that are presumed to be so consensually accepted that they are objective social facts *(ibid).* Likewise, legitimation, according to Zelditch (2001, p.9), is a process that "brings the unaccepted into accord with accepted norms, values, beliefs, practices, and procedures". It is, basically, a consensus-building process, Zelditch explains. Johnson *et al.* (2006) however notice that whilst consensus is a necessary condition of legitimacy, it is not necessary to refer to actual or absolute consensus, for legitimacy can be maintained despite disagreement from some individuals.

The literature on legitimacy (e.g. the organisations literature) so far places much more focus on NGOs than on social movements. Within the existing organisational scholarship, the definition offered by Suchman (1995, p.574), is recognised as influential, whereby he conceptualises it as "a generalised perception that actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions". Once established, legitimacy will provide favourable conditions for civil society groups to mobilise the support of wider society and defend them from having their functionings and conducts questioned or sanctioned (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). More notable, however, is that legitimacy has a contested nature and it is generated in a lettuce of often competing normative and cognitive frameworks (Walton, 2013). The process of legitimation is not directly related to the degree of legitimacy enjoyed by its target (Thomas, 2013). This implies that legitimacy is not fixed, for once given or established, it needs to be maintained otherwise it can be removed. Understanding the contested nature of legitimacy, as such, gives an explanation as to why the different civil society groups of my research had to direct their substantial efforts towards not only building but also maintaining their legitimacy.

To date, there remain limited academic efforts aimed at unpacking what legitimacy means in relation to social movements. The crux of the existing accounts lies in questions such as whether social movements are legitimate actors or whether

strategies they employ and the claims they make are legitimate. Haunss (2007) argues that in addressing how legitimacy relates to social movements, focus should be shifted to exploring how social movements confer or deny legitimacy to political actors as well as the extent to which they are able to do so being contingent on their strategic choices or structural constraints.

Since the two case studies of my research straddle several domains, it is important to search for a proper interpretation of legitimacy that is analytically agile and relevant for application across these cases. Legitimacy in this research is of course not limited to a legal registration or a legal status, nor is it simply an internal trait of a particular organisation. Rather, drawing on Suchman (1995), Zelditch (2001), Edwards (2001) and Douglas (1986) above, legitimacy in this thesis is construed in terms of *how to be socially accepted and recognised for the acts that are right in reason and in nature, desirable, proper, admissible and justifiable and thus, enjoy the support of an identifiable community.* I developed this definition rather than adopting completely any of those formulated by the authors above, because it opened enough analytical space for me to examine two contrasting forms of civil society activism, NGO-led and citizen-led activism. Understanding legitimacy in this way not only avoids the unpleasant confusion of this term when applied to different organisational structures embedded in the case studies of this research (e.g. how to understand legitimacy of a social movement and an NGO at the same time). It also avoids the risk of downgrading the legitimation processes of groups without legal status. In addition, it provides a key to understanding the importance of legitimacy in social mobilisation orchestrated by different civil society groups in Vietnam.

Regarding types of legitimacy, Suchman (1995) brings to the fore four types of legitimacy. Specifically, regulatory legitimacy is reliant on conformity with the existing laws and regulations; normative legitimacy refers to congruence between the values pursued by organisations and wider societal values; "cognitive legitimacy is related to conformity to established cognitive structures in society, what is often described as having 'taken-for granted' status" (Kostova and Zaheer, 1999 cited in Lister, 2003, p.179); and pragmatic legitimacy derives from getting things done for clients or the audience (e.g. addressing social needs).

Existing literature on legitimacy overlooks the legitimation strategies and processes. This research will fill this gap by exploring a series of inter-related questions in chapters 4, 5 and 6: How do the NGO and the Trees Movement within this research construct and enhance legitimacy for their activism? What mobilising strategies do they use to legitimise their activism and then maintain their legitimacy? In whose eyes are these groups legitimate? Why do certain groups with differing positions of legitimacy gain or lose political salience at certain times? In relation to the three key research questions of my thesis, legitimacy is the detectable component pertinent to the first: "What organisational forms do civil society groups adopt and how are these positioned in relation to the state?"

3.2. Autonomy of activism

Autonomy is a classical topical concern of the liberal civil society theory and also the new social movement literature (e.g. Offe, 1985). Whilst under the former, it is structurally independent from the state, under the latter it is viewed as collective action autonomous from the existing bureaucratic structures (e.g. unions, political parties). The thesis rejects the liberal understanding of autonomy that focuses on state-society polarity or 'structural autonomy' by approaching autonomy in terms of capacity to act in relation to the state. The understanding of autonomy from the new social movement perspective is also rejected through the argument that in authoritarian contexts, such as Vietnam, all forms of civil society activism are constrained by the state and they have to be aligned with the state agenda and discourse in order to achieve success.

There exists a large variety of conceptual definitions regarding autonomy in moral, social and political philosophy. Bringing a detailed definitional account of this concept is, however, beyond the scope of the thesis. Autonomy concerns the self-rule and states of a person (Dworkin, 1988 cited in Christman, 2008), or refers to the capacity of people in varying degrees to govern their lives and determine their course (Raz, 1986 cited in Devine et al. 2008). Self-rule, according to Dworkin, includes two components: the independence of one's deliberation and choice from manipulation by others along with the capacity to rule oneself (Dworkin, 1988, cited in Christman, 2008). Christman (2004) contends that autonomy, in general, is

associated with the level of competence of the person in acting, reflection, and decision making on the basis of factors that are somehow his/her own. In order to be able to exercise self-rule, one must be in a position to act competently based on values, conditions, desires, etc. that constitute him/her and motivate choice *(ibid)*.

In similar account, Chirkov *et al* (2003, p.98) indicate that "people are most autonomous when they act in accord with their authentic interests or integrated values and desires". In particular, they offer an alternative way of perceiving this term in relation to dependency, whereby they problematise the relationship between autonomy and dependency. They argue that the two can exist at the same time and in many scenarios, the latter even paves the way for achieving the former. This means that in certain instances, people seek shelter in further dependency in order to pursue greater autonomy and agency (Chirkov et al., 2003 cited in Devine, 2006). The account by Chirkov *et al.* is reminiscent of the question concerning whether embeddedness in the state by VNGOs is coincident with the productive or unproductive synergistic relationships between them and the state, which will be addressed in Chapter 5.

Among influential views on autonomy is 'relational autonomy', which implies that autonomy fundamentally concerns social relations rather than individual traits (Oshana, 2006 cited in Christman, 2008). Under this approach, autonomy is understood "as a property, not merely of an individual and her capacities, but of the relations that comprise those conditions. To protect autonomy in this way is to protect those relations" (Christman, 2004, p.156). Relational views of autonomy "valuably underscore the social embeddedness of selves while not forsaking the basic value commitments of (for the most part, liberal) justice" (Christman, 2004, p.143). They emphasise on the role that background social dynamics and power structures play in the enjoyment and development of autonomy.

The thesis does not focus on autonomy at the individual (personal) level, but by drawing on the relational views of autonomy, Chirkov *et al* (2003), Christman (2004) as well as Dworkin (1988), I view *autonomy as the ability of civil society groups to act and to determine their course in accord with their interests or values and desires when negotiating especially with the state*. Autonomy in the thesis is not a collective goal that civil society groups seek to claim from the state. It is analysed in

relation to 'embeddedness' in the state in this thesis. Specifically, the research involves examining the significance of the varying relations to the state that civil society groups are enmeshed within. It examines, based on these varied degrees of embeddedness in the state, how civil society groups are able to express, organise and orchestrate activism towards achieving collective goals.

While comparing the experiences of civil society activism in Vietnam across my two case studies, I realised that autonomy retains strong resonance, since together with legitimacy it is an important factor that shapes how civil society groups can act and orchestrate collective actions. Similarly, since autonomy and legitimacy are conceived as being inter-related, I explore how the former affects the legitimation processes pursued by the different groups as well as how the latter affects these groups to deploy their autonomy.

Also approaching this term in a non-conventional way, Ana Dinerstein (2010) looks at autonomy as an instrument to contest power. Although she does not provide a clear conception of what autonomy is, she argues that it involves a contested relationship in and against the state or "autonomy is a tool to contest power" (Dinerstein, 2010, p.361). Dinerstein's argument reverberates with the experience of activism by different civil society groups associated with varying degrees of autonomy in this research. Insofar as autonomy is concerned, drawing on Dinerstein, I argue that given the extent of autonomy that is available to them, civil society groups become attuned to their connections to political power and decide to act accordingly. They become strategic mobilisers by taking advantage of their differing levels of embeddedness in the state in order to realise their collective goals. This argument seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of civil society activism in authoritarian contexts, where civil society groups do not always promote a co-opted form of political activism that upholds rather than contradicts the status quo.

Autonomy will be addressed in detail throughout my empirical analysis in Chapters four, five, and six. Together with legitimacy, providing an insightful account of 'autonomy' will allow for the first research question of the thesis to be addressed.

3.3. Formality and informality of activism

(In)formality of activism is the third integral element to civil society activism in Vietnam. Bringing insight into formality and informality of activism involves investigating *processes* of social mobilisation through which different civil society groups associated with varying degrees of autonomy and legitimacy strategically articulate the interplay of formal and informal processes to achieve collective goals.

This theme is theoretically informed by the relational approach (see section 2.3) as well as the dominant explanatory term, 'mobilising structures', of social movement theories (see section 2.5). As indicated, the relational perspective considers civil society in terms of social processes and relations with other objects and examines how it is constituted after such relations and interactions. If 'framing processes' of social movement theories shed some needed light on the concept 'legitimacy', 'mobilising structures' are the term that resonates with (in)formality. The latter is defined as the collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilise and engage in collective action (McAdam *et al.*, 1996). Salient to this concept is the emphasis on the flexible use of both formal and informal channels and institutions as well as the combination of diverse constellations of actors that are explicitly organised around movement goals.

There is no rigorous and systematic conceptualisation in the literature on (in)formality, for it encompasses a wide range of strands that consider these terms in varying or even competing views. There is some consensus that formality relates to coming within the ambit of state regulation (Sinha and Kanbur, 2012). In comparative politics, for example, a common distinction between formal and informal institutions is state-societal. Whilst the former refers to state bodies (legislatures, bureaucracies) and state-enforced rules (constitutions, laws, regulations), the latter pertains to civic, religious, and other societal rules and organisations (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004). In attempt to overcome this divide, Helmke and Levitsky (2004, pp. 8-9) define "formal institutions as rules that are openly codified, in the sense that they are established and communicated through channels that are widely accepted as official. By contrast, informal institutions are socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels."

From a sociological perspective, drawing on Goffman (1983), Morand (1995) considers formality and informality as two distinct types of interaction orders. Goffman's interaction order refers to the situation that when participating in social gatherings, actors tend to generate a set of conventions or rules for co-mingling, which shape how individuals are to conduct themselves (Goffman, 1983 cited in Morand, 1995). Formality and informality are construed as two different types of interaction orders, since, Morand (1995) explains, each exhibits a distinct set of understandings or conventions about how actors are to perform. The latter is characterised by looser, more casual modes of behaviour and situational involvement, whilst the former is characterised by tighter, more disciplined ones *(ibid).*

Formality and informality of activism in this thesis are formulated based on Helmke and Levitsky's (2004) and Morand's (1995) perspectives, as provided above. This is first done in relation to a number of related concepts: formal vs. informal structures, and formal vs. informal channels. A formal structure is defined as an officially institutionalised one with a physical head-office (e.g. a registered NGO or a structure belonging to the state, such as a mass organisation) that works within the rules that are openly codified. In contrast, an informal structure refers to a loosely organised and non-institutionalised one (e.g. an independent group of activists, or an informal civilian network, or an independent/unregistered group) that works outside of the officially institutionalised structure. Drawing on this definition, it can be seen in this thesis that the case study CCERD, a local registered NGO, has a formal structure, whilst the mobilising groups in the Trees Movement have informal structures. Formal channels are officially sanctioned mechanisms (e.g. receiving office for citizens in government departments, state laws, policies, state-propagandised commitments and authorised activities). Informal channels concern mechanisms that tend to exist or to be enforced outside officially sanctioned channels (e.g. petition signing, public demonstration, civil disobedience, or Facebook).

Formality and informality of activism will be approached in terms of processes and interactions performed by different structures, formal or informal, in this thesis. Specifically, I define *formal activism as a process through which different groups overtly engage with and/ or perform their acts through formal channels and*

structures. In contrast, *informal activism is a process through which different groups engage with and/or perform their acts through informal channels and structures in either an overt or a covert manner*. For example, when a mobilising group in the Trees Movement (i.e. an informal structure) convened at the city government (i.e. formal structure) to demand a formal meeting (formal channel) with the city leaders, this can be considered as formal activism. Covert activism, by contrast, is considered as informal activism. As an example of this came when the NGO case study covertly worked with a centrally-based formal structure, i.e. the NGO 'Toward Sustainable Development' based in Hanoi, so as to gain more support from the central level.

Asking 'whether civil society groups associated with greater legitimacy and embeddedness in the state only resort to formal activism and vice versa' or 'whether these different groups deploy both formality and informality and how they do it', will open up an important avenue for understanding the dynamic of activism performed by these groups. Ethnographic research provided me with the opportunity to observe the unobservable, to make sense of everyday acts of my target groups and to comprehend the logic and motive underlining their decisions. Moreover, during my comparative efforts of the two case studies, an array of novel insights came out, which enabled me to give an answer to why different groups adopted certain mobilising strategies and why they strategically navigated both formal and informal channels at certain times during the course of mobilisation.

James Scott (1998) argues that what constitutes formality always has an informal underpinning. As we will see later, underpinning the mobilisations led by the formal structure (i.e. the NGO-CCERD) as well as by the informal structure (i.e. the Trees Movement) were dynamic interactions between formality and informality.

Along the lines of the discussion about formality and informality, it is pertinent to mention the term 'embedded activism', which has been used by Peter Ho (2007), and Ho and Edmonds (2007), in their wide ranging account on civil society activism in China, and Wells-Dang (2011) on informal civil society networks in Vietnam and China. This form of activism, to a certain extent, resonates with the experience and practice of NGO-led activism in this thesis, it therefore deserves some clarification. Embedded activism is, according to Ho (2007, p.193), a form of social activism that

is led by a formally organised structure or engages with authorities. It uses institutionalised structures along with formal channels such as state laws, policies, officially promoted values or state-propagandised agenda as well as mainstream media to frame mobilising structures around controversial issues in a non-confrontational manner. Ho, however, notices that embeddedness does not indicate a submissive and silenced movement, but rather, this form of activism is continually negotiated and therefore effectively adapted into the existing political environment through which some extent of political influence can be effectuated.

Drawing on Ho, embedded activism could be evidenced in the NGO-led activism case study of this research. The NGO engaged with or even manipulated formal power structures and deployed formal channels to mobilise collectively in order to compel the local government to deliver progressive policy outcomes to the local poor.

In contrast to embedded activism is autonomous citizen-led activism, which is embodied by the Trees Movement case study. Civil society activism across regions, Cavatorta (2012) argues, goes beyond formal hierarchical structures and organisations. Engagement with socio-economic and political affairs is no longer only limited to formal structures. Instead, ordinary people with increasing awareness of their citizenship and civic duties become activated citizens taking initiatives to organise themselves and exercise critical activism in many authoritarian contexts.

Formality and informality of activism is the element pertinent to the second research question of the thesis, whereby I ask "what strategies of engagement do civil society groups adopt in order to achieve their goals?"

4. Conclusion

This chapter has traced and explored theories and concepts relating to civil society activism in authoritarian contexts. I have explored difficulties in applying dominant

civil society and social movement theories in non-democratic regimes such as Vietnam. Evolving state-society relations in Vietnam are running counter to many of the assumptions underpinning this traditional civil society model and many episodes of public contestation are not always covered by social movement theories.

Drawing on these theoretical discussions and particularly validated by my empirical findings, I developed three key concepts: legitimacy, autonomy of activism, along with formality and informality of activism. These concepts have enabled me to engage analytically with the realities and experiences of civil society activism in Vietnam and to reflect upon the politics of changing state-society relations. These elements constitute the analytical framework of the thesis, which guides my empirical analysis in the chapters that follow. They are considered as possessing the explanatory power to respond to my concrete empirical encounters. Each of them alone provides a particular slant of the complexity and dynamics of the evolving state-society relations in Vietnam. This framework is also expected to have wider conceptual implications for the existing literature pertaining to the topic.

Chapter 3 Methodology

1. Introduction

Social science research is a dialectic and interactive process that is characterized by various continual negotiations. According to Devine (1999), dialectics and interactions are constitutive features of all phases of research rather than restricted to a certain one. Struggles to finalise research questions, data collection and empirical analysis pertaining to my research cost me a great deal of energy and effort to accommodate, improvise and even take risk to reach where I am now. Dozens of questions arose at critical moments of my research, which necessitated taking a decisive step. Along that journey, aside from aspects such as the psychological, behavioural, cultural, and political, I realised that I would also need to take into account the aspect of emotional feeling. Being a female researcher undertaking research about civil society activism in my home country, seeing civilians in my city being attacked and assaulted in the Trees Movement, several of whom were my key informants, neutralising my feelings to observe and analyse in the role of an impartial researcher obviously was a challenging task.

This chapter aims to explain the methodological process through which I negotiated case studies, collected data, refined the research questions and addressed the research challenges as well as ethical issues including ethical considerations concerning online research. I also highlight the challenges I encountered and how I myself as a researcher related to the key subjects in the field throughout the research process.

2. Epistemological framework

In this research, I adopted a constructivist paradigm in which I pursued an interpretive-interactive- hermeneutic approach. Taking such an epistemological stance allowed me to understand social phenomena in terms of relationships and processes, while fully acknowledging their specific context. In what follows, I explain and justify this epistemological stance.

Positivism and constructionism are the two traditional ontological approaches in social science, but they differ sharply in terms of how the world is conceived. Under the former, there is the belief of the existence of a real world out there, but this world is autonomous from human agency. The aim is to discover and explain patterns that are supposed to be rooted in nature (Giddens and Giddens, 1974). In contrast, regarding the latter, its proponents contend that such patterns are a product of our own making and the belief in a universal and objective knowledge is disputed (Lynch, 1998). Constructivists believe that the "knowledge and reality that people hold is socially constructed through the use and interpretation of language, consciousness and shared meaning" (Habermas, 1972 cited in Pansiri, 2013, p. 24). Social constructionism seeks to capture and understand "the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live" (Gergen, 1985, p.266).

My research was fundamentally approached from a qualitative constructivist-interpretivist perspective, which threw more light on understanding and interpretation and less on verification. Following this stance allowed me to gain in-depth insight into a particular social phenomenon emanating from the public sphere in Vietnam, where civil society groups associated with different institutional characteristics exercised different forms of activism conducive to (re)structuring state-society relations in the country. In the constructivist interpretivist approach, "social reality is regarded as the product of processes by which social actors negotiate the meanings for actions and situations" (Blaikie, 1991, p. 120). The social world is a universe of meanings, it suggests therefore that to understand this world of meanings one must interpret it (Schwandt, 1994). It is incumbent on the inquirer to elucidate the process of meaning construction, along with what and how meanings are illustrated in the language and actions of social actors (*ibid*).

This epistemological framework also indicates that my research process is inherently hermeneutic-dialectic, which lies at the centre of constructivist tradition (Guba and Lincoln, 2001). "Hermeneutics seeks to gain insight into society by interpreting what motivates others (introspection), 'understanding' in the sense of empathy" (Van der Pijl, 2009, p. 88). It is a recognised procedure of the interpretation, whereby any understanding must manifest to fit a distinct historical and social context (Dilthey, 1979 cited in Moses and Knutsen, 2012, p.187). In its essence, the particular is juxtaposed with the general, and the local with the distant; in order to understand the entire, one has to understand the constitutive

components, but in order to understand the constitutive components one has to understand the whole (Reason and Rowan, 1981). Dialectics, as opposed to hermeneutics, examines internal contradictions (Kvale, 1996). The logics of the two processes seem to contrast in that hermeneutics attempts to combine meanings, whereas dialectics seeks to expose contradictions in those that are formed *(ibid).* In the light of this interpretation, the hermeneutic-dialectic approach is inherently comparative and contrasting between particular events, whilst general norms help constructivists widen their understanding of the event beyond the particular or local (Moses and Knutsen, 2012). They employ comparisons to strengthen not weaken the local significance of knowledge, with no attempt to draw out larger generalisations regarding the nature of the social phenomenon. In particular, they seek to interpret certain events as set against larger contextual settings, which they consider to provide constitutive meanings to those events (ibid).

Drawing on the constructivist paradigm and interpretative-interactive-hermeneutic approach, I engaged with the subjects pertinent to my in-depth case studies (who came from a wide array of backgrounds with varied beliefs and values) by enmeshing myself within the frames in which they construct meanings for their identities and actions, as well as the processes through which they undergo and reach decisions. My research offers two in-depth case studies of civil society activism, which proved to be contrasting, but also complementary to one other, which helped me illuminate different slants of Vietnam's associationalism and reflect on the politics of the changing state-society relations in the country. I justify my case selection in the coming section.

As indicated clearly in the introduction, my research is an attempt to contribute to understanding the politics of change by looking at the phenomenon of civil society activism. I viewed the phenomenon of change in terms of processes rather than in static terms. Process tracing is a fundamental tool of qualitative analysis, which is defined "as the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analysed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator" (Collier, 2011, p.823). It focuses on the unfolding of events or situations over time and yet, Collier suggests, this unfolding will fail if one cannot adequately describe an event of situation at one point in time. Hence, insightful description, a fundamental component of this technique, should be started not with observing change or sequence, but rather with capturing a series of specific moments, then penetrating into characterising key stages marked by critical moments, which in turn allows for

a good analytical account of processes of change (Collier, 2011). In the same vein, Vennesson indicates that process tracing used in the inductive constructivist tradition shifts the research focus from what happened to how and why it happened; it offers a means to discover the preference and perceptions of actors, their purposes, their goals, their values and their specification of the situations that face them (Vennesson, 2008, cited in Moses and Knutsen, 2012, p.225).

In investigating civil society activism in Vietnam, my research drew on a flexible combination of outside-in and inside-out perspectives. Specifically, the former involved describing and analysing contextual factors that underpin and shape civil society actions, such as structural links, 'king's rules', and local norms as well as formal and informal institutions. Meanwhile the latter concerned examining the internal decision-making processes of the studied civil society groups, as well as capturing their internal dynamics and driving forces of their shift in actions or strategies when necessary. Having said that, it does not mean my approach to researching simply embraces discrete interrogations of external and internal dimensions and processes. Rather, I was informed by Goffman of a challenge that prevails regarding how to relate the 'front stage' to the 'backstage' and how to find that pathway for reaching the backstage, which is often deliberately defended (Goffman, 1959 cited in Devine, 1999, p.118). What actors perform on the front stage is explicit and accessible to the audience, whereas the backstage - where the decision-making process actually happens and where they construct, prepare and rehearse what they would perform on the front stage - is conventionally not accessible *(ibid).* The front stage only works because of multiple backstage activities. The explored civil society groups of the research performed various formal and informal processes on both the front and back stages to orchestrate their mobilisations. Hence, gaining in-depth insights into the intricacies of their performances at both these stages, as well as understanding the dynamics of their movements between them, was the ultimate aim of my empirical data collection.

Regarding the positionality of the researcher, in securing impartiality in research I used my personal insight while taking a non-judgemental stance to understand, triangulate, and interpret the lived experience, behaviours and perspectives of my respondents as they participated, constructed and interpreted the meaning of their own enquiries and actions.

3. Evolution of the research questions

My thesis evolved in terms of the themes and questions from what I had intended to address at the beginning of my research. In my first PhD seminar at Bath (12 June 2014), I explained that my initial research objective was to explore the nature of change arising from the rise to prominence of NGO-led civil society in the authoritarian state of Vietnam. This would involve examining political significance effectuated by local NGOs in two main areas: social service provision (i.e. microfinance) and policy impact (i.e. land issues). I planned to limit my research focus to NGO-led interventions in order to examine changing state-society relations in a transitional Vietnam. This plan was designed on the basis of information gathered from literature, as well as preliminary interviews and conversations I had conducted via Skype along with emails with NGO leaders, experts, academics and journalists.

The fact that my research followed an inductive data-driven approach, as well as an interpretative-interactive-hermeneutic approach, did not mean that I would simply enter the field with no questions. On the contrary, the initial questions, Maxwell (2008) points out, help to frame the study in important ways and influence decisions concerning methods. In particular, they are instrumental for developing questions with greater specificity. It is essential that a researcher starts out with a substantial amount of foundational experience and theoretical knowledge, which will help her/him produce certain questions in relation to the phenomena studied. My theoretical focus before I entered into the field was centred on civil society theory, in general and civil society in authoritarian contexts, in particular, which was underpinned by my expertise and foundational experience as a development practitioner who had spent several years working for a number of projects by the World Bank and UNDP.

Empirically, the existing literature informed me how Vietnam in the aftermath of *doi moi* has undergone a major restructuring of society evidenced in the emergence and rise to prominence of new societal actors such as NGOs (Sidel, 1995). This has opened up new spaces and new forms of engagement for civil society actors seeking social change and policy impacts (Kerkvliet, 2001). I initially proposed to work with organisations committed to microfinance and land reform by the virtue

of their significance in relation to the country's development course, as well as within the NGO sector itself. Microfinance is seen as a popular instrument, utilised by both government-owned NGOs (i.e. mass organisations) and local NGOs in combatting poverty. Consequently, it is considered instrumental to enhancing NGOs' legitimacy in welfare service delivery and nurturing collaborative relationships between the state and society. Land issues (e.g. lack of access to land encountered by ethnic minority groups, relocation and resettlement problems facing the affected groups from hydropower plants construction, etc.) were planned to be selected with a view to incorporate organisations working in a more 'contentious' area.

Conceptually, the dominant civil society theory that assumes an autonomous civil society and ascribes the role in democratisation to it, fails to capture civil society practice as well as the intricacies of the changing state-society relations in authoritarian states like Vietnam.

Research questions are an impetus to the choice of research design and methodology. In social sciences, what tends, however, to be observed in reality is that they often change either in subtle ways or to substantial degree in response to real conditions encountered in the field or to make up for the discovery of new, unexpected phenomena (Walton, 2010). What I unexpectedly encountered in the field caused the initial objective of my research (i.e. to examine local NGO actions in the authoritarian context of Vietnam) to evolve in response to the new phenomena. Specifically, whilst NGO activism still constituted a main component of my research focus, another form, citizen-led activism (non-NGO focused), which I came across in the field, was also incorporated into my research. Accordingly, the research objectives and questions were expanded and adjusted to respond to this new phenomenon growing out of my field encounters. In particular, the contested nature inherent in Vietnam's public sphere expressed in this emerging form of civil society activism (i.e. citizen-led), became more tangible and dynamic. These forms of activism were deliberated at length through my in-depth case studies. In what follows, I explain in more detail the transformation of my research questions.

During the early stage of my fieldwork, I sought to gain as much access to and to review secondary data on historical development and others issues related to Vietnamese civil society from local sources. Prior to entering the field, most of the

documents that assisted me to formulate my research and conceptualise my understanding about Vietnamese civil society came from English sources, which resulted in an important gap in my understanding of the subject matter. In Vietnam I began to examine the Vietnamese sources. Concurrently, the insights gained from these sources opened the door for me to identify key contacts and potential case-study NGOs. I strived to obtain insightful knowledge of their activities and historical engagements with the state in Vietnam. Coupled with preliminary information collected from dozens of precursory interviews (with a variety of respondents including prominent NGO leaders, local experts, academics, and journalists) regarding the nature of political change, civil society space and associational life at the general level, all data collected indicated that there was important knowledge concerning civil society activism that could only be obtained and understood through fieldwork. Three notable realisations arose regarding civil society actions in Vietnam during this period.

First, VNGOs, formally organised structures of civil society mandatorily tied to the state via legalistic requirements, obviously continued to be a key component of my research locus. Yet, there were new insights regarding this sector that needed to be incorporated into my research. Specifically, it came to my realisation that VNGOs working on land conflict comprised a very modest proportion of the total and that there was no NGO that had committed itself wholly to only addressing this issue. Instead, land was mainstreamed and integrated with other areas that VNGOs were involved in. Moreover, I found out that almost every civil society role in Hannah's civil society spectrum (indicated in Chapter 1) could be observed in present-day Vietnam's associationalism, including from state policy implementers, watchdog, civil disobedience, opposition, and regime change. It should be noted that this model was generated in 2007, by which time Hannah had argued that most VNGOs had recourse to service delivery for their emergence and operation. Subsequently, their social service engagement would gradually open up space for them to manoeuvre and encroach on more contentious areas. Since the late 2000s, however, this situation appears to have changed with a number of NGOs bypassing the point of entry as social service providers to engage directly in areas such as policy lobbying, advocacy and watchdog. This phenomenon has risen to more pre-eminence and signals a dynamic of change pertaining to the NGO sector in Vietnam. In the aftermath of the state-led reform of the 2013 Constitution, several laws concerning civil liberties, including the Law on Association and the law on Access to Information were brought again onto the table of the National Assembly in the

2014-2015 period, after years of delay. During this period, it was observed that the NGOs actively participated in state-led public consultation regarding these legislations. Notably, their engagement efforts were acknowledged as being fruitful in issues such as LGBT (e.g. the revised Law on Marriage and Families removed the article that opposed same-sex marriages) and budget law (NGOs made this law more comprehensible and accessible to the average population).

Second, the period 2014-2015, especially 2015, was a dynamic time that witnessed a series of events that had been unseen in the associational life before. In parallel with local NGOs' efforts at ensuring progressive policy outcomes, were the increasing actions performed by independent (unregistered) civil society groups. Their activities sought to push for more government accountability and rule of law. A stronger activism in both the virtual sphere and real life by these groups (e.g. dissidents, victims of injustice, radical academics, bloggers, radical lawyers, informal networks on environmental issues, or rights activists) signifies emerging public contestation in present-day Vietnam. This phenomenon has increasingly embarrassed the ruling regime, which finds these organisations difficult to anticipate and respond to (Abuza, 2015). In particular, the anti-China nationalist movement has yielded a generation of regular independent activists, who have become key players in contesting the political hegemony.

Third, accompanying the stronger engagement of independent civil society groups has been increasing state coercion. The state arbitrariness has become more ruthless, which is evidenced in the fact that many activist-lawyers, rights activists, and bloggers were intimidated, attacked and detained under the same label imposed by the state, i.e. evil forces who seek to overthrow the socialist state. In particular, the abuse of power and violence perpetrated by public security against the opposition, has become highly worrisome. Yet, despite the grip being more tightened, the contention in civil society has become more acute rather than disrupted. The increasing activism by these autonomous groups is accentuating the 'contested' nature of civil society that has been long obscured by the rhetoric that civil society in authoritarian regimes like Vietnam is either co-opted or suppressed. Becoming aware of this phenomenon prompted me to investigate it further, and also left me struggling to figure out what exactly I would seek to examine in relation to it and which case study I should select to capture its nuances. Moreover, I needed to work out how to incorporate it into the overarching aim of my research, which was to examine civil society activism and reflect upon the politics of evolving

state-society relations in Vietnam. While I was still grappling with case selection to convey this phenomenon, the Trees Movement began. It emerged at the very right moment for my research to evolve, and eventually became a strong case of citizen-led activism, contrasting to NGO-led activism of my thesis. Taken together, they sufficed in showcasing the dynamics of civil society activism under the single-party rule of Vietnam.

From being overlooked in my initial research proposal, citizen-led activism eventually became a pillar of my research along with NGO-led activism. This shift signified that my research had evolved from exploring civil society actions with NGO focus, to a more politics informed analysis with greater diversification of the subjects involved and greater intricacies regarding contestation. In so doing, I sought to examine varying forms and processes of civil society activism, as well as how they were structured, organised and mobilised and in what way they could effect change and (re)structure state-society relations in Vietnam. In sum, I was motivated to make certain adjustments for my research objectives and central research questions so as to accommodate the discovery of the unexpected phenomena emanating from my empirical findings.

Specifically, the aim of the thesis was to explore contemporary civil society activism in Vietnam and reflect upon the politics of the changing state-society relations in the country. This was achieved through an analysis of two different forms of civil society activism, with an examination that located these activisms in a wider historical context. The following research questions were formulated to assist me to attain the research objectives.

> *First*, what organisational forms do civil society groups adopt and how are these positioned in relation to the state?

> *Second*, what strategies of engagement do civil society groups adopt in order to achieve their goals?

> *Third,* how do the different forms of civil society activism illuminate evolving state-society relations in Vietnam?

These questions allowed me to discover and triangulate different empirical perspectives. They helped me explore the most distinctive dimensions of civil

society activism in Vietnam, which I formulated under the key themes I indicated previously: legitimacy, autonomy as well as formality and informality of activism. Simultaneously, they also allowed me to reflect upon the evolving state-society relations in Vietnam.

4. Research methods

The choice of research methods is contingent on the nature of the social phenomena to be explored as well as the research questions (Morgan and Smircich, 1980). Given that my research was aimed at examining civil society activism in Vietnam, I adopted a research approach that allowed for prolonged interactions and engagements with a variety of players, as well as triangulation of different sources of evidence. Accordingly, I decided to adopt the in-depth case study and ethnographic approach to realise my research objectives. In doing so, I endeavoured to understand my research participants' perspectives from the inside as well as to observe them along with their behaviours and actions more distantly at the way that might be unfamiliar to them. This dynamic of ethnographic research enabled me to obtain an insightful understanding of how people say and what they actually do differ and what they think and do also differ. I conducted eight months of fieldwork in Vietnam from October 2014 till July 2015, mostly in Quang Binh province and Hanoi city, with research visits to provinces, such as Hue and Da Nang in the central region and Ho Chi Minh City and Dong Nai province in the south.

4.1. Why case studies?

My thesis offers a comparative in-depth bottom-up account of two contrasting case studies of civil society activism in Vietnam. Adopting case study approach fitted well the constructivist paradigm and allowed me to go so far as to convey the in-depth insights of the social phenomenon that I endeavoured to examine. Flyvbjerg (2006) suggests that the selection of cases is importantly based on clear objectives, rather than their easy accessibility. In particular, in order to provide a strong comparative account, it is imperative that the case studies selected pursue similar objectives but with different approaches.

According to Dooley, case study research emphasises "detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships" (Dooley, 2002, p.335). Meanwhile, this approach for Yin (2003) takes most effect when the focus of the study is to research phenomena that are highly complex, or to look for evidence in answering 'how' and 'why' questions rather than 'what'. The case study researcher aspires to observe all of the variables and their interacting relationships, rather than to control them. This contrasts for example, with statistical studies that omit all contextual and intervening factors except those codified in the variables selected for measurement or used for constituting a population of cases (George and Bennett, 2005). In the same vein, Walton (2010) argues that this approach allows researchers to examine not only variables that might hold most significance, but also how and why these variables can be or are connected to one another. This thesis aimed to provide an in-depth investigation into the complex processes of civil society activism led by different groups associated with different institutional characteristics. Given this goal, case studies were deemed to be an appropriate well-tested method.

Whilst the two identified in-depth case studies differed in a number of important respects such as degree of autonomy, strategy of legitimation, organisational structure, and mobilising structure, their activisms were commonly geared towards influencing the state power in order to attain their mobilising objectives. Comparison, Collier (1993) points out, sharpens our power of description and plays a central role in concept-formation by elucidating suggestive similarities and contrasts among cases. With particular reference to small n comparative cases, he argues, the objective is to highlight how contrasting they are, thus "establishing a framework for interpreting how parallel processes of change are played out in different ways within each context" is incumbent upon the case study researcher (Collier, 1993, p.108). A thorough understanding of each case study is, therefore, needed in laying the ground for an analytical framework that will be used in cross-case comparisons (Goodrick, 2014).

Drawing on Goodrick and Collier and based on the deep understanding of each case, I managed to set out the key overarching themes (i.e. legitimacy, autonomy as well as formality and informality of activism) cutting across the two case studies, whereby similarities and differences between them were elucidated. The juxtaposition of two contrasting cases in this thesis allowed me to examine in more depth the meaning and significance of the differences between them, through

which I could explain how and why these differentiations mattered and how significant these cases were in relation to the growing civil society activism and evolving state-society relations in Vietnam.

In utilising a case study approach, I was, however, aware of its most distinctive limitation, i.e. the lack of its generalisability. Yet, the use of structured, focused and comparative case studies, as I indicated above, assisted me to tackle this limitation to a large extent. In particular, as explained previously, the strong impetus driving my selection of these two cases rested on the fact that they opened much room for comparisons across several domains pertaining to them, such as mobilising strategies, leadership, and methods of activism. This modest comparative account also opened an avenue for me to draw important conceptual implications for civil society activism under authoritarian regimes.

Moreover, the most salient advantage of the case study approach lies in that it allows researchers to triangulate multiple evidence sources as well as using diverse techniques and procedures for data collection, therefore ensuring the rigour of the data analysis. In sum, it is stressed once more that for this thesis, my aim was to examine the depth, the intensity and the complexity of civil society activism in Vietnam; hence, a case study approach was deemed the most powerful tool conducive to achieving this.

4.2. Case selection and ethnographic fieldwork

As briefly explained above, my research plan during the first two months of my fieldwork (November – December 2015) was almost unchanged, with the focus being on VNGOs' action, in which the primary task was to select two in-depth case studies involving local NGOs, one specialising in delivering micro-finance services and another working with landless people, being committed to land reform. Each of the selected organisations would bring to light varying aspects of the NGO sector, as well as the practice and dynamics of civil society in Vietnam. I also aimed to work with organisations in the central region of the country, since unlike their counterparts in the two largest cities Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, these organisations have traditionally been overlooked by scholars especially non-

Vietnamese ones. Targeting NGOs in this geographical location would thus reinforce the empirical contribution of my research.

Preliminary case studies

The fieldwork started out with a strategic mapping exercise, which was underpinned by my initial review of the historical development of local NGOs and Vietnamese civil society. The reading of Vietnamese writings and the information gathered from roughly 20 interviews with NGO representatives, local experts, and state officials in Hanoi, allowed me to identify potential VNGOs that focused their work on land reform and microfinance service delivery. After mapping, the next task was to select preliminary case studies to pay field visits.

It is notable that the process through which I had to negotiate and determine the case studies for my research was undertaken with timely needed adjustment to articulate new findings, and respond to a new phenomenon emanating from the field. I left Bath for the fieldwork in Vietnam with the idea of searching for two VNGOs committed to microfinance and land issues, one more inclined to service delivery and another more concerned with policy impact. This idea, however, changed and I had to move away from micro-finance NGOs. This was because being embedded in the field for a while, I realised that it would be erroneous to overlook the 'political' nature of the NGO actions as well as civil society action, in general. I saw how this political nature required detailed attention as this shed light on the dynamics of civil society activism as well as changing state-society relations in Vietnam. In particular, I came to recognise that this 'political' dynamics manifested itself more in the land NGO context than in the micro finance one. This was considered the first important shift in my research.

My research aimed to provide an in-depth bottom-up account of civil society activism. Hence, purposive sampling with a 'small n' was selected to take advantage of my 'insider knowledge', as well as my familiarity with the context and population. That is, the objective was to move beyond superficial observation to capture complex processes, the influence of context and the significance of time. Based on variables generated from the mapping exercise (e.g. size of organisation, years of working, duration of land issues-engagement, socio-political background, project

coverage, relationships with stakeholders, and areas of focus), coupled with my initial empirical investigation, I managed to identify a group of six local NGOs involved in land issues as my preliminary case studies, among which two had a head office in Hanoi and the other four were based in the central provinces of Hue and Quang Binh, about 500 km away from the capital city, Hanoi.

I continued further investigation into these six preliminary case studies by conducting a number of field visits, along with dozens of interviews with staff members, leaders and their representative clients. I also became involved in the related activities of these organisations (e.g. workshops, grassroots community meetings and training activities). Concurrently, I endeavoured to search for any grey material, secondary data, reports and local media writings on these organisations. Preliminary case studies, George and Bennett (2005) argue, are instrumental to determining whether further examination is warranted, which means that this phase allowed me to probe the plausibility and feasibility of seeking more in-depth accounts of these organisations. They also helped me position in-depth case studies more effectively as opposed to other potential cases in the same cluster. All the evidence collected from these preliminary cases, Walton (2010) suggests, provides useful inputs for subsequent decisions upon in-depth case selection, as well as additional information to assist the analysis of the chosen case studies during the writing up phase. This also allows for drawing broader conclusions from the in-depth cases studies and shaping clearer boundaries for generalisation *(ibid).*

In-depth case studies

After preliminary studies, I decided to select an NGO in Quang Binh called 'Centre for Community Empowerment and Rural Development (CCERD) and another named the 'Centre for Poverty Research' (CPR) in Hue province as my research sites. These two cases working on land issues were expected to provide enough space for comparisons across a number of respects, including the advocacy strategies and methods of mobilisation. These organisations were of similar medium-size located in two different provinces of the central region of Vietnam, which have been understudied by both local and external scholars and where the land issues facing the ethnic minority groups prevail.

CCERD, established in 2003 a couple of years before CPR, was the very first local NGO in Quang Binh province. It was founded with the charitable purpose of being committed to reducing poverty and increasing livelihoods, especially for poor ethnic minority groups in the locality. The NGO's historical engagement in local socio-economic development has helped to enhance its legitimacy, from which it carved out more space to encroach upon a non-service delivery area, i.e. land advocacy for local ethnic minorities. CPR is located in Hue province about 200 km distant from Quang Binh. While CCERD focused upon claiming forest land for local ethnic minorities, CPR directed its advocacy activities towards controversial hydropower plants and dam constructions. Service delivery was employed as an entry point for CCERD, whereas CPR emerged and directly engaged in policy advocacy based on site research and community engagement. Despite there being important differences between the two NGOs, they shared a number of similar traits such as hierarchical organisational structure, well-educated staff, influential role of NGO leaders, and co-members of a number of civil society networks).

Map 1. Quang Binh and Hue in the central region of Vietnam

The in-depth case studies once selected were followed by the undertaking of more in-depth investigation into these organisations. This was aimed at capturing more insights of their mobilising strategies, especially to understand how and why they embarked on certain modes of action to create room to manoeuvre. I decided to base myself at CCERD's head office as my first research site for in-depth exploration. Whilst I was based in Quang Binh to examine the first case study, I still managed to conduct a couple of short field visits to Hue to discuss with the CPR leadership and

visited their project sites, since there were several activities implemented by this organisation during this period.

Nevertheless, there were critical findings emerging, which shifted the selection of my second in-depth case study intended to be CPR. In particular, when I was about to accomplish my fieldwork with CCERD, the associational life in Vietnam changed radically. The citizen-led Trees Movement occurring in the capital city of Hanoi was a particularly prominent example of an emerging form of civil society actions, where local people were rallying to oppose the city government's decision to cut down thousands of large old trees lining the streets. Speaking out against the ruling regime could earn a Vietnamese a jail sentence, but the movement seemed to start out as an apolitical issue which opened a window for ordinary civilians to delve into and orchestrate mobilisation. This was the first time that a social campaign had been initiated on a virtual network with participation cutting across social spectrums and questioned the government's misconduct. Critically, it was not just limited to online activism, but was quickly transformed into real life practice.

This new compelling phenomenon prompted me to reconsider the selection of my second in-depth case study. The discussions via Skype and emails with my supervisors were of great help, reinforcing my intuition during this period, whereby the Trees Movement became more appealing to me. There was a strong reason to justify this shift. As light was shed on the mobilising strategies of CCERD and CPR, I came to realise that they were almost identical. In essence, their activism followed a non-adversarial approach and sought to pressurise the local government to enforce effectively the policies and agenda put in place by the central government. So, in effect both of them orchestrated activism within their legal bounds and their limits of permissibility.

I understood that the points of entry of the two NGOs differed, i.e. CCERD resorted to service provision, whereas CPR bypassed service delivery and embarked directly on policy advocacy. However, a strong comparison requires similar objectives, but different approaches and this difference (i.e. difference in terms of the point of entry) of the two organisations was not indicative of a strong comparative account. Nevertheless, for my subsequent analysis of the NGO-led mobilisation case study, what I had learnt about CPR was greatly informative. With an aim to make the thesis a nuanced and rigorous comparative account, the citizen-led Trees Movement (TM) was finally selected as the second in-depth case study. The

structure, organisation, and evolution of the TM were also seen as unprecedented in Vietnam's associationalism. The NGO-led (CCERD) and the non-NGO led activism (the TM) were juxtaposed to examine civil society activism in Vietnam.

Case study 1: CCERD

I spent three and half months based in CCERD's office to observe the organisation's everyday acts. In addition to participant observation, various other research techniques were applied to harness and triangulate evidence and information. They included in-depth interviews (i.e. informal unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and key informant interviews), focus group discussions with a variety of organisational workers, documentation of its grey literature, extensive discussions with other stakeholders including local officials, mass organisation officials, local experts, donors, grassroots community leaders and staff from other NGOs in the region.

I also engaged in many other organisational activities such as capacity building for clients and community meetings attended by different stakeholders. In addition, I visited the organisation's key project sites located in the hotspots of forest land conflict in the region. A large volume of the organisation's materials inclusive of project reports, research findings and publications on the impacts of lack of access to land on the local poor as well as other relevant organisational literature, were extensively probed.

Given that the research questions I formulated were not the type that could be addressed quickly, the ethnographic methods indicated above were particularly conducive to addressing these questions. Exploring the nature of social change or the intensity and complexity of a social phenomenon requires the kind of familiarity derived from embeddedness in the context and engaging with the subjects. Participant observation "is useful for gaining an understanding of the physical, social, cultural, and economic contexts in which study participants live; the relationships among and between people, contexts, ideas, norms, and events; and people's behaviours and activities – what they do, how frequently, and with whom" (Mack *et al.*, 2005, p.14). Participant observation, Tedlock (1991) explains, makes ethnographers become both emotionally-engaged participants and coolly

dispassionate observers of the lives of others. Simultaneously, the observation of participation enables ethnographers to experience and observe their own and others' co-participation within the ethnographic encounter *(ibid).* Through observations of people's everyday activities, the ethnographer seeks to understand the processes and meanings that sustain and motivate social groups (Herbert, 2000)*.* This technique provides room for the ethnographer to make sense of, as well as to contrast the deeds (actions) and thoughts (intentions) of people as knowledgeable agents in their everyday lives *(ibid).* Spending time in CCERD's office and at its project sites to observe everyday interactions and behaviours between the staff members, between the staff and the organisation's stakeholders, especially between the staff and its target group (i.e. the Van Kieu ethnic minority group), opened a unique avenue for me to examine its actions and decision making processes, especially the logics behind these.

In-depth interviews of various types were used to gain deeper insights into the politics within which the NGO mobilisation occurred. Since my understanding of my case study was still evolving, unstructured or semi-structured interviews characterised by open-ended questions enabled for testing out my preliminary understanding and probing in greater depth the subject matter, while still allowing for opportunities for new ways of seeing and understanding to develop (even in unanticipated directions) (Nhodo *et al.*, 2013). Key informant interviews were used to capture multiple perceptions of a wide range of selected actors, who had first-hand knowledge and experience about the case study. Despite reconciling their competing perceptions/opinions costing me much effort and time to make a strong sense of them, this process yielded important insights into my case study from the 'outside'. This induced me to negotiate with the internal knowledge I gained while playing the role of an outsider looking from the inside. These insights related to the outsiders' (i.e. the organisation's stakeholders) perceptions about the NGO, the relationships between them and the NGO as well as any conflict between them and the NGO.

Focus groups were conducted with the organisational staff members, as well as with the NGO's beneficiaries such as the members of the self-help groups established by CCERD, village leaders, community heads. This adopted technique was aimed at provoking discussions and extracting multi-faceted interactive information in a face-to-face manner, thereby adding insights into collective understanding (Devine, 1999).

During my ethnographic research period in Quang Binh, 55 interviews (including repeated ones) (see appendix three) and five focus group discussions were conducted with 40 people, of which 45 % came from CCERD and other local NGOs, 5% were representatives of INGOs, 3% being donors, 5% being local media, 12% were local government officials, 3% (1 interview) was a parliamentary member for the Quang Binh province, 10% were officials of commune and district mass-organisations and 17% were from self-help community groups.

Case study 2: Trees Movement (TM)

The TM was a broad-based citizen led movement established to protest against the Hanoi government's arbitrary decision to cut down thousands of large old trees lining the city's streets. It took place in mid-March 2015, coincident with the period of my field research, whereby I could become involved as a marginal participant to capture the fresh and real-life moments of the movement. During my fieldwork, I followed closely the TM and collected primary data from extended conversations and in-depth interviews, with a wide range of actors who were closely associated with the movement, including local NGO leaders, dissidents, independent activists, bloggers, human rights experts, artists, intellectuals, housewives, journalists, etc (see appendix three).

Hanoi is the biggest hub of local NGOs in Vietnam. Since *doi moi* in 1986, local NGOs have received large amounts of development aid and they have increasingly expanded in number. The associationalism of Vietnam in the aftermath of *doi moi* was consolidated by the emergence of registered NGOs and the growing number of independent activists as well as dissidents dedicated to rights advocacy, democratisation and social change. Taylor *et al*. (2012) in their comparative study of civil society organisations in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City demonstrate that those in Hanoi are much more engaged in establishing networks with government agencies, as well as in the policy advocacy domain. To some extent, this practice provides explanation as to why there were a number of vibrant NGO leaders and staff actively engaged in the TM when it happened.

Given the fact that this movement was facilitated via Facebook, it was incumbent on me to investigate the key actors who were standing on the backstage to manage

the front stage. The key mobilising groups set up both closed and open platforms (i.e. closed and open Facebook groups) for collective mobilisation. Regarding which, the closed platforms were only used for discussions and interactions between the members within the core team of each movement group, who took leading roles and made decisions for activities on the front stage, and the open platforms were for interacting openly with the public to mobilise wider social participation. In order to capture the insightful dynamics of mobilisation and decision making processes of the TM, being immersed in the 'closed' platform (i.e. the back stage) was imperative.

This was a challenging part of my fieldwork, specifically in what way I could make them trust me to allow me, an independent researcher, to join their 'secret' group. The first important thing to do was to identify the founding member(s) or administrator(s) of the closed groups. A great deal of efforts had to be made to this end, and it was not easy for those who had this information to reveal it owing to the safety needs of those people involved. Snowballing was used effectively at this stage to find out the gate keeper. After dozens of attentively-prepared conversations with my available contacts being NGO leaders and some independent activists, supplemented by my 'insider knowledge' as a locally born researcher, I finally found out who the founding members of this secret group were. It turned out that one of them participated in my interview before and I contacted this person, but she said she could not enrol me for two reasons.

First, to be a member of the group I was required to have a guarantor who was already a group member and willing to introduce me to the group. This was considered a precondition for the safety of other group members. Second, she asked me what kind of use I could bring to the group as a member; she kindly clarified that for the time being the group really needed those who could act and help, rather than just simply being an observer. Regarding the second reason, I strived my best to explain to her the significance of the TM in the civil society practice of Vietnam, which had been very much understudied by Vietnamese scholars and that I would, to the best of my capacity, convey this fresh experience of public contestation to the wider community or even the outside world. She was appreciative to my good intentions, but reiterated that the first precondition of membership was still not met. After extensive efforts spent searching for the entry, finally, one of my initial contacts, who was a local NGO leader and a member of this closed group, was willing to be my guarantor and to introduce me to the group so that other members would feel safe in my presence.

Being a marginal participant of the movement allowed me to identify prominent campaigners who were my key respondents, some of whom subsequently helped me to make contact with other 'hidden' independent activists, who played an important role in the campaign. What is notable here is that 'independent activists' and 'dissidents' for the ruling communists in Vietnam are trouble makers, dangerous and a disturbing group, being branded as 'reactionary forces'. This label associated with ample wickedness and conspiracies, successfully isolates them from the general population. Consequently, gaining access to them requires a certain degree of trust to be established for the reason of their safety. Given these circumstances, snowball sampling was finally used in order to access this hidden and hard-to-reach population. The main value of snowball sampling, according to Atkinson and Flint (2001), is that it is a method for seeking appropriate respondents when they are few in number or where some degree of trust is required to contact. Being a marginal participant facilitated the identification of the initial respondents, who gave me the name of another 'hidden' activist, who in turn provided the name of the next one and so on. However, I was aware of the deficiency associated with this sampling technique, i.e. the researcher might end up with the same kind of respondents. For I sought to obtain the greatest variety and diversity of activists who were differentiated in terms of, for example, political views, field of activism and level of experience, I consequently set up different snowballing samples with different types of initial informants so as to enrich my data collection.

Vietnam has no tradition of large-scale peaceful demonstrations marching through city centres and in fact, this form of activism or any other alike is rare. Yet, for the past few years there has been an increasing sign of public protests on varying scales. There are regular small-scale street protests by landless peasants and victims of injustice to oppose unaccountable government decisions or the increasing anti-China nationalist movement. Likewise, large-scale workers' strikes are seen growing recently. However, unlike farmer or worker protests, which are restricted to a specific marginalised group, the TM secured the support of both unorganised and organised groups, with participation cutting across societal spectrums. As a result, the composition of my respondents in the TM was much more diverse than in the NGO case study, for they came from a wide variety of backgrounds and social segments.

To achieve validity and relevance of the data collected, a checklist of key themes was devised for in-depth interviews in an attempt to cover systematically a wide range of issues concerning the TM (see appendix one). These themes included, *inter alia*, motivations of participation, methods of activism, feelings, fear of state repression, perceptions, state response, etc. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, focus group discussions were an inappropriate technique for this case study, thus interviews of all types and Facebook pages of the TM groups/activists/dissidents were exclusively employed to collect data. The overarching theme of most interviews was to probe different players' motivations and perceptions of the TM and its significance in relation to evolving state-society relations in Vietnam in general and civil society development in particular. In addition to directly following all of the TM's public demonstrations, I followed closely the Facebook pages of prominent activists, NGO leaders involved in the TM and many others related to it since these were important channels for evidence collection. For example, the experiences encountered by the activists when dealing with security forces were posted on their Facebook pages, were valued information for a nuanced understanding of this case study.

My interview questions focused on the campaigners' motivations, targets, beliefs, aspirations, tactics, repertoires of actions, discourses and slogans as well as their relationships with other groups in the TM. The interviews were undertaken in various forms ranging from impromptu interviews with random participants I met in the demonstrations, to unstructured and semi-structured interviews, whilst sometimes they took in the form of extended conversations. Apart from the impromptu ones, the interviews lasted between two and three hours and were conducted in Vietnamese between March and June 2015. In several cases, follow-up communication was made via emails, Facebook or Skype. The interviews were then translated into English to make it easier for coding process aided by NVIVO software.

In the first phase of my data analysis, I inputted all my collected data (already translated into English) into NVIVO. I mostly used this software for coding and formulating themes (see appendix two). Before starting the in-depth analysis, I made a rough description of all the data collected regarding each case study. Exposing data descriptively at the beginning helped me make sense of the evidence

and information, capture the story as a whole, as well as to understand its logic. My final analysis was underpinned by my analytical framework.

5. Research challenges

The number of Vietnamese scholars researching civil society in general and grassroots activism in particular is extremely small. This is partly because it is relatively challenging for them to research a topic which has such a fragile institutional support. Moreover, a prevailing practice in Vietnamese political and academic culture is that it does not reward intellectual creativity outside of the officially sanctioned channels and, hence, Vietnamese academics and government researchers tend to opt for safe rather than sensitive topics for the sake of their career safety.

The fact that my topic on civil society activism was considered sensitive in the Vietnamese political context meant that I had to struggle to find a position in which I could gain trust from people, as well as avoid any potential political problems of being associated, especially with the Trees Movement. Devine (1999) holds that the researcher, like an actor on a stage, has to learn how to negotiate and manage different roles, because field relations can make or break the fieldwork experience and hence, it is important to negotiate research positions carefully. The TM campaigners could have shut all the doors to me, if for any reason I had sparked their suspicion regarding my motivation. The extent of their revelation was obviously contingent upon the degree of trust I established with them.

The tree saving campaign evolved amid an intense atmosphere in Hanoi that involved increasing harassment and intimidation by the public security forces. Being born and growing up in Vietnam enabled me to use my own insider knowledge on searching for the way to work with 'sensitive' actors, such as independent activists (IAs) and dissidents, those labelled as hostile or reactionary forces, who also played a very important role in this movement. It particularly gave me strong sense of prudence about what I should do, whom I should contact as well as how, when, and where I should do it. As a matter of fact, working or interacting directly with IAs and dissidents in a politically restricted environment like Vietnam, engenders risks for both foreign and even Vietnamese researchers. However, being Vietnamese put me

in a stronger position to study this social movement than foreign researchers. For dissidents and IAs, their individual acts or criticism will be to some extent tolerated by the authorities as long as they do not seek to assemble with others or have links to foreigners. Taking advantage of my common nationhood, I strove to provide an in-depth bottom-up account of the meaning and outcome of one of the most significant episodes of public contestation in Vietnam recently.

I was prudent when communicating with the IAs and dissidents. I took heed when selecting locations for interviews as well as the means to contact them. For instance, mobile phones and/or emails of these people could have been under police surveillance or they might have been hacked. Consequently, alternative means, such as Facebook or Skype (the servers of which are based overseas) were considered safer to use.

Gaining trust with my respondents came as a challenge and keeping the 'right' distance from them was another one. In fact, grappling to find a balance between being a passionate supporter and dispassionate researcher proved to be much harder than I expected. Thousands of old trees were cut down and the movement happened in my city. Observing directly the peaceful female campaigners in traditional long dress (some of whom were my helpful respondents) being attacked and suppressed by the police on that Sunday 26th of April in the downtown area became a most striking moment, for which I had never imagined that one day I would ever have to witness that.

A multitude of feelings emerged in the aftermath of that incident, however as a researcher it was mandatory to avoid emotive language and a biased view in my analysis. Writing a reflective journal on a daily basis became a useful tool. Writing things down helped me to calm down my feelings; then in the subsequent periods, when looking through my daily journals again for the purpose of analysis, my mind would become more settled, which enabled me to avoid an emotive writing style. In addition, writing a reflective diary also provided me useful inputs to supplement the other data and acted as a good aide memoire when I conducted my summative analysis.

With respect to the CCERD case study, I was from time to time prompted by the NGO leader that I should not use the term civil society (*xã hội dân sự*) in conversations and interviews with local authorities, since this could have provoked

their reluctance. Instead, I was advised by him to make some adjustment so as to make the topic less sensitive. So, for instance, I was advised to tell them that I was doing research on "the effectiveness and impact of SOCIAL organisation interventions in the locality", rather than "social or political change effectuated by CIVIL SOCIETY activism". These prompts provided me with a different slant of evidence aside from the information collected from other channels, which induced me to negotiate my interview questions. Nevertheless, I did not want my interview questions to be grounded in the 'misleading' concepts (e.g. social organisations rather than civil society organisations) just to avoid 'invisible' (or even maybe non-existent) conflict, because using the 'misleading' concepts could potentially have yielded the kind of information that might be insignificant or irrelevant to my research. Hence, in order to overcome this challenge, 'probing' questions were prioritised to avoid to the greatest extent of suspicion or potential turbulence (if any) and to ensure the smooth flow of interviews. In particular, while engaging with local officials, I endeavoured to be as honest as I could in informing them of the topic, the themes and issues I was seeking to address within my thesis.

Obviously, working with NGOs is less politically challenging than with dissidents and IAs. My trust building with CCERD was quite straightforward. I came to know the NGO leader through one of my close NGO contacts, who helped liaise me to him. Then, I met him at several conferences and workshops in Hanoi at the beginning of my fieldwork. After that, during a number of field trips to Quang Binh for my preliminary case selection, where the NGO was located, I engaged with him further to discuss his organisation's work. I also made him aware of my professional experience as a development practitioner before starting my PhD. He is a man with an open, development-oriented mind, so this common background made it comfortable enough for us to interact in an effusive manner with each other. I explained to him attentively the aim of my research, as well as what I was looking for at this stage in order to realise the research objectives. While engaging with him, I showed him my deep interest and intention of selecting his organisation as a good case study in 'mobilising' local communities for collective purposes in the authoritarian one-party state. He responded positively to my request with his good will, but wanted me to explain to him what I exactly meant by 'mobilising' since he continually reiterated that his organisation had never involved itself in 'agitating' local people to take to the streets and that he was not an agitator. He wanted to make sure both he and I were on the same page in understanding the term 'mobilising communities'. Appreciating his prudence, I explained to him that

'mobilising' was nothing related to agitation against the state agenda or anything alike, but rather it was about how CCERD engaged with related stakeholders to help the local ethnic minorities to claim land.

However, there was a challenge for me in arranging interviews with the state forest company (SFC), the actor towards which CCERD had to direct its mobilising efforts to put pressure on it to return land to local communities. All my efforts to interact with this SFC were unsuccessful, for they did not want to open the door to welcome a researcher. This shows how when researching civil society activism in authoritarian contexts, the actors most difficult to access so as to collect rigorous data are those from the state sector, rather than from politically sensitive groups within civil society. This challenge also rings true with my encounters in the Trees Movement, where the Hanoi authorities refused my interview requests.

Most of my interviews were arranged through the contacts I managed to establish for myself while staying in the field, although on one occasion I had to resort to an acquaintance of mine who was an acclaimed academic to help arrange a meeting with a radical journalist, who I failed to contact by myself.

Regarding data validation, collecting data from a variety of sources and applying varied methods helped me to secure this. Specifically, for the NGO-led mobilisation, I interviewed the NGO leader and staff, its different stakeholders (local authorities, local communities, mass organisations and the local media) and its partners (NGOs in the same region and in Hanoi, INGOs, and donors). Moreover, the data were triangulated through the use of different methods including participant observation, interviews of various types, existing materials from local media coverage of the NGO, and especially focus groups used to provoke face-to-face interactive discussions. For the Trees Movement, a wide range of actors from different backgrounds and social spectrums were incorporated. I also reached out to those who did not get involved in the TM (those not participating in the TM's protests or those ambivalent or supporting the government tree felling project) as well as retired high-ranking state officials, state media journalists, academics, foreign embassies' senior staff and Hanoi-based INGOs. In addition, I closely followed mainstream and social media along with the international press such as Voice of America, BBC Vietnamese, and The Economist (those covering this movement). In sum, I combined both virtual (online) and onsite ethnographic research techniques to gain as many insights as possible into the TM.

6. Ethical issues

Comparative case studies in social sciences involve intensive description of real-life events, where conveying the richness of the cases must take into account the risk that the focal participants could be identifiable. Research ethics always reminded me that the confidentiality and safety of my participants must never be compromised. Similarly, by virtue of many of my questions being politically sensitive, I repeatedly informed my interviewees of my unwavering intention to use pseudonyms rather than their real names when writing up my thesis. Despite the leader of the NGO case study allowing me to reveal the real name of his organisation, I decided not to do so, for my ultimate concern was to ensure safety for those who confided in me unconditionally and supported me with their enthusiasm, generosity and honesty.

Nevertheless, in some cases it was not reasonable or possible to follow the pseudonym and anonymisation strategy when the names of Facebook pages or Facebook groups and the names of certain actors or organisations were publicly covered in either mainstream or social media. Falling in this situation, prompted by Devine's (1999) dual strategy, I decided not to change the names when these instances were already circulated in the media, but where I used the information collected from personal interviews with these actors, I had to anonymise them.

An important amount of data from the TM was collected from online communities, this pointed to some ethical considerations concerning online research that needs to be addressed in this thesis. Before discussing online research ethics, there are some clarifications concerning the scope of the online research in the thesis that I need to make. First, I conducted virtual ethnographic research on the TM, but online surveys or online questionnaires to collect data were not applied. That is, most of my interviews were conducted through face-to-face direct interaction with my respondents/participants. There were, however, a small number of follow-up interviews made online (via Facebook or Skype). I largely used social media sites to approach the politically sensitive groups (i.e. hard-to-reach population), which is considered a general advantage of online research. Second, I used pre-existing data on Facebook pages of the movement groups and key activists, which are publicly accessible. Third, I was a member of both closed and open forums of the movement groups, so I collected data from following their conversations, discussions, posts or comments. When joining the online 'closed' groups' discussions, I played the role of

participant observer (i.e. where relevant and possible I participated by commenting).

Due to the relative infancy of internet mediated research, critical and detailed discussion of ethical considerations regarding online data collection and analysis remains scarce. There is no consensus as to what constitutes appropriate ethical conduct for online research (Jones, 2004). It is therefore, as Rodham and Gavin (2011) suggest, very much left up to individual researchers to make themselves familiar with the current debates concerning online research. Like onsite research, consent and anonymity are also major issues in online research ethics. As I indicated above, I did collect data from open sites. When harvesting this kind of data, Rodham and Gavin (2011) suggest that both the composers of the words and the name of the site hosting the message should be given pseudonyms in the writing-up of the research. Researchers, they warn further, should be aware that the author of online quotations can sometimes be identified by the use of a search engine. However, this was not an issue in my research, because my participants posted messages on their pages in Vietnamese and when I used these quotes I translated them into English, which the search engine could thus not identify. I anonymised all my respondents, as well as their relevant Facebook pages.

In terms of gaining consent, there was no virtual consent in my research, for as I above indicated, I did not employ online interviews or surveys. Thus, all the consent I retrieved from my respondents was in written form and made during my direct interaction with them. Nevertheless, Madge (2007) indicates another thorny issue of gaining informed consent for participant observation in the online environment, i.e. 'lurking' in online communities might be perceived as intruding and/or 'deception', which involves researchers deliberately concealing the purpose of their study. In this regard, I should assert that there was no lurking, nor deception in my research, for I was honest about my topic when I approached my respondents. As I explained previously, in order to gain access to the 'closed' 'secret' group to follow their interactions, I needed to find a guarantor who would be willing to introduce me in the group. When I was accepted into the group, the group administrator made an announcement of my presence/participation within this closed group, meaning that other group members were aware of my participation.

Another key issue in online research ethics lies in the ambiguous status of online data, or the blurred distinction between public/private, i.e. whether a researcher is

ethically justified in using publicly available information as data for his/her research project, even if these were provided by the internet user for private consumption? Or should a researcher be able to 'data mine' from newsgroup postings and individual webpages? (Thurlow et al., 2004 cited in Madge, 2007, p.14). Debates concerning this go on unabated and hence are inconclusive. In response to this conundrum, Hewson et al. (2003) conclude that "data that have been made deliberately and voluntarily available in the public internet domains should be accessible to a researcher providing anonymity is ensured" (Hewson et al., 2003 cited in Madge, 2007, p.14). My participants posted information on their Facebook pages and set their pages on 'public status', thereby making their postings publicly accessible to everyone. Nevertheless, using their information, I anonymised them and their personal webpages, accordingly.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described at length the processes through which I negotiated my case studies, research questions and methods. In addition, I have explained how I narrated my fieldwork encounters, as well as how I addressed research challenges and ethical issues. When I started to enter onto the actual journey, it turned out remarkably different from what I could ever imagine or anticipate. It became an indispensable lived experience growing out of my research process, which I could have failed to discern or work out, if I had not surrendered my stubbornness and had thus continued to stick doggedly to the initially established framework.

Throughout my research process, I endeavoured to articulate a range of vantage points coming from different actors pertaining to different positions and structures. This allowed me to examine in depth how the mundane acts as well as the mobilising structures, mobilising strategies and shifts in action performed by different civil society groups, could negotiate and restructure the relations they were enmeshed within. The footage of peaceful female protesters in traditional long dresses being thrown onto a bus on that sunny Sunday by the public security will perhaps for a long time continue to play on my mind. The ear-piercing volume generated from the police loudspeakers, the screaming of peaceful protesters and their solidarity spirit either standing side by side or lying down together on the ground in the middle of hundreds of security officers and civic order defenders,

emerged in front of my eyes. It prompted me to think about the fracturing of state-society interaction patterns in contemporary Vietnam. The old societal structures are now being broken; the sign of people's power is emerging. Ordinary citizens are now learning to enlighten themselves regarding their constitutional rights and the ruling power cannot continue to rule as it did like before. As a researcher, I myself was placed in a position where I had to go through what I had never thought I would or wanted to encounter in order to see, to hear, to think, and to feel all the breaths, sounds and movements of Vietnamese civil society.

Chapter 4: Citizen-led activism - An antagonistic form of activism

Trees Movement in Vietnam

1. Introduction

> "I can't understand this, I can't understand why they (the city government) are doing this? I can't understand what is actually behind this recklessness? Tons of bombs B52 by Americans failed to destroy our old trees during wartime, why authorities dare to cut them down now? […] If they defend what they are trying to do is for a more civilised and modern Hanoi, why do they start from cutting down trees when there are countless problems that are more urgent directly associated with the infrastructure and living quality in Hanoi, e.g. degrading roads, polluted environment, sewage, severe lack of public space, etc.?" (Interview, 14th April 2015, Hanoi cited in Vu, 2017, p.1182)

It was a warm March in 2015 when the spring atmosphere was lingering in the streets of Hanoi. All corners of the capital city were displayed with red banners written with yellow slogan "Greet the Party, Greet Spring", which for decades has become an indispensable part of the Vietnamese society to honour the Communist party when spring comes. The city, with its distinctive beauty of tree-fringed boulevards, serene lakes, pagodas and charming harmonized French and Vietnamese architecture, was vibrating. It vibrated not because of an earthquake or a natural calamity, but because the city administration had chopped down 6,708 trees in 190 streets across the capital city.

Figure 7. 'Greet the Party, Greet Spring' in Hanoi streets

Source: VOV. Available at: http://vov.vn/Print.aspx?id=464464

Much of the existing scholarship on Vietnamese civil society has focused on the activities of the NGOs, the formal structure of civil society organisation, for they are officially organised and their actions are more regulated. This apparently makes NGOs less challenging to study, especially for foreign researchers. This however is not the case for other more organic and sporadic social movements.

This chapter fills this gap in the literature by focusing on a high-profile case of civil society activism that is not centred on NGO action. It focuses on the 'Trees Movement' (TM), a very recent broad-based citizen-led movement established to protest against a government decision to cut down thousands of large old trees lining the streets of Hanoi. It examines processes through which different informal civilian groups orchestrate collective actions to request the government to stop cutting down the trees, as well as to demand a deliberative and accountable government. It also explores what the movement tells us about the changing dynamics of state-society relations in Vietnam. Most importantly, however, I will use this case study to argue that citizen-led activism, an emerging form of civic engagement, is likely to play a critical role in effecting change and (re)structuring state-society relations in Vietnam. This is because it signals to the political elites how civilians can orchestrate rightful civic actions to oppose unpopular state decisions and policies. The TM also signals the rise of critical green activism, in which the use of digital tools and social media plays a key role.

Drawing on the TM, I highlight how strategically-organised non-violent resistance opens up opportunities for civil society groups wishing to stand up to the state. The TM was not restricted to any political rhetoric, nor was it agitated by a particular political ideology, religion or social class, nor did it have a single identifiable leader. Instead, it had a diffusive leadership (Vu, 2017). On the face of it, it seemed to be loosely structured, clandestine and non-hierarchical; however, in reality it was well-organised, strategic and professionally-led. The TM's challenging groups, considered as informal structures (i.e. informal civilian networks), mainly appropriated informal channels for their activism. However, they also used more formal channels. They strategically articulated the interplay of formality and informality, combining online activism (through social media sites) and offline activism (street protests), building legitimacy for their activism through appeals to the Constitution and nesting within the state agenda and discourse. Equally notable about this case is that it is not led by NGOs or any other organised form of civil society. The impetus for its collective actions came from a broad-based coalition of citizens across the societal spectrum.

As it evolved, the TM secured the support of both registered NGOs and informal/unregistered groups including independent activists and dissidents. The surreptitious coalition of the registered NGOs and independent activists/dissidents in the TM, which is unprecedented in Vietnam, helped the movement avoid early state repression, as well as create opportunities for further civic actions. This phenomenon resonates with the recent social movements elsewhere, such as the Arab Spring, the anti-austerity and anti-capitalist movements in many parts of Europe, where independent activists and NGOs embarked on a relationship which Glasius and Ishkanian refer to as "surreptitious symbiosis" to maintain activism and bring about social change (Glasius and Ishkanian, 2014 cited in Vu, 2017, p.1183).

The chapter examines how and why the TM campaigners embarked on specific repertoires of actions by capturing the evolution of the movement and dynamics of its activism. Bringing insights into the TM, I argue further that environmental activism has opened up a new arena of contestation for civil society activism in Vietnam.

2. Trees Movement: Grassroots citizen-led activism

2.1. Setting of the Trees Movement

In November 2013, the Hanoi Department of Construction submitted to the city People's Committee (i.e. the city government) its proposal for approval of a scheme to renovate and replace trees in urban Hanoi during the period 2014-2015 (Hanoi Construction Department's Proposal No. 8542/TTr-SXD). The project was referred to as the tree-felling project by Hanoians, while the government repeatedly framed it as a landscaping project. Its estimated cost was VND73.38 billion (equivalent to $US3.4 million), for which the funding would come from the city's budget. The project, as the department indicated, aimed to replace the old and decaying trees with other types of trees or plants considered more suitable to the city outlook. On 18 March 2014, the Hanoi People's Committee adopted the department's proposal (Decision No.6816/QD-UBND). As many as 6,708 green trees, making up more than a quarter of the total city greenery, would be cut down and/or replaced for reasons such as these trees were either dying, decayed, or bent; or they posed risks to road users during rainy seasons; or different kinds of trees were planted in the same street creating a poor aesthetic outlook; or they were detrimental to planned infrastructure projects. However, the Hanoians observed in reality that the majority of trees being cut down were healthy, luxuriant, and old having been planted during the French colonial rule. The timber would generate a huge source of income (see Figure 8 & 9), but the department provided no information of what they would do with the large volume of timber (Vu, 2017).

Numerous questions and concerns arose and were centred on the project's legitimacy and propriety. This triggered public anger towards the municipal authorities because they had decided to cut down the old trees without public consultation. As one protester put it:

> "Why do thousands of trees have to be chopped down all at once? I agree there are some trees that can cause danger to pedestrians and drivers during the storm season, but cutting their unsuitable branches is more than enough, not whole trees. For those trees unfit to the aesthetic city landscape as the authority persistently defends, they should be removed and replanted elsewhere, rather than being chopped down. It is heart-

breaking. How many years do we have to wait to have shade from trees again, which is really needed in this city, where thousands of street vendors and labourers are every single day grappling with the heat in burning summers?" (Interview, 18 March 2015, Hanoi, cited in Vu, 2017, p.1188)

An environmentalist revealed his dismay in the following way:

"Under the irresistible pressure of growing population and modernisation, Hanoi is now heavily lacking greenery and getting stuffy and polluted, because of vehicles and construction work.[..] Instead of planting more trees and creating more green space, they are spending public money to cut down thousands of old trees and replace with new saplings. This sounds really ridiculous" (Interview, 30 March 2015 Hanoi)

Figure 8. **Healthy old trees were chopped down. Hanoi looked like a construction site**

Source: http://www.kienthuc.net.vn/soi-xet/ha-noi-xin-khat-hang-loat-cau-hoi-vuchat-cay-xanh-468493.html (cited in Vu, 2017, p.1189)

Figure 9. Healthy old trees were chopped down. Hanoi looked like a construction site

Source: http://www.kienthuc.net.vn/soi-xet/ha-noi-xin-khat-hang-loat-cau-hoi-vuchat-cay-xanh-468493.html (cited in Vu, 2017, p.1189)

Figure 10. Trees replanted in Nguyen Chi Thanh street after all the large old trees were chopped down

(Source: http://www.thanhniennews.com/society/people-see-red-as-hanoi-starts-cutting-down-6700-trees-40014.html) (cited in Vu, 2017)

On 19-20 March 2015, hundreds of trees alongside Nguyen Chi Thanh Street, known as one of the most beautiful boulevards in Vietnam, were cut down. This was the first phase of felling the trees. Earlier, Mr Le Van Duc, Director of the Hanoi Construction Department, stated in a mainstream newspaper that "a total 381 shade trees of 15 species on Nguyen Chi Thanh Street, which prompts a lack of

uniformity, will be replaced by *Manglietia Dandyi*". The new trees, he said, were of high value and would provide a better aesthetical outlook for the city. However, these saplings looked unhealthy and almost unable to grow after being planted in reality (see Figure 10). Local scientists proved that these trees are in fact *Magnolia conifera*[5], a deciduous tree native to China, which grows up to 30 meters in height, and is among the species that are not suitable for urban streets (Thanh Nien News, 2015). Within just a few days, Hanoi looked like a construction site with loads of large healthy trees being cut into logs and spread on the ground. Within a very short period of time as many as 2,000 trees, which included a large number of old and valuable trees had been completely cut down (Vu, 2017).

It was a despair for Hanoians to realise that as many as four more thousands trees were still waiting to be cut down. People could not understand why the green trees of their beloved city had survived wartime bombing, but were now being destroyed during peace time. Their anger increased when they realised that the decision to fell the trees had been taken with no public consultation, and that the authorities were deliberately trying to prevent open discussion and debate.

On this ground, some people started to realise action was needed to help save their city. The social media was on fire with Facebook updating new images of felled trees or warnings of the next trees to be felled, accompanied by rallying messages to resist. To pacify public outcry, the head of the Hanoi People's Committee decided to put the project on hold and a handful of low-ranking officials of the Department of Construction (but none from the Hanoi People's Committee) were temporarily suspended. This was not enough, however. A blogger, and rights activist stated, "this is just a cosmetic tactic of the city administration" (Vu, 2017, p.1190).

Hanoians value their city heritage and are proud of it. Tree after tree was cut down without consultation. People wanted to hear responsible responses to unanswered questions, such as "Why do streets in Hanoi have to wear '*manglietia dandyi*' uniform?", "Why are most of felled trees healthy ones?", "Where is the timber of the felled trees (its estimated value is worth millions of dollars) and how will the government deal with the timber?".

In the sections that follow I first analyse why and how people took to the streets in the TM. I then investigate how the TM orchestrated its activism effectively with the

---

[5] *Manglietia Dandyi and Magnolia conifer are very much different in price, the former costs about $US 2,000 to 2,500/each tree while the latter is about $US50.*

aid of the digital and technological tools, and finally examine how the TM, starting out as an environmental campaign, created a new space of contestation that aimed at demanding a participatory and accountable government in Vietnam.

2.2. A moment to spark: constructive nonviolent tension

In this section, I explain the moment when tension reached a climax, as well as its significance for the TM. It is said that public goods, such as trees and parks, can spark intense reaction in people (Clark, 2015). This can be evidenced in a wide array of public protests associated with public space and environmental issues across the world, with the Gezi Park demonstrations in Istanbul in mid-2013 being a glaring example, in which people protested against the demolition of a large park to clear the way for a commercial centre. Compared with the Gezi Park, the scale of the tree-saving campaign in Hanoi is smaller, but arguably has significant resonance for the contemporary political landscape of Vietnam.

A good point of entry is to explore how people decided to take to the streets. Under the one-party rule of Vietnam, where seeking refuge in silence is a more favoured habit rather than speaking out, and the fundamental democratic institutions (e.g. law on demonstrations, law on associations, or law on referendum) are still absent, rallying in streets to protest against a government decision as observed in the TM is not common. Dr. Nguyen Quang A, a dissident, argued that the tree saving campaign in Hanoi awakened civil society in Vietnam and it was an encouraging sign for civil society activists (RFI, 2015 cited in Vu, 2017, p.1191).

The TM helped awake civil society in Vietnam as Dr Nguyen pinpointed. So, what made people come together to join the TM? More precisely, what provoked them to decide to act? A conventional wisdom in the dominant social movement theories is that 'opposition to the government/state', a key characteristic in any social movement, cannot be missing (McAdam *et al.,* 2003 cited in Chabanet and Royall, 2014, p.5). In the TM, this type of opposition does exist. Nevertheless, 'opposition' here needs to be treated with care, because the government can easily manipulate this term to isolate critics and label them 'regime opponents'. From silence to taking to the streets, this process needs some catalysts to induce change. Most of my respondent accounts indicated that there were numerous instances in Hanoi, where the municipal government were either neglectful or reluctant to respond to public

concerns. Yet, people's habitual response was either to lament to themselves or remain muted, irrespective of the consequence of that decision or policy that could negatively affect their everyday lives (for instance, escalating price of petroleum and electricity, rampant red tape in public administration offices, or widespread selling of fake medicines). So, why did the city citizens choose to respond differently in the TM, i.e. speaking out and taking to the streets?

Hanoians are proud of their city green heritage, along with its intensity of historical and cultural values. Many of the green campaigners grew up in Hanoi and fought for the city, throughout time the old trees have become their companions. Emotional bonds have been entrenchedly established between trees and Hanoians. The charm of Hanoi is laid to the old trees and they make the city boulevards come alive. Hanoians love them in many respects (Vu, 2017).

Figure 11. **Tree-lined boulevards at night in Hanoi**

Source: http://blog.tamtay.vn/entry/view/987647/Gui-nhung-noi-co-don.html

The government's tree-felling project sparked public outcry. Only within a few days, the campaign momentum increased through Facebook, an alternative platform that allowed people to share freely their sentiments of sorrow, disenchantment, wrath, and especially, to connect freely to each other.

Nevertheless, these sentiments simply constituted a runway for collective action to take off. A dramatic or transformative event is needed to liberate cognition, trigger contention, and provoke action. Social movements, elsewhere, were often seen to be sparked by the sacrifice of someone, whom Castells (2012) refers to as a rebel hero, either it be immolation or martyrdom, for example. The image of a street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, setting himself on fire, which gave rise to the revolt that finally transformed the institutions of governance in Tunisia still shocks today. Humiliation provoked by the cynicism and arrogance of those in power was the prime cause of public protests, Castells argues. In the TM, there was neither immolation, nor martyrdom, nor a rebel hero of any type, but humiliation emerged as a decisive factor that climaxed the momentum of contention and transformed the emotion of fear. People felt disgraced and humiliated by the cynical and arrogant statement of Mr. Phan Dang Long, the Deputy Head of the Hanoi Party Committee's Propaganda Department. On 17 March 2015, when asked by a reporter of a local media about whether it was necessary to consult the public in replacing trees, he replied as follows:

> "Do you mean that the government has to consult the citizenry on everything? It is just only about felling a tree. There is no need to ask for public opinions. I am asking you: if everything needs to be consulted by the people, what is the point of electing the government? (Vietnamnet, 2015 a, b)

"There is no need to ask for public opinions", Mr Long's announcement, likened to a bullet fired at people's trust (Le *et al*., 2016), emerged as a transformative event. Humiliation ably transformed the emotion of fear (Vu, 2017). This transformative event, according to Johnston and Carnesecca (2014), marks a turning point in the social construction of consciousness and quickly triggers the momentum of contestation, whereby it manages, mitigates, and/or transcends fear, a principal deterrent to collective action in the authoritarian state, into several innovative oppositional repertoires. These repertoires, Johnston and Carnesecca explain, draw in larger segments of the society to take part in the movement, which is instrumental in intensifying the momentum for collective mobilisation. Under the dominant social movement theory (Tarrow, 1994), this event can be understood as a political opportunity structure that requires collective mobilisers to take advantage of and quickly convert into the mobilising strategies and repertoires of actions conducive to achieving the collective goals. The trees campaigners in the TM quickly articulated this opportunity and brought people to the streets (Vu, 2017).

2.3. The TM: emergence, structure and organisation

The TM is a glaring example of how the use of modern digital and technological tools (e.g. social media sites) opens up an alternative public sphere for civilians to exhibit contention. Mobilising support, calling for action, petition signing, coordinating and organising rallies, were orchestrated on social media sites (mostly Facebook in this case). A large scholarship recently depicts how social media changes state-society relations and provides an alternative platform for social and political activism in authoritarian regimes (see Castell, 2012; Hoffman, 2011; Lotan *et al*., 2011; Smith, 2011). Smith (2011), for example, even goes so far as to coin the term 'Facebook revolution' to emphasise the importance of Facebook in the downfall of the Mubarack regime in Egypt. In Vietnam, independent press is not allowed, hundreds of local newspapers and over 60 TV and radio stations are under the absolute control of the party state. However, unlike China, Vietnam fails to block social media, such as Facebook or Twitter. Facebook, now used by over 22 million people (making up one fourths of the whole population), is among the most popular (Gray, 2015). Thuy Minh, a blogger and a member of Green Hanoi Group explained:

> "Facebook offers us a space for unrestrained deliberation and actions. In this movement, let's assume, if there were no Facebook, they might have finished the felling of trees long before people could react." (Interview, 20th May 2015, Hanoi cited in VU, 2017, p.1193)

The TM membership was heterogeneous, unrestricted to any specific disadvantaged group. It attracted a wide range of participation cutting across the social spectrum including women, men, the old, the young, the rich, the poor, intellectuals, artists, scientists, business, academics, lawyers, students, journalists, registered local NGO staff, bloggers, rights activists, housewives, etc. Importantly the movement is completely localised with no support from international donors and INGOs in terms of resources. Some staff of embassies and INGOs participated in the peaceful demonstrations not on behalf of their organisation, but as individuals. Many interview respondents from the mobilising groups revealed that they did not feel convinced about the need to involve external actors, for they thought that Vietnamese people could handle this issue by themselves. This suggests that they were aware of the possible risks if the movement was seen by the government as

having links overseas. An international expert working in Vietnam for over 10 years stated as follows:

> "If there were some emergent overseas-associated elements, it could make the state speculate that the tree campaigners were receiving money from overseas organisations to agitate ordinary people to oppose the government or overthrow the regime. This is also what I suppose the groups understood and wanted to avoid. Moreover, the campaigning groups, I think, don't really need money. Online activism and taking to the streets actually don't need much money." (Interview, 23 April 2015 Hanoi)

Another important aspect of the TM was its spontaneous and impromptu nature. This contrasts with the project or programme driven framework under which international organisations and INGOs work in Vietnam. These institutions rarely put themselves in direct opposition to the local government because of the risk to their programmes.

To facilitate the reading of the analysis of the TM, in what follows I offer a summary timeline of critical events.

Table 3. Chronology of the critical events in the Trees Movement in Hanoi

Date	Events	Who involved or responsible
Early March 2015	Hundreds of large trees in Nguyen Chi Thanh street acclaimed as the most beautiful boulevard in Vietnam were cut down (estimated 400 trees). After Nguyen Chi Thanh, large old trees in many other streets in the old quarters were cut down. Within a few days the whole city looked like a construction site because of the tree felling.	The Hanoi Construction Department
16 March 2015	An open letter filed by a reputable journalist Mr Tran Dang Tuan, a former deputy general director of the Vietnam National Television Station to the Chairman of the Hanoi People's Committee (i.e. the city government) requested the suspension to the tree felling project. This event kicked-off the TM.	Mr Tran Dang Tuan

16 March 2015	The Facebook page "6,700 People for 6,700 trees" was established, with the initial aim to seek 6,700 Likes to pay tribute to the felled trees. The page was shared on a grand scale and received 10,000 Likes within 24 hours.	The page was set up by a housewife who lived in Hanoi and loved the city.
17 March 2015	A closed Facebook Group 6,700 People, the pioneering group, was established and took on the role of managing the Facebook page "6,700 People for 6,700 Trees".	Group 6,700 People
17 March 2015	The first meeting of the pioneering Group 6,700 People was quickly organised to develop the action plan with clear steps and achievable objectives	Group 6,700 People
17 March 2015	Mr Phan Dang Long, the Deputy Head of the Hanoi Party Committee's Propaganda Department, stated on the mainstream media that "There is no need to ask for public opinions in the tree project". Mr Long's saying went viral on social media and sparked public outcry.	Mr Phan Dang Long
18 March 2015	The Facebook Group 6700 Trees was established by two local architects to collect information and data for making a one-hour documentary about the love and response of Hanoians to the loss of their trees.	
In the morning of the 20th March 2015	City citizens' petition was addressed to the related government agencies: People's Committee, People's Council and Department of Construction	Group 6,700 People
In the afternoon of the 20th March 2015	The Hanoi People's Committee (city government) hold a press conference on the tree felling project. The President of the People's Committee decided to suspend the project.	Hanoi People's Committee
22 March 2015	Tree Hugs Picnic (aka. Public protest) was organised. This was considered the first public demonstration of the TM.	Group 6,700 People
23 March 2015	A seminar "From the Project 6,700 Trees to Hanoi planning issues" co-organised by two local NGOs, the leaders of these NGOs were members of Group 6,700 People	
29 March 2015	Green Walk (aka. public protest) was organised with the participation of about 1,000 people	Group 6,700 Trees

31 March 2015	Some parts of Group 6,700 Trees divorced from the group after sensing the intervention of the police into the group (e.g. under the security harassment and intimidation, the group administrators were prevented from posting any call for further demonstrations). Those who left the group (mostly radical activists) established the new group called "For A Green Hanoi" (which is referred to as Green Hanoi hereinafter)	Group Green Hanoi established
05 April 2015	Biking for Trees was held, but the participants were obstructed and split by the police and security before reaching the final destination. The event encountered the state aggressiveness.	Group Green Hanoi
12 April 2015	A public demonstration was organised by the Group Green Hanoi	Group Green Hanoi
19 April 2015	Another public demonstration was waged by the Group Green Hanoi	Group Green Hanoi
22 April 2015	An administrator of the Group Green Hanoi was heavily assaulted by plain-clothes police. Despite the escalating state harassment and intimidation, the group called for the next street protest, which not only focused on the environmental issues, but also criticized the security violence and harassment	Group Green Hanoi
26 April 2015	The final demonstration of the Group Green Hanoi was heavily repressed by hundreds of police and civic order defenders	Group Green Hanoi
06 May 2015	After being heavily repressed, Group Green Hanoi filed an open letter to the National Assembly deputies. The group representatives convened at the constituency of the Hanoi National Assembly Delegation to address the letter. Nevertheless, they were prevented from outside the meeting hall and were not able to get inside to meet the deputies.	Group Green Hanoi

How were the TM groups organised and structured? By virtue of the TM's activism being staged mainly via Facebook groups, it was crucial for me to be involved in these groups as a member and I managed to do so (see Chapter 3 for how I managed to enter the TM's 'closed' platforms). Being an insider to these groups allowed me to gain greater insights into how they were organised and structured, and how they communicated internally and externally. In trying to map out the leading TM Facebook groups, it is useful to think of concentric circles, whereby the core position of each group was inhabited by administrators and task force teams. These are surrounded by participants who simply exhibited their interests by clicking 'Like', 'Share', or leaving comments, as well as by observers. The diagram below visualises the different levels of participation and commitment of members.

There were several groups participating in the TM with different scales and sizes, but I focused on three main groups, which stood out in terms of their significance, distinctive mobilising structures, objectives and memberships. These were Group 6,700 People (the pioneering group and also managing the Fanpage 6,700 people for 6,700 trees), Group 6700 Trees, and Group Green Hanoi.

Diagram 1. Concentric circles of TM participation

Observers & information collectors

Supporters through clicking 'Share', 'Like', 'Comment'

Active & direct participants

Administrators & core team
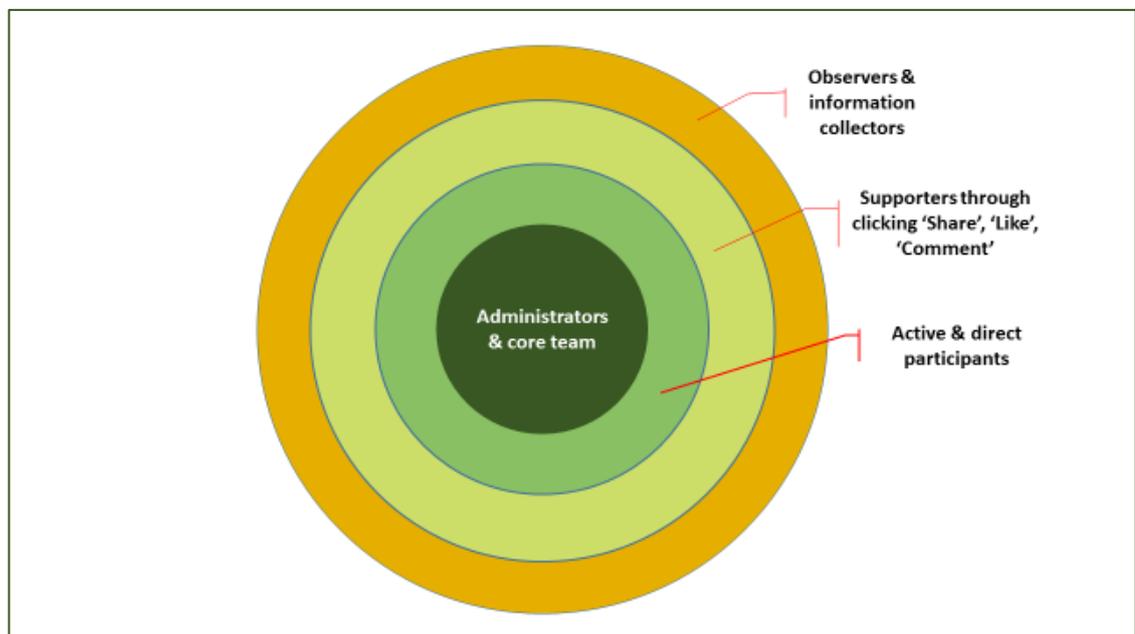
(Source: the Researcher)

However, the launch of the TM needs to be traced back not to these groups but to an open letter written by Mr Tran Dang Tuan, a reputable journalist, former deputy general director of the Vietnam national television station, and a humanitarian. On

March 16th 2015, he filed a letter to the president of the city government, Nguyen The Thao, in which he requested an immediate suspension to the tree felling. Mr Tuan's letter went viral on both Facebook and mainstream media. This letter was followed by the initiatives and actions of the Group 6,700 People, the path-breaking group of the movement.

2.3.1. Group 6,700 People

Following Mr. Tuan's letter was the prompt emergence of the Facebook page "6,700 people for 6,700 trees", established on the 16th March 2015 by a housewife with first-hand experience in social activism (Vu, 2017). She was not born in Hanoi, but had lived in it for a long period and had a great love for it. Devoted to her family and her own bakery, she had never been involved in any social campaign before. Setting up the page, she simply wanted to seek 6,700 LIKES to pay tribute to the felled and going-to-be-felled trees. In the morning, she set up the page, in the afternoon she made some posters written with "I am a healthy tree, please don't cut me down", and drove her scooter to some inner streets to stick them to the old trees. It was beyond her expectation that the page was shared on a grand scale and received 10,000 LIKES just within 24 hours and over 60,000 LIKES within less than two weeks (Vu, 2017). She was contacted by a local independent human rights expert on the day she wrote the page, and together they took on the administration of Group 6,700 People. She was invited to participate in a meeting with some other campaigners, who were then the first members of Group 6,700 People. This first meeting was a critical milestone for the movement, which will be discussed in detail after I bring insight into the composition of this group.

The group emerged as a pioneering one of the TM and took on the role of managing the page "6,700 People for 6,700 Trees". This Facebook group was set on 'closed status' for safety reasons, and included roughly 100 members coming from diverse backgrounds such as NGO staff members, rights experts, journalists, IT specialists, scientists, researchers, lawyers, architectures, lecturers, artists, and so forth. It was a closed group, so anyone who wanted to join needed to be introduced by a standing member. The group was horizontally organised and loosely structured with

no single, identifiable leader. Communication and discussion within the group members was mainly via this Facebook group, but the group used the fanpage "6,700 People for 6,700 Trees" to communicate with the public, mobilise wider support, and call for collective action (Vu, 2017).

The group had a core team of about ten members, many of whom are leaders of local registered NGOs and had previously worked together in several projects and social campaigns. There was therefore a certain degree of trust and mutual understanding between them. They are all professional, knowledgeable, dedicated, developmental-minded, and especially, activist-oriented. Seeing the old trees being cut down, they decided to come together in a voluntary manner to protest and to save the trees. Their unity was therefore based on their shared concerns and objectives towards saving the trees. The role of this core team was pivotal, because they functioned as the steering committee which designed and decided mobilising tactics and aims. One NGO leader, a member of the core team, explained:

> "How a page works depends heavily on the core team. They shape the culture of deliberation on the page and influence the attitudes of the participants. This can be seen in the content, language, tone, spirit and attitude reflected on the page. […] We endeavoured to maintain a deliberative space in a democratic and open manner in order to maintain dialogue between us and the people who followed the page, and also between the tree campaigners and the authorities." (Interview, 14 April 2015, Hanoi, cited in Vu, 2017, p. 1193)

Equally notable about Group 6,700 People was the number of members from local registered NGOs who offered knowledge and time of the campaign, as well as material resources such as infrastructure, financial support for printing T-shirts and stationery for the volunteers participating in the tree status survey. Their activism was based on nonviolence and collaboration. One of the group's administrators explained:

> "We were not agitators, we only strived to show to the government our good will to cooperate, not to confront. We wanted to save our old trees, save the city." (Interview, 14 April 2015, Hanoi)

Since local NGOs are tightly regulated in Vietnam, they are forced to exercise self-censorship and operate in non-confrontational ways. However, as we will see later in this chapter, this does not mean that their activism lacks dynamism and strategy. For example, they drafted the influential petition that attracted many supporters, they helped set up direct meetings with formal representatives within the city government, they framed the movement in a way which broader mass appealed, they also called on formal channels (i.e. the Constitution, the relevant state legal documents, etc.) to legitimise the movement.

The first collective effort of the path-breaking Group 6,700 People was to set up a dialogue between the city citizens and the authorities and to request transparency be put in place. The first group meeting was initiated by a local independent expert on human rights and took place on the 17th March 2015 at the office of a local NGO one day after the fanpage was established. This meeting played a crucial role in setting the course of the group actions, as well as strategising actions for the movement during the early stage. Around twenty people attended this meeting including the core team of 10 people and around 10 others who did not know each other (Vu, 2017). Phan Lam, a member of the core team, observed:

> "In this meeting, despite the majority having not known each other before, the discussion was smooth and no conflict occurred. Perhaps, it is because the trees issue was so urgent that no one wanted to take it personally. […] If you look at the movement as a whole, it is a loosely organised movement. Its structure looks like a school of fish when there is no single leader taking a lead." (Interview, 07 April 2015, Hanoi cited in Vu, 2017, p.1195)

Although there was no leader, the first meeting was facilitated by a leader of a local NGO, and this helped ensure the flow of the meeting. Labour division was based on individuals' voluntariness and expertise, with no one giving command or order. Five themes of action were quickly agreed on: (1) Information gathering: data, evidence from all sources; (2) Communication: working closely with mainstream media as long as they were still allowed to, liaising with scientists and experts to collect scientific evidence, working with lawyers to mobilise legal support; (3) Advocacy: searching for any influential contact within the state who could help set up a meeting with Hanoi authorities if possible; (4) Petition signing: collecting public signatures for the petition and addressing it to the city government; (5) Event organizing: Tree Hugs Picnic (cum public demonstration) (Vu, 2017).

Figure 12. The front and the back side of the Advocacy T-shirt of Group 6,700 People (the logo of the back side is the official advocacy logo of the group)

The sequence of actions in their mobilising structure above is noticeable, because this is indicative of the overall strategy. Specifically, public protest (i.e. Tree Hugs Picnic) was not the first action that they mobilised collectively to undertake. Instead, this action came after efforts to establishing dialogue and increase support (petition signing). Whilst they constantly received numerous comments on the fanpage urging them to wage a protest, they were resolute and persistent with their agenda. Not being provoked by the radical ideas to take to the streets too soon, they strived to set up a dialogue with city authorities in the first place (Vu, 2017). As one member of the core team explained:

"We wanted to set up dialogue with the government first, we wanted to meet up with them. We wanted to make use of that channel before taking to the streets. If we took to the streets too soon, we could have invited early state repression. As a consequence, we couldn't have saved the trees. They would have continued cutting down trees." (Interview, 14 April 2015, Hanoi).

Given the repertoire of actions, the group identified which activities were to be directly undertaken by the closed group members and which activities were to be posted on the fanpage to mobilise wider support and participation. In doing so, they attempted to avoid or at least to minimise risks. Once the consensus on labour divisions was reached behind the scenes (i.e. using a closed platform), they circulated the action agenda more publicly (i.e. on the fanpage which was an open forum) to mobilise participation. During the early days, Group 6700 People was central to the movement, tens of thousands of people followed their fanpage. The first important action they focused on was to organise petition signing.

On their 'closed' platform, the group members focused on searching for a prestigious contact in the state apparatus (i.e. a formal structure), which could help them set up a direct meeting with the city leaders, as well as maintaining close engagement with some reliable mainstream media. Meanwhile, the mobilisation on the open page focused on direct actions engaged by the community, which looked to halt the tree felling quickly. In this people adopted a number of creative actions including inserting the movement logo into facebook profile pictures, sharing photos and videos concerning the felled trees on facebook, decorating targeted trees with ribbons and posters like "I am a healthy tree. Don't cut me down", collecting signatures and so forth.

The urgency, professionalism, and efficacy in their mobilising structure were discernible. Whilst tree after tree was cut down without hesitation by the authorities, the course of actions was calculated carefully to attain maximum impact in the shorted period of time. Shortly after the first group meeting on the 17th March, the citizens' petition was thoughtfully drafted in both English and Vietnamese and posted on the Fanpage to collect signatures. On 19 March 2015, within less than twenty four hours, they collected 22,000 signatures. On the morning of the 20th March 2015, three small groups of 5-7 people together with closed group members turned up at the related city government offices including the People's Committee (i.e. the executive body), the People's Council (i.e. elected

body) and the Department of Construction (i.e. the producer of the tree felling project). Despite of receiving a reluctant welcome by the authorities, the group eventually managed to submit the petition to the representatives of these agencies. This was the first time a civic and public action of this kind had emerged. The decision to take the petition to the authorities and submit it in person as opposed to sending it by post was indicative of the group's determination to set up a collaborative dialogue with the government (Vu, 2017).

Three succinct demands were put forward in the Petition, including, (1) suspend the felling; (2) disclose all information related to the project; (3) open dialogue with citizens to respond to their concerns regarding the project. These goals were set out in a context that highlighted both environmental concerns as well as emotional cum public ones. Not only were the trees good for the environment, people liked them.

The group efforts in putting initial pressure on the government somewhat bore fruit, which could be seen in the government decision to put the tree-cutting project on hold. In coping with the public pressure, the city president finally decided to temporarily suspend the contentious project on the afternoon of the 20th March 2015, after the Group submitted and addressed the Petition on the morning of the same day. However, the response was a cosmetic tactic of the city administration and did not answer key citizens' questions such as the overall budget for the project, what was to happen to the timber, who had responsibility for the project and so forth. In particular, halting the tree cutting was only the first of the three objectives stated in the Petition to Hanoi authorities. The other two objectives focused on 'openness' and 'accountability', and these had not been addressed. Against this backdrop, Group 6700 People decided to move to the next step of its campaign, i.e. take the debate to the streets. This took the form of a "Tree Hugs Picnic".

The picnic was staged on 22nd March 2015, two days after the Hanoi government's decision. The event was widely covered on mainstream and social media and drew in participants from all walks of life. Around 600 people came from diverse segments of society joined the picnic, many of whom wore advocacy T-shirts (sponsored by a local NGO) and carried Tree Hugs Hanoi banners, holding hands outside the park and displaying their love for Hanoi, love for environment, and love for trees. They sang, played music, hugged trees, and marched around the lake, calling for the project to be stopped and for the environment to be protected. The picnic took place in an atmosphere of friendliness, peace and love, which was the

leading message that the Group 6700 People strived to spread to the wider community.

> "It is not our hatred but our love which can save our city. Instead of sitting still and showing our resentment to the city government, let's take action to save our city."

> *(Quoted from on fanpage 6700 people for 6,700 trees, dated 18 March 2015)*

The event happened with no excessive behaviour from the security forces. Many of the participants were young people, who had cooperated with local NGOs in several events before, either as volunteers or affiliated groups. The activism by the pioneering Group 6,700 People, as one of my respondents, an active activist of the Green Hanoi Group revealed, played an important role in helping the movement avoid state crackdown from the start.

Figure 13. Tree Hugs Picnic

(Source: Fanpage 6700 people for 6700 trees
https://www.facebook.com/pg/manfortree/notes/?ref=page_internal)

Although the group was orchestrating by registered local NGO participation, the NGO members participated in the movement not as representatives of their organisations but as private citizens who wanted to be activists. However, the strategy posed a risk to the NGOs. In the restricted political environment of

Vietnam, local NGOs' activities are under constant surveillance by security forces. Those taking part in the TM would have known this and therefore took calculated risks. They calculated the political opportunity structures and devised strategies to mobilise accordingly, so that their organisations would not face unnecessary risks.

In the aftermath of the Tree Hugs Picnic, state intolerance started to accelerate, i.e. several members of the closed group received the warnings from the police, many students who participated in the picnic or simply stuck posters or ribbons to the trees were asked to go the police station for interrogation, the mainstream media was asked to stop writings on the tree project, and the propagation brigades were mobilised in all neighbourhoods to prevent people from taking to the streets (state response to the TM is discussed in more detail in section 2.5 below). Given this, Group 6,700 People gradually diminished its activism, moving from the forefront of the movement to the margin. After the Picnic (also considered the first street protest of the movement), the group decided not to hold more public demonstrations, and to seek opportunities to work with the state structures. However, the authorities had become more intolerant and the Group 6,700 People's efforts were unsuccessful (Vu, 2017).

Since all efforts to engage with the government failed, they turned their attention to surveying and developing the trees map, with an aim to protect the remaining number of green trees in the inner city.

2.3.2. Group 6700 Trees

Entering the fray a bit later than the Group 6700 People was Group 6700 Trees. The latter was established by two architects, who had first-hand social activist experience, on 18th March 2015. This new group did not have a Fanpage and was set up as a 'Public Group', which meant that there was direct communication between group members, group administrators were 'visible', and people could join. This contrasted with the "6700 people for 6700 trees" Fanpage which was a closed group, and the identity of the administrators was not revealed.

The emergence of the Group 6700 Trees had the same repercussion as its predecessor. Within twenty four hours, it enrolled 4,300 members and new posts

regarding tree felling were updated every second'. The page was shared at an unexpectedly grand scale, especially after the two group founders were interviewed by a local media about their idea of making a documentary on Hanoi's old trees. The two architects initially set up the Group in order to mobilise public contribution of images and video clips of Hanoi trees, which would be used as invaluable inputs for the development of a one-hour documentary about the love and response of Hanoians to the loss of their trees. The purpose of the movie was to reflect the impacts of the tree-felling project upon the city residents, and the need of community participation in the urban development management. The intended core message of the movie was "City for People" ("Do Thi Vi Nhan Sinh"), which emphasised human values in architectural and urban spaces (Vietnamnews, 2015). The specific objectives of the Group 6700 Trees were, (i) request the city government to halt the tree felling, disclose information regarding the project and responsibilities of each related individual, and disclose the plan on how to preserve and develop the urban greenery of Hanoi; and (ii) gather information for the documentary.

Due to the unexpected proliferation of members in a very short period of time, the two founders had to convince others to become administrators together with them to manage the massive flow of new information and photos. The group finally had twenty two administrators and no one knew each other before except for the founders.

On 29 March 2015 (one week after the Tree Hugs Picnic), the "Green Walk for Trees", another unique street protest, was orchestrated by this group. The event attracted around 800-1000 participants, and resulted in further evidence of an increasingly intolerant state. After the Green Walk, group administrators came under the surveillance of the security forces. Specifically, two group founders were asked to show up at one of the high-level security agencies of the Ministry of Public Security for interrogation, whilst other administrators received unexpected visits by security officers at their private residences. With such high intimidation, the Facebook group was set from public to closed status, all the notes related to the Green Walk and mobilising messages for subsequent public protests were deleted, some administrators quit and others announced on the page that there would be no further calls for public demonstration. This declaration disappointed radical elements in the group, who sensed that the group had been influenced by the security forces, and hence, they decided to divorce from Group 6,700 Trees and set up a new Facebook group called "For a Green Hanoi". The new group was launched

on the 31st March 2015. The Group 6700 Trees gradually demobilised after the Green Walk and restricted its activities to the investigation of legal documents concerning the tree felling project (Vu, 2017).

2.3.3. Group Green Hanoi

Since its emergence, Group for a Green Hanoi (called Green Hanoi hereinafter) reenergised TM activism. This again was a facebook group, set up as a 'public' one, so anyone could enroll. They pursued various acts of civic resistance, including public demonstrations, civil disobedience, and legal. Their activism was aimed at demanding that the municipal government be accountable and that those individuals who committed wrongdoings should be sanctioned. The group attracted more than 9,000 members coming from most societal segments. Like the organisational structure of the two preceding groups, the role of a single leader was absent and instead, the key members who made up the core team of the group decided what direction to go. Hence the role of these members and administrators became salient (Vu, 2017).

The distinctive feature of this group was the involvement of independent activists, labelled as 'reactionary forces' by the ruling communist leaders. These members had street protest experience from their participation in anti-China demonstrations. As such they were more prepared and experienced to push the boundaries of what might be considered legal or acceptable to the authorities. These independent activists are critical of the regime and exercised their contention through blogs, Facebook page messages, and by taking to the streets. Their activist experience helped them transcend fear and placed them in front positions in a series of public protests staged by the Group Green Hanoi. The group's core team included not only experienced activists, but also new comers (i.e. inexperienced and young activists). One of the group administrators explained as follows:

> "A key reason for our persistent efforts to sustain the campaign despite the increasing repression is to empower people, to familiarise them with resisting or opposing inappropriate state policies and decisions, rather than seeking refuge in silence and passiveness. This may be considered a small step, but holds significance in Vietnam now, where people choose to be

indifferent to politics for fear or a lack of confidence." (Interview, 30 April, 2015, Hanoi cited in Vu, 2017, p.1189)

Since its emergence, the group continued to wage public protests and events, including marching, biking, filing open letters and complaining to the city government. They also shifted to using legal means to channel their opposition. Being aware of the risk that the group faced, because of their vulnerability to the regime reacting against them, they consistently highlighted the principle of nonviolence and law compliance:

"We take to the streets with peaceful spirit and polite attitude, in respect of the law enforcement officers who are doing their jobs; we absolutely say no to violence, oppose and prevent violence. We will altogether establish a courteous and civil image for our actions." (Excerpt from Group Green Hanoi)

A rights activist and group member stated that:

"We believe in the rightfulness and civility of peaceful demonstrations. We believe that it is the most effective way to incorporate civilians in the resolution of social conflicts that are pervasive in our society. Thus, we want to show our determination to persevere with the Trees Movement in the hope that we can establish a civic-led resistance model for the Vietnamese throughout the country." (Interview, 13 May 2015, Hanoi)

There was a critical difference in the objectives of activism between Group Green Hanoi and its two predecessors (Group 6700 People and Group 6700 Trees). While asking for sanction and prosecution of those who committed wrongdoings was absent in the set of goals to be achieved by the latter, it was brought onto the former's action agenda. With historical activist experience, the concerted efforts of the Group Green Hanoi were targeted at reaching more ambitious goals that explicitly challenged the state legitimacy. They strategically adjusted their methods of activism in line with the state response (Vu, 2017).

Figure 14. Peaceful demonstration mobilised by Group Green Hanoi

A series of public demonstrations were orchestrated by Group Green Hanoi on four consecutive Sundays, which were accompanied with varying degrees of state interventions, ranging from house watch, harassment, detainment, violent assault, and stigmatisation of the private lives of a number of group members. The appearance of five to seven plain-clothes security officers from the early morning in front of the group activists' houses to intimidate and prevent them from attending the rallies was common. Because of this, many of them had to sneak out from their homes on the night before or days in advance to avoid security detection. In particular, one of the group administrators, also a blogger, was violently assaulted by plain-clothes police on 22 April 2015, which caused the group to add issues of violence and police harassment to the struggle's objectives on top of tree saving and government accountability. The assault was aimed at threatening the group and the public as a whole from staging more protests. The Group Green Hanoi took to the streets on 26 April 2015, which was the final street protest of the group and indeed of the TM. Participants were heavily suppressed by hundreds of police officers and civic order defenders (Vu, 2017).

There are some salient points pertaining to the group's final protest that need to be highlighted. Amid escalating state aggressiveness, and sensing a high possibility of

state repression in the coming demonstration, the Group strategically mobilised new members. It targeted the recruitment of young females and encouraged them to wear traditional long dress 'AO DAI' and stand in the front line of the march (see Figure 15). The image of young women in traditional long dresses contrasted with the aggression of the security forces, and the Group hoped it would deter state violence. Yet, things did not happen in this way. These female protesters, together with others, were suppressed by hundreds of police and civic order defenders. Twenty two people were arrested in total in the street demonstration of the 26 April 2015 and were accused of causing public disorder. More experienced activists accompanied the newcomers to the police station, even though they had not been arrested (Vu, 2017).

The detainees were released on the same day after long hours of being interrogated separately. During the interrogation, the inexperienced activists had to face degrading comments and intimidation by the security officers. Most of the interrogative questions centred on whether there was any connection between the protesters and the Viet Tan (Vietnam Reform) Party, which for the CPV is an exiled reactionary organisation that wants to overthrow the socialist state. Thu Huong, one of the detainees, disclosed that in the interview that:

> "The police aggressively took my mobile and kept searching for information in it without my consent. They asked me whether I belonged to any reactionary forces; how much money I received from Viet Tan to participate in the protests and since when had I joined Viet Tan. Apart from that, they treated me with disrespect and used degrading words to talk to me".

In the aftermath of the arrest, police harassment and intimidation escalated further. Another active member of Group Green Hanoi was severely attacked by five plainclothes security officers who hit him on his head with iron bars (Figure 16). He was beaten unconscious at the scene. He was an influential blogger, who was always on the frontline of street demonstrations of the TM. He was also an active member on several anti-China rallies opposing Beijing's claims to the disputed waters. A number of Western diplomats came to visit him and expressed their concerns about the state sponsored violence. When asked "What made you decide to embark on the path full of spikes and thorns?" he simply replied me "Just to be myself".

Figure 15. Female protesters in traditional long dress before the repression

Figure 16. Two activists of Group Green Hanoi were violently assaulted and other female protesters were supressed in the 26 April protest

With increased state supported violence, Group Green Hanoi shifted its strategy and began using legal channels to express its opposition. They filed two open letters and submitted them to the city authority in person to show their determination to make the government accountable for their unusual decisions. Apart from these letters, the group representatives also convened at one of the district halls, where the Party General Secretary had a meeting with constituents, to present a list of queries related to the 6700-tree project. However they were prevented from entering the hall by dozens of police and plain-clothes agents. Moreover, the group embarked on an unprecedented civic legal action, i.e. those who were arrested in the peaceful demonstration on 26 April lodged a complaint to the Hanoi public security department, with the aim of denouncing the police and civic order defence forces for their arbitrary detention of peaceful marchers. A key group member stated, this was the first time the protesters had taken legal action against those who repressed them, but she admitted that she was not optimistic the authorities would deal with the complaint effectively. However, she also said:

> "This does not mean we will not do anything about that. People should not be discouraged from taking action by the mindset that 'nothing can change'. Our small action might set a little brick on the way, but it will make a difference in the long run, if we persist" (Interview, 17 May 2015, Hanoi)

So far, I have provided an account of each TM group and examined how they emerged, how they were structured and organised, as well as how and why they embarked on certain repertoires of actions during specific stages of the TM. The advancement and demobilisation of each group was contingent on its degree of autonomy in relation to the state and its position of legitimacy. The efforts of independent activists and registered NGOs were, however, complementary and conducive to building a model of how civilians could converge and oppose the government's unpopular decisions, and make change happen. In what follows, I bring more insight into the mobilisation process of the TM, specifically how the TM mobilised people and facilitated civil action. I shed light on how the Group 6700 People (i.e. registered NGO-based) and Green Hanoi Group (i.e. independent activist-based) engaged in a type of collaboration, which I referred to as "surreptitious symbiosis" (Glasius and Ishkanian, 2014, p.3) at the early period of the TM. Underscoring this analysis is an attempt to show how environmental concerns were used by the tree campaigners to influence political activism, and promote good governance and government accountability.

2.4. The TM: Mobilisation process and dynamics of activism

Under the unexpected pressures of public opposition, on 20 March 2015 the city government suspended the project and promised a full review. This U-turn state response to public criticism is still rare in Vietnam, even if there are signs of increasing openness in recent times. Political criticism is treated as a sensitive or 'forbidden' terrain and the state uses its power to respond with a range of tactics including the arrest and jailing of some critics. However, trees or environmental issues in the broader sense, are often seen as apolitical issues and have opened up new avenues for civilians in authoritarian regimes like Vietnam. In Vietnam, politics is often treated not as 'everyday' or 'petty' politics (i.e. politics with a small p, such as everyday choices and decisions that make people who they are), but instead as anything that the CPV thinks might challenge its monopoly of power (politics with big P), such as regime change, calling for multi-partyism or independent labour unions (Vu, 2017).

In the following analysis of the citizen-led movement, I argue that the TM was not only an 'environmental issue', but that the TM campaigners successfully combined environment and political issues, such as participatory governance and government accountability in their mobilisations. This was evidenced in the fact that although a decision had been taken to halt the tree cutting, it was not enough to stop Hanoians asking questions concerning the transparency of the project and the accountability of the city administration. As a result, the campaign proceeded with even stronger actions.

As stated on the Facebook page of the Group Green Hanoi:

> "[…] and our actions are not only limited to calling for the halt of tree cutting and requesting government transparency in very general terms. We need to create a precedent, i.e. the government must be accountable for its wrongdoings. Those who commit misconduct must be sanctioned. Public property has been destroyed and the community must be compensated. We, citizens, are entitled to demand a transparent and accountable government, and we can do it. Demonstrations or green biking are only one component of our repertoire of actions that, step by step, are aimed at promoting a transparent and responsible government." (Excerpt from the

Facebook page Green Hanoi dated 16ᵗʰ April, 2015 cited in Vu, 2017, p.1201).

The dynamics of the TM rests on the fact that on the face of it, it seemed loosely structured, clandestine, and non-hierarchical however beneath the scenes, it was well-organised and professionally-led. A repertoire of non-violent actions appealing to both formal and informal channels was mobilised to demand an immediate halt to the tree felling, ranging from changing profile pictures, sharing photos and videos on Facebook, signing petitions, setting up official meetings with the city government, beautifying trees with ribbons, surveying trees, organising workshops, and in particular taking to the streets.

To generate legitimacy for their rightful resistance, the tree campaigners appealed to the fundamental citizenship rights stated in the Constitution and nested within the state agenda and discourse:

> "We have formed our requests based on our good will to cooperate with the Hanoi authorities in the implementation of the 2013 Constitution, specifically regarding the right to access information, the right to participate into state and social management, as well as the corresponding obligation of the State (Chapter II, Article 25 and Article 28), the Environmental Protection Law and Ordinance No. 34/2007/PL-UBTVQH11 on the Implementation of Democracy in Wards, Communes, and Townships."

(Excerpt from the Petition of the Fanpage 6700 people for 6700 trees https://www.facebook.com/pg/manfortree/notes/?ref=page_internal) (cited in Vu, 2017, p.1201)

By carefully appealing to the Constitution and other related legal documents (i.e. formal channels) in the petition, the first civic action of the TM staged by the Group 6700 People demonstrated the campaigners' professionalism, as well as their strategic thinking in seeking legitimation for their mobilisation. They signalled a clear message to the city administration with the statement: "we are aware of our constitutional rights, but importantly, we are not in a position of confrontation but rather, one of cooperation" (Interview, 25 March 2015, Hanoi).

The TM groups were committed to nonviolence and in their endeavours, they established a civil resistance model through which civilians knew, spoke out and exercised their rights in a peaceful and rightful manner. In non-democratic regimes like Vietnam, where public fear still prevails because of state coercion, the tree

campaigners understood that this needed to be mitigated as a first step in the mobilisation process. Once fear was alleviated, it would attract more participation, which would provide potential protection for individual participants and then enhance legitimacy for the movement.

Fear was tactically mitigated and transformed by the TM groups through a repertoire of strategic actions. First, the vocabulary they employed conveyed the severity, urgency, efficacy, and propriety of the campaign. Their attempts were to break down a fine line between inside-outside participants of the movement. They understood that the movement had progressed to a great extent through the aid of the social network, and that the distinction between participants and non-participants was weak because a simple click on the LIKE or SHARE button meant someone was 'involved'. The way they addressed the public and the strategic messages they delivered focused on the fact that it was the people's constitutional right to voice their concern. The Group 6700 People, for example, stated clearly on their page:

> "Our efforts are to set up a dialogue between the PEOPLE and the city government about the tree-felling project in an open, transparent and goodwill manner. The main actions that we emphasise on are promoting transparency and collaboration between citizens and the authorities. […] Positive and law-abiding activities are advocated and in particular, it is necessary to avoid acts that might endanger participants or might be abused or distorted."
>
> *(Excerpted from fanpage 6700 People for 6700 trees, 19 March 2015 https://www.facebook.com/pg/manfortree/notes/?ref=page_internal)*

By addressing the "PEOPLE", they emphasised that this movement would not exclude anyone and that anyone could be affected by environmental destruction, particularly stressing the fact that their attempts were not to establish a dialogue between the group itself and the city administration, but rather, it was for Hanoians as a whole. Also, by proclaiming clear objectives and specific actions, they sought to highlight that their motivations and actions were open and transparent and not related to what the state referred to as 'being agitated by the conspiracy of evil forces'.

They encouraged people not to be fearful by repeatedly reiterating that it was absolutely their constitutional rights to voice their concern or by delivering inspiring

messages to spark people's consciousness and conscience to accelerate collective mobilisation:

"[…] we have to raise our voice so that there will be no more environmental destruction like this in the time to come. We are not those who try to hinder human advancement. What we all require is transparency, consultation and respect. Nature also needs to be respected. […]

There are so many things that we have to do, and we have to do them without hesitation because they don't give us even a minute to spare. Tree after tree is being chopped down. Please take a look around you, near your house, near your office, your school, or at the places that you often travel past to see whether there is any tree that is healthy. It will be felled. Please give a shout, please don't cover your eyes or your ears anymore, please raise your voice, the voice of a citizen, so that the authorities will understand that we are not blind."

(Excerpted from Fanpage 6,700 people for 6,700 trees, 18 March 2015
https://www.facebook.com/pg/manfortree/notes/?ref=page_internal)

The second strategy the campaigners used to mitigate public fear so as to trigger collective mobilisation rested on their publicly well-stated determination to protect participants and their efforts to promote solidarity among them. As the TM momentum increased, harassment by the security forces also increased. Young students in particular were targeted because the CPV is traditionally suspicious of youth movements because of its recollection and interpretation of the Tiananmen Square uprising. The authorities therefore adopted many tactics to put pressure on students, their universities and their families.

Amid the increasing complexity of the movement, the mobilising groups created a self-protection mechanism for participants by improving their legal awareness. They mobilised legal support from lawyers who were willing to help and become part of the movement. The guiding information regarding each specific harassment case was carefully explained on the TM groups' pages so that people would know about their rights. Group 6700 People, for instance, posted on its page that:

"[…] Citizens cannot be arrested or detained unless they are caught committing crimes or there is an arrest warrant. If invited to the police station, you have the right to refuse and this is your right. […] You have the right to refuse to answer questions and the right to ask for the protection of lawyers. If there is an illegal detainment deployed, you have the right to sue them, if you have enough witnesses or evidence."

Vietnam is not a rule of law state, the campaigners understood that. This is not, however, to say that they did not bother to improve public awareness of legitimate rights that they were entitled to, for they believed that when people were informed they would act differently.

Group Green Hanoi, with the presence of several independent and experienced street activists designed a detailed but easy to understand handbook entitled "How to work with security forces and universities" for young participants in the TM. The guidance document provides basic and useful information to improve the awareness and capacities of the young people on how to behave and respond when being questioned by security officers or their universities. The document is also littered with suggested tactics, essential legal knowledge, and simulation scenarios which the youth might encounter. This document was very popular among the tree campaigners.

Throughout the course of the TM, there was a phenomenon that was for the first time observed in civil society activism in Vietnam, i.e. the below-the-radar synergy between the registered NGO staff and independent activists, some of whom were labelled as dissidents. This was not a formal partnership between NGOs and activists but a case of people with similar personal interests coming together. An experienced independent activist explained it in this way:

> "It is difficult to get cooperation between the NGOs and independent activists, it is because trust matters. Activists are often given labels that seem to frighten the general public, such as hostile or reactionary forces. Whereas the registered NGOs, constrained by a legalistic framework and webs of bureaucratic practices, have to position themselves away from confrontational methods. Given their conditions and relations with the government and donors, being too close to the independent activists who are critical of the regime could put them at risk. It is also uneasy for them to establish a collaborative relationship with 'reactionary forces' since security agents will not leave them in peace." (Interview, 10th June 2015, Hanoi cited in Vu, 2017, p.1203)

However, despite these potential tensions, for the first time the registered NGOs and independent activists emerged with a sort of common voice over a common issue. The below-the-radar coalition between them was subtle but significant. What actually happened between the two groups? Why did the independent activists (the leading actors in the Green Hanoi Group), who were experienced street activists, not organise public protest from the start? Why was the first street demonstration (i.e. Tree Hugs Picnic) orchestrated by Group 6700 People (NGO-based) and not by independent activists? It was observed that when public rage reached a peak, the possibility of public protest was greater. However, if it had been driven by independent activists, efforts to set up dialogue with the government would have failed, and even worse the TM might have encountered a state crackdown from the start. The state never holds dialogue with independent activists, no matter their issue of cause for concern. Aware of this, Group 6700 People, through an intermediary who was an independent writer, sent an important message to the independent activists' group in an attempt to explain the situation and seek their endorsement, and convince them not to take to the streets too soon, because they were trying to establish a relation with the city government. The independent activists endorsed the suggestion, and as a result, they did not push for public protest.

The independent activists understand that any social campaign or movement needs broad participation. In relation to the Tree Hugs Picnic, some prominent independent activists turned up at the rally, but played a supportive rather than leading role. In essence, the two groups established a mutual respect and understanding of their own strategies, methods and positions. Throughout the movement, whenever possible, they shared information to find opportunities for collaboration. The mutual respect and surreptitious symbiosis, albeit subtle, between the groups, is an unprecedented phenomenon and signals a progressive sign for future citizen-led activism in Vietnam (Vu, 2017).

If Group Green Hanoi (independent activists-based) showed their support to Group 6700 People (i.e. NGO-based) by staying in the background at the beginning, the latter later reciprocated. A seminar (i.e. formal channel), entitled "From the Project 6,700 trees to Hanoi planning issues" co-organised by two local NGOs on 23 March 2015, was open to everyone, including independent activists. Attended by popular experts, lawyers, and scientists, the seminar aimed to muster scientific opinions and convey them to the public and media. The event suffered an unexpected power cut

right at the beginning. Whilst there was no explanation by the venue provider about the power outage, the participants understood that it was a case of sabotage rather than an accident. In the end, the seminar took place without power. Most participants raised a concern that the project violated the 2012 Law on the capital city and the government's Decree 64/2010/ND-CP on the management of urban trees, and demanded an intermediate investigation with the involvement of the Central Government Inspectorate. Explaining the significance of this seminar, an experienced pro-democracy activist of Group Green Hanoi indicated:

> "This was an important event since it was also open to reactionary forces like us. It provided us with plenty of valued information (e.g. the original proposal, the legal basis of this project, the government decisions and decrees and much other legal evidence of the law violation by authorities regarding this project). This information was useful for the legal struggles of our group in the subsequent stages." (Interview, 27 May 2015, Hanoi)

In addition, Group 6,700 People also raised their voice in a timely manner to show their solidarity with Group Green Hanoi when a human rights activist, also a prominent member of the latter, was allegedly assaulted by the plain-clothes security officers. The image of his face covered with blood (see Figure 16 above) went viral on social media sites exacerbating public indignation and haunting those with conscious minds. A nonviolent action of civil disobedience was undertaken, i.e. hundreds of Vietnamese facebookers inside and outside of the country changed their avatars to his bloody face to show their resentment of the authorities and their solidarity with the activist. At that time, the government's public opinion shapers, a component of the regime propaganda brigade, tried to provoke Group 6,700 People into suspecting the Group Green Hanoi of being driven by reactionary actors and hence, getting them to stay away from it. In response to this, the former showed its support to the independent activist group on its Facebook page by exposing the instrument effectively used by the pro-communist agenda to isolate the independent activists from the general populace (Vu, 2017). The following excerpt explains it well:

> "One of the most effective political strategies of the state apparatus is to arbitrarily label anyone who wants to be critical of the party state as a 'reactionary force'. The word 'reactionary' once assigned indiscriminately implies a myriad of wickedness and depravity, such as conspiracies against

the state, organised deception and terrorism, with the support from the exile-based organisations such as Viet Tan (Vietnam Reform) Party or other powerful diaspora forces. Their propaganda is so effective that now, anyone who opens their mouth to mention words, such as democracy or human rights, will be labelled reactionary by many of the civilian population and consequently, be isolated from their communities. [….] And, especially, I realise how effective the propaganda machinery is, when a law-abiding citizen who was assaulted by five thugs in the street in the capital city was easily ignored by ordinary people, because they thought 'this guy is a kind of reactionary' or they quickly suspected his bloody face fake despite the fact that his injuries were proven with medical evidence. It is unbelievable. If, centuries ago, someone could easily be put onto the pyre for being labeled a 'counter-God', nowadays in the 21st century right in the middle of the so-called capital for peace, Hanoi, they could attack someone to death in the street for 'he is reactionary'. If so, honestly human beings have not made significant progress in evolution, I reckon".

(Excerpt from Fanpage of group 6700 People, 12th May 2015
https://www.facebook.com/pg/manfortree/notes/?ref=page_internal)

The TM started out as an environmental campaign but evolved into a political campaign that provoked a government response. Each group participating in the TM had specific roles to play, none of which should be downplayed. The ebb and flow of each group was contingent on institutional characteristics. Specifically, Group 6700 People characterised by mainly registered NGO participation, was more embedded in the state via a web of legalistic requirements and bureaucratic practices. So, they took advantage of their connections with the government but had also to be careful because of the same connections. The room for manoeuvre that the connections facilitated could so easily be closed down at very short notice. After the Tree Hugs Picnic, it did not stage street protests, but limited its activism to examining the status of trees in the main streets and called on all Hanoians to become tree watchers. Group 6700 Trees remained in the spotlight for a short period of time and then retreated, because the founding members had never been social activists and could not cope with public security intimidation. Group Green Hanoi, which was characterised by independent activists' autonomy and more critical engagement with the party state, took over the arena and brought the TM to a higher level of contention by overtly questioning the government's accountability and asking for the sanctioning of officials who had committed wrongdoing. It continued to orchestrate more public protests for almost two months and only when it was directly and heavily repressed, did it terminate its

street activism. Being at a distance from the state meant Group Green Hanoi could support activism with higher state antagonism – an antagonism NGOs could not support. This however meant its legitimacy was always under threat.

2.5. State response to the TM

The outcry of Hanoians caused the city government to reverse the 6700 trees project. Yet, the halt to the tree cutting was seen as a cosmetic tactic that the city leaders put in place to calm public rage. As a strategy exercised frequently by the authoritarian state in responding to continued public opposition, officials either delayed disclosing information as long as possible or issued superficial, 'sham' directives to pacify the public such as sanctioning some low-ranking officers or asking the City Inspectorate to carry out investigations. People were cynical because they knew the Hanoi Inspectorate, a subordinate agency, would not have enough authority to denounce the wrongdoings of its superior, top leaders. One of the core official responses during the protest was that the policy of replacing the trees was appropriate and correct, and that that tardiness of low level officials to actually implement the replacement had created uncertainty and misunderstanding among the public. They promised to conduct a thorough self-review and to take appropriate measures to address the shortcomings (Đời sống và Pháp luật, 2015).

The tree felling project of the Hanoi authorities also signalled an upsetting practice of profiteering by local party officials, in other words, state corruption (The Economist, 2015). It illustrated the extent of law violation or fence-breaking carried out by local officials who did not follow directives from above. This project was initiated in Hanoi (i.e. at provincial level) and the city government violated the national Law on the Capital City. A well-articulated argument was that the Hanoi Department of Construction and the city top leaders made backdoor deals to seek to 'earn something' amid the tightened state budget. Appealing slogans like "People know, people do, people discuss, people monitor" advocated by the ruling Communists, are visible everywhere from government offices to public, but the tree felling of Hanoi government was an example of this principle being ignored.

In this section I directly address how the government responded to the TM, which included using coercion as direct state intervention, setting the agenda to prevent public criticism and using 'labelling' as a non-coercive instrument of the hegemonic state. The government responses strongly resonated with Lukes's (1974) three dimensions of power.

2.5.1. Using coercive power

The first dimension of power, according to Lukes, implies that people change how they behave as a result of being exposed to direct coercive power. It is notable that all collective actions by the leading movement groups were lawful (e.g. petition signing, meetings with state officials, or peaceful demonstrations). Yet, in one party-ruled Vietnam, this does mean that the peaceful campaigners are safe from state coercion.

The tree felling plan was put on hold and a few officials were named and shamed for their wrongdoing, but that small victory came at a cost to many campaigners. Many young people put their future at risk by participating in the campaign to save the old trees of Hanoi. The TM yielded new faces and new energy for civil society activism in Vietnam. However in the process the green campaigners were harassed, humiliated, intimidated and at worst heavily assaulted in the streets. Moreover, not only were their own personal lives jeopardised, their families were also threatened. An independent activist, and one of leading members of Group Green Hanoi, claimed:

> "It seems to me that almost everyone who dares to stand out and participate in the tree saving campaign is targeted in one way or another by a sophisticated and well trained system of coercion". (Interview, 20th May 2015, Hanoi)

In response to the nonviolent civil resistance of Hanoians, the city authorities appropriated a variety of coercive means such as harassment, humiliation, intimidations, assault, detainment, among others, in order to suppress the green campaigners.

Many Facebook and email accounts of the campaigners were hacked, their internet usage was tracked, and their mobile phones were tapped. The freedom of TM

members to move around was also violated. A new but an active campaigner of the Group Green Hanoi recalled:

> "The plain-clothes police and regime thugs were also mobilised by turning up in front of my house in a group of seven to ten and aggressively blocking me from joining the rally. They stayed there for hours and only left when they knew for sure that the demonstration was over." (Interview, 22 May 2015, Hanoi)

Thus, in order to be able to join the rally, the prominent independent activists had to play a game of 'hide and seek', sneaking out of their houses the night before or even days in advance to avoid police detection. Another tactic public security used was to lock people in their houses or block their vehicles so as to confine them to their homes.

For new campaigners, often students, intimidation was channelled through universities and families. A new activist taking part in the green campaign for the first time revealed how she was harassed and intimidated:

> "The security officers went to talk to my lecturers and the administrative staff at my university. They terrified them by telling them that I was meeting with terrorists. My university asked me to sign a pledge that I would not become involved in any further activities concerning the trees protests. But I refused to do so telling them I hadn't done anything wrong." (Interview, 23 May 2015, 2015)

An experienced activist who had been detained and physically abused revealed that:

> "Apart from putting pressure on families and universities, they also put pressure on the employers, business and landowners of the campaigners, in an attempt to cut off their livelihoods source and impoverish them. Security officers will quickly find out where you work and go talk to your employers. The same tactic is repeatedly used. They will tell the employer this staff is waging some activities to ruin the socialist state, and they pressure the employer into dismissing you." (Interview, 13 May 2015, Hanoi)

Last but not least, the campaigners were allegedly assaulted and the final demonstration on 26 April 2015 was heavily repressed with several participants suffering physical violence and detention. Two peaceful campaigners of Group

Green Hanoi, a group administrator and a rights activist, were attacked by 'regime thugs' in the street, which raised the issue of the state's abuse of violence.

2.5.2. Setting the agenda to dictate the situation

Lukes's second dimension of power indicates that people have power if they can set the agenda by controlling what is discussed, said, or done. In this way they effectively control a situation without the need for coercion.

With their large propaganda brigade, the authorities made the general population believe that the participants in the TM demonstrations were receiving money from overseas and were being agitated by evil forces to cause public disorder and destroy public safety. Many campaigners had to encounter suspicious attitudes from their neighbours and friends. A young campaigner recalled what he had experienced in his interview:

> "When I returned home from the rally on that Sunday morning, a couple of neighbours sitting outside asked me how much money I was paid for taking part in the protests. It was humiliating, but… […] all I can say is a large part of the populace still believe in almost everything the government infiltrates into their minds. This can be considered a success of the propaganda machinery." (Interview, 19 May 2015 Hanoi)

Notably the government mobilised an army of public opinion shapers (rumour-mongers) who are paid by the state to shape public opinion online. It is estimated that there are thousands of rumour-mongers nationwide and 900 in Hanoi alone (Vietnam Right Now, 2015). These people also set up Facebook pages or blogs and browse the blogosphere and social media, rapidly producing postings to advocate the government's agenda and to oppose any critic. Another task they have to accomplish is to trace pro-active bloggers, facebookers and other influential activists to shape public opinions against these people by using crude language to suppress dissent (Pham Doan Trang, 2014). In the TM, the troop of rumour-mongers was largely mobilised to attack the campaigners online by humiliating them.

The city government also tried to silence scientists and academics who wanted to use their environmental expertise to provide the public with scientific evidence. For example, local scientists wanted to point out that the new saplings the authorities

were using to replace the healthy old trees were totally inappropriate to be planted in the inner streets and their price was in fact much lower than that stated in the project document. When they realised that all the trees replanted in Nguyen Chi Thanh Street were in fact unvalued in terms of shade and timber, a lecturer from the Forestry University wanted to disseminate this information. However, he was censured by his employer for revealing it to the media without the university's consent. After this incident, the Forestry University issued a formal notice to all of its staff and students warning them not to speak or to disclose information concerning the tree project without the university's permission. The state media was also compelled to terminate all writings regarding the 6700 trees project. The youth and students were pressured by their universities not to become involved in street protests.

In every neighbourhood across the capital city, the propagation brigades led by the mass organisations' leaders such as the Fatherland Front, Women's Union, Veterans' Union, and so forth, were mobilised to visit local households to spread the state agenda that "[…] The evil forces are agitating ordinary people to participate in the illegal demonstrations to cause public disorder and insecurity in the city. […] In realising the directive of the Hanoi Party Committee's Propaganda Department on securing social safety, all the local households are advised to be highly vigilant to avoid being agitated by evil forces to participate in illegal public demonstrations causing political instability and social insecurity, which adversely affect the image of our capital city […]" (Excerpted from the notice of a neighbourhood unit party committee)

2.5.3. Manipulating through labelling

During the course of the TM, the label 'reactionary forces' was strategically utilised by the hegemonic state to ascribe to the leading campaigners (e.g. independent activists and dissidents), so as to isolate them from the general population. With no need to resort to coercive measures, through this 'labelling' technique the government managed to manipulate people's consciousness. This resonates with the radical view of power by Lukes (1974), whereby he indicates that the ruling class transforms the ruled class in such a way that the latter behaves as the former wishes by non-coercive forms, such as creating a permeating system of cognitions,

beliefs, or false consciousness. The word 'reactionary' once translated into Vietnamese *(phản động),* entails innumerable wickednesses, dubious conspiracies, fears and threats. Given that a large part of the population still chooses to be immune from politics because of fear, the label 'reactionary forces' took effect.

As Wood (1985) explains, de-linking and isolation is an inherent feature of labelling. The strategic state imposition of this label successfully scared ordinary people and fenced them off from linkages with independent activists and dissidents or anyone seeking to criticise the state. The whole propaganda machinery was mobilised at all levels including universities, residential clusters, districts-, ward level people's committees, and of course families. The aim was to simply manipulate people to stay away from 'reactionary forces'.

The Party Secretary of Hanoi, Pham Quang Nghi, once stated clearly that "In terms of the mainstream media, the government can control it. Yet, there are numerous websites that the government finds hard to control. They are trying to take advantage of the trees issue to agitate the populace. It is imperative that people be vigilant of these hostile and reactionary forces, who are trying to call for public protests in the guise of trees saving, but are in fact, against the regime and the socialist state at all levels" (Hà Nội Mới, 2015). To reinforce the city leader's message, a state newspaper added that "Clearly, Group Green Hanoi, which is orchestrating public protests, is de facto created by an exile reactionary group. Therefore it is absurd to think that they are merely spontaneous, innocent tree lovers. It is also unlikely to believe that there is no reactionary force standing behind to secretly manage this group without any wicked conspiracy." (Tuần Báo Văn Nghệ TPHCM, 2015).

However, labelling, a non-coercive means of power by the state officialdom might have its effects on the general population, but how independent activists respond to it varies from person to person. Being labelled 'reactionary force' seems not to be scary. Independent activists call themselves 'reactionary forces of the CPV', in other words, progressives. The following point raised by an independent activist highlights this:

> "The people in the 'opposition' camp (i.e. independent activists and dissidents) don't care much about how they are or should be labelled. Democratic or human rights activists *(nhà hoạt động dân chủ/nhân quyền)* or dissidents *(người bất đồng chính kiến, người hoạt động đối lập)* does not make much sense to us. In Vietnam, these people are not formally

recognised professionals who have official degrees. We are simply vocal and critical of the government's wrongdoings and policies, then we are called by different labels. What matters more to us is how to exercise activism effectively to make the public aware of their rights and demand that these rights be exercised in real life." (Interview, 25 June 2015, Hanoi).

3. Conclusion

At first glance, the citizen-led TM came across as a localised issue: people liked the trees and were upset because the government decided to cut them down with no public consultation. Yet the TM, as I have argued, is far more political than meets the eye. What started out as a localised campaign evolved into a movement through which civilians made demands for a government that is accountable, deliberative and respectful of its citizens. The aim of concerted efforts of different informal civilian networks in the TM was to gradually create a habit of exercising democratic culture through advocacy and action as opposed to silence and passiveness. In a politically restricted environment where public disrespect by the authorities is prevalent and where fundamental human rights are routinely violated, TM activism signals that when people leave fear behind and stand up to the government, change is possible. That change might be just a small victory on the way, but over the long run with sustained efforts substantive change can emerge. As Goldfarb proclaimed "political change doesn't always begin with a bang; it often starts with just a whisper" (Goldfarb, 2007 cited in Vu, 2017, p.1205).

The chapter has argued from the beginning that grassroots citizen-led activism, an emerging form of civic engagement, is likely to play a critical role in (re)shaping state-society relations in Vietnam. Throughout the analysis, I have attempted to illustrate this argument. I have portrayed the detailed processes in which Hanoi's citizens orchestrated rightful civic actions to oppose the unaccountable state's decision to cut down thousands of healthy old trees. The TM accentuates the 'contested' nature that has been long obscured by the rhetoric that civil society in authoritarian regimes like Vietnam is either co-opted or suppressed.

I have used the TM as a case study of citizen-led form of activism under Vietnam's one-party rule. Whilst it involved members from local NGOs, it was not led by them

or any other formally organised structure of civil society. NGOs' members participated in the TM in a personal capacity, not as representatives of their organisations. The TM was de facto constituted by different informal civilian groups, which were unregistered, unregulated and drew forth broad-based participation cutting across societal spectrums. These grassroots networks were, by nature, loosely-structured groupings of like-minded civilians who came together to prevent ecological destruction and then to encroach on political issues, such as government accountability and democratic participation. They were loosely-structured because their degree of commitment was issue-based and sporadic, which resonates well with grassroots activism elsewhere in other authoritarian regimes (Cavatorta, 2013). Nevertheless, it is notable that among the three groups discussed in this analysis, Group Green Hanoi (i.e. independent activist-based) is the only one which has continued to stick together to maintain its green activism. It has now enrolled new young activists who are environmentalist-oriented, critical of ecological crises caused by unselective economic decisions involving collusion between special interest groups and political elites. Many experienced and young independent activists now remain in this group and mobilise together around ecological issues. When the political opportunity occurs, they also engage in confrontational action over other issues such as the CPV's weak stance towards China's aggression in the disputed areas, and other socio-political issues. The group continues to exist with no demand to seek registration or co-optation into the state, which has been considered a challenge to the authorities for the past two years.

In the light of the analytical framework set out in Chapter 2, legitimacy and (in)formality were the themes that occupied more analytical space in this chapter, whereby I discussed how the TM groups generated legitimacy for their actions as well as how they resorted to (in)formal channels to orchestrate their activism. It can be seen that formality and informality were well articulated by the TM groups. These groups, associated more with either registered NGOs or independent activists, all had to resort to the interplay of formal and informal activism in order to achieve collective goals. These themes will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 6, where I will engage directly in comparative analysis of different forms of activism guided by my analytical framework. The advancement and demobilisation of each group was reliant on how it was institutionally characterised. Greater embeddedness in the state helped Group 6700 People (NGO-based) become path-breaking and carve out some guarded room to manoeuvre in critical actions. However, it was also this embeddedness that caused it to withdraw from some of

its activism. Not being regulated with the government enabled the Group Green Hanoi to support mobilisation with higher levels of antagonism towards this state. This however met with state resistance.

The chapter has explored the rise to prominence of the citizen-led TM in Hanoi. This movement highlights five salient insights regarding citizen-led mobilisation that have been understudied in the existing literature on Vietnamese civil society.

First, the evidence suggests that civil society groups, either embedded groups (NGOs) or independent groups (independent activists, dissidents), have to couch their activities within the state agenda and discourse (constitution, state law, state-propagandised values, etc.) to generate legitimacy for their collective actions. Coupled with the state responses that I depicted above, this indicates that the authoritarian state in Vietnam remains dominant and the increasing civil society vibrancy is not indicative of declining state power. The CPV continues to maintain its stance as the vanguard of popular struggles and therefore, will not accept or welcome civic attempts to represent popular aspirations. In this ideology, any social mobilisation outside its officially approved channels even in the most mundane matters is still considered a threat to its monopoly of power and the status quo. The rise to pre-eminence of the TM is also reflexive of the extent to which the existing formal channels (e.g. visiting offices for petitioners established in government agencies) for citizen interaction with the state have failed.

Second, environmental activism has opened up a new arena of contestation for civil society activism in Vietnam. Amid unpredicted and uncertain state intolerance, political criticism is repeatedly treated as a sensitive or 'forbidden' terrain under a lattice of deterring tactics employed by the state. Nonetheless trees, or environmental issues, apolitical from the façade, have opened up a new avenue for civilians in authoritarian Vietnam to exercise contestation, advocating their rights and demanding a more accountable government.

Third, The TM was a broad- based coalition bringing together formally organised groups, such as NGOs with unorganised independent activist groups. This type of coalition is new in Vietnam and has triggered a more tolerant state response, as well as created opportunities for further civic actions. This was the first time where the registered (NGOs) and unregistered group (independent activists) reached a common voice about a single issue and importantly, they established some sort of a mutual arrangement or negotiation in sustaining activism. The surreptitious symbiosis between them was subtle; however, it was still significant in that it

helped the movement circumvent early state intervention. As a result, the prolonged period of the movement created a good opportunity for enhanced contentious actions to challenge the state authority (Vu, 2017).

Fourth, the TM has signalled to the political elites how people power can respond to arbitrary state decisions that directly affect their everyday lives. Specifically, it has informed the government how civilians can react and organise rightful civic actions to oppose unpopular state decisions and policies. In the era of digital technology, the single party-ruled state can control and silence the state-run media, but fails to do so with social media where citizen journalism is blooming with open criticism and dissent towards the government. Social media was used effectively by the TM groups to orchestrate collective actions and especially, to empower people and raise their awareness of their citizenship rights. Castells (2012) once argued that political change, in order to be in place, needs to come with change in the minds of the people. Castel's argument rings true well with most of the respondent accounts from both the NGOs' members and independent activists towards the TM. The mobilising groups incorporated constitutional rights in their mobilising structures, on the one hand, to generate legitimacy for their activism and to improve public awareness of their citizenship rights, on the other (Vu, 2017).

In the view of many activists from local NGOs, creating a paradigm shift was beyond the ability of TM and acknowledging the movement as a glorious victory of civic resistance was misleading. They recognise the TM as a test for civil society capacity to stand up to the state, and thus, an incubator for more organised citizen-led activism. Meanwhile for the independent activists, the grassroots TM was a sign of people power that activated citizens to become aware of their agency in order to demand government accountability. This phenomenon is still seen rare under the authoritarian constraint in Vietnam.

Fifth, state response to the TM is vividly expressive of how an authoritarian state responds to civil society activism in order to maintain its monopoly over power. How it responded resonates strongly with the strategies exercised by other authoritarian states elsewhere, where legitimation and repression are concurrently exercised. Legitimation, one of the pillars of stability in autocratic regimes, according to Gerschewski (2013), is aimed at guaranteeing active consent, compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration within the population. This strategy is resonant with Lukes's (1974) second and third dimensions of power whereas repression rings well with his first dimension. In the

TM, the authorities exercised their authoritarian legitimation strategy by apparently responding to citizens when they temporarily stopped felling the trees. However when its political hegemony was challenged, it resorted to coercive measures.

Chapter 5: NGO-led activism

Between cooperation and contestation

1. Introduction

The 1986 reform transformed Vietnam economically and socially and led *inter alia* to the emergence of new societal actors, including NGOs and other forms of civil society. Since then, these forms of civil society have been expanding and taking on new roles aimed at, for example, pro-poor policy, institutional reform, social mobilisation, or associational pluralism.

Globally, the fascination with NGOs has yielded a large literature, much of which has focused on their socio-economic functions and the normative interpretation of NGOs' role in democratisation. Since the early 1980s, NGOs have been conceived of as an important development actor with a number of comparative advantages that enable them to address development issues effectively and to build local capacities at different levels (Devine, 2006; Heyzer *et al*. 1995; Mercer, 2002). Articulating work by Fisher (1998), Fowler (1993) and Hulme and Edwards (1997), Devine (2006) identified the following comparative advantages: (a) efficiently providing welfare services to the poor; and (b) developing a political process grounded in principles of participation, empowerment and accountability. For the past decade, there has been, however, emerging scholarship on the political salience of NGOs in the global south (e.g. Devine, 2006; Walton, 2013, Ho, 2007; Gleiss, 2014; Wischermann, 2013; Wischerman *et al*., 2016; Angley, 2010). These accounts offer a more contextualised and nuanced understanding of the role of NGOs in the politics of development.

The proliferation of local NGOs in the late 1990s in Vietnam prompted academics and practitioners to study how this new societal actor exists and operates in the one-party state. The existing studies predominantly focus on either the typology of organisations or their role in socio-economic development (Sinh, 2003; Nghiem and Laurenceson, 2006; Vinh, 2006; Taylor *et al*., 2012). The political significance of VNGOs remains a much under-researched area. Unlike their counterparts elsewhere

in global south, such as in Bangladesh, where NGOs have a high policy profile and are active in community mobilisation (Devine, 2006), VNGOs, albeit expansive in number and scale, have been grappling to work from within and enlarge a narrow margin shaped by the CPV. In Vietnam there is very little scholarship on how far VNGOs can play a role in social mobilisation to bring better policy outcomes for the local poor, as well as towards restructuring state-society relations.

The chapter will fill this gap by providing an in-depth empirical account of the processes in which a local NGO orchestrates community mobilisation to improve the policy delivery response to the poor, and how its mobilisation is reflexive of an embedded form of civil society activism. Specifically, I will examine the detailed dynamics of the processes through which the NGO built loyalty among its clients, as well as wider local communities; established strategic coalitions with varied actors, both locally and beyond; and opened up structural links to claim land back for the local poor ethnic minorities. This detailed account will be attentive to the historical and local context within which the NGO emerged and has been operating.

The Centre for Community Empowerment and Rural Development (CCERD), the second in-depth case study of my research, is indicative of a form of activism led by a local NGO. Despite being embedded in the state via a web of legalistic requirements and bureaucratic practices, it managed to mobilise local poor and other concerned actors to claim 3,700 hectares of forest land from the state forest company (SFC) to return to the commune government for later redistribution among the local landless. With this case study, I argue that NGO-led activism, by taking advantage of its embedded connections to the state, working within and through bureaucratic structures, manipulating the available structural links, as well as strategising the interplay of formality and informality of activism, carves out valuable room for itself to manoeuvre.

While the Trees Movement analysed earlier has portrayed a transient, more antagonistic form of activism, where discrete informal civilian groups organised and stood up to the state and challenged the status quo, the NGO-led activism in this chapter will illustrate a more sustainable, collaborative, and embedded form. The two contrasting forms of activism characterised by different organisational structures, degrees of autonomy and positions of legitimacy, illuminate distinctive

slants of civil society activism and reflect different episodes of contentious politics in Vietnam ranging from dialogue to advocacy through to contention.

The chapter is structured as follows. The first part will shed light on the setting of the case study NGO and explain, historically, how and why it emerged. The second part contains discussion on the local context of mobilisation within which CCERD is embedded. The chapter closes by exploring, in depth, the mobilisation processes orchestrated by the NGO and illustrating how this form may actually be an effective form of social action in the politically restrictive setting of Vietnam. Its collective action, consequently, put the local power structure in the position where the latter was compelled to make the decision to return land to the landless farmers.

2. The setting and emergence of the NGO case study: CCERD

In the aftermath of *doi moi,* the advent of multiple donors and international NGOs, coupled with the needed changes in regulations and legislations to respond to the newly adapted market-based economy as well as the increasing challenges in socio-economic development, all in all, contributed to the emergence and proliferation of Vietnam NGOs from the mid-1990s onwards. There are increasing signs that the space for civil society actions is slowly opening up in Vietnam. However, the paradox where the CPV selectively embraces capitalism and persistently maintains its commitments to the socialist ideology generates a wide array of tensions, which complicates state-society relations. It continues to preserve its grips on the associationalism and arbitrarily takes coercive measures. This also places CSOs including VNGOs in everyday struggle in which they are required to perform a "complex dance between domestic and international ideas of development and civil society" (Hannah, 2007, p.124). As demonstrated by one of my respondents, an NGO leader:

> "You know … it (i.e. the institutional preconditions for civil society) is like twilight…between daylight and darkness… it is the state of obscurity and ambiguity. That is the context in which VNGOs are working. In this context we have to probe… then do… probing… then doing… We try this way, if it

doesn't work, we will try another way, and we don't give up. Things are like that." (Interview, Hanoi, 15 April 2015)

The root cause of state ambivalence towards the development of civil society in general and VNGOs in particular can be traced to its unwavering commitments to the Marxist-Leninist ideology. Advocating this ideology, the CPV continues to categorise society into social classes. Through its large-scale propaganda machinery, the state disseminates the message that its core mandate is to protect the proletariat's interests by insisting that this class can only obtain revolutionary awareness when it is under the sustained leadership of the vanguard communist party. Hence, for the proletariat's own sake, the party has to perpetuate its absolute leadership in order to drive the revolution to success and uphold the socialist path (Thayer, 1992; Hannah, 2007). Before 1986, the CPV denied any form of actor outside the state's auspices, whilst nowadays it downplays any such institutions, for their involvement could potentially derail the proletariat from their noble revolutionary course and create an avenue for counter-revolutionary forces to emerge and ruin the national revolution.

Salient evidence of state ambivalence to the NGO sector can be observed in its continuing delay in putting in place an enabling legal framework for civic associations. The Law on Association has yet to be approved despite having been discussed for over twenty years. As a consequence, VNGOs have to grapple within a matrix of intertwined legalistic requirements and bureaucratic practices for registration and operation (see Chapter 1). In essence, registration is utilised as a powerful tool by the ruling communists to rein in these organisations.

The institutional preconditions for local NGOs to exist and thrive are still lacking. However, a well-known Vietnamese proverb helps understand the dynamics of VNGOs 'Live in a gourd, you grow round. Live in a tube, you grow long' *(Ở bầu thì tròn, ở ống thì dài).* In practice, each VNGO acquires for itself needed institutional experiences to deal with the existing structural obstacles and manages to find its own way through the registration process. They acquire their legal status in different forms including as research centres, scientific and technological organisations, foundations, funds, or sub-associations of larger associations. Apparently, the absence of an enabling legal framework does not impede VNGOs from emerging, so long as they do not use the NGO label and work within the state

discourse. So VNGOs take various shapes (gourd or tube) depending on how they negotiate their registration and identity.

Emerging as early as in 2003, which makes it one of the earliest NGOs in Quang Binh, a poor province along the north-central coast of Vietnam, the rural-based Centre for Community Empowerment and Rural Development (CCERD) was established as a continuation of a large, long-standing Dutch INGO-funded poverty reduction project in the locality. It carried on the work after the INGO project was completed. This rural based formation stands in quite stark contrast with the NGO trend of that time, which tended to be urban-based and managed by retired government officials with close links to the state apparatus (Gray, 1999).

CCERD is reflexive of a VNGO that is based on the INGO model. Its working areas encompass agriculture-forestry development, rural infrastructure development, micro finance, health care and education, environmental protection and natural resource management, as well as cultural and indigenous knowledge preservation. It is committed to combatting local poverty and empowering the poorest and most marginalised groups, especially ethnic minority women, in Quang Ninh, a rural district of Quang Binh province. It has an annual budget of approximately EURO 100,000 derived from various donors including the Netherlands, Sweden, Australia, Oxfam, Ford USA). Its first initial fund was EURO 20,000 provided by the Netherlands. It has expanded its support base over the years and has about 10 core staff. It is now considered a medium sized VNGO.

Born and raised in Quang Binh, the director, Mr. Linh Phan, established CCERD with a conviction that positive changes would happen in his hometown. He is a vibrant and engaging man in his forties. Mr. Linh and I had become friends and hence, our discussions were professional and mannerly, but also quiet and open at the same time. He used to work as a senior staff member at the Dutch INGO project and wanted to prolong the project in order to bring change to the local communities.

The organisation distances itself from a radical or confrontational ideology and advocates the idea of incremental and sustainable change. Adversity, Mr Linh believes, causes more harm than good in this political context. Partnering or

nurturing good relationships with state institutions, he explains, in fact is the key to securing organisational viability and a needed level of autonomy to access target groups, to seek donor funding and to implement activities. In his own words:

> "We never put ourselves in confrontation with the state. This is not what we would like to do or to advocate. The state has immense power to constrain us. They can block us from all pathways to reach our target populations, prevent us from raising funds or organising our activities. State constraints could however be worked out, by which I mean that they can be loosened or tightened based on the quality of the connection or relationship we establish with them. If we want to get things done, scale up our impacts, we must work through state institutions. For example, several of our sustainable livelihoods models were copied and promoted by the local government. This is a good effect, isn't it?" (Interview, 27th December 2015, Quang Binh)

Mr Linh's revelation gives much insight into the state-NGOs relationship in Vietnam at present. Working through competing state power structures and channels is the key strategy exercised well by VNGOs in order to 'get things done'. I was told by another NGO interviewee that "if they (the authorities) want us to report, we report; if they want us to approach three, four, five ministries to procure whole permission to organise certain activities, we do so; if they want X, Y, Z, we give them X, Y, Z. We learn and try to work around them. After all these, we can be free to do what we want". Mr Linh, as well as other NGOs signalled something important about the nature of the state in Vietnam, i.e. it is an aggregation of competing actors and institutions. The state may be authoritarian but it is certainly not monolithic.

Mr Linh pictures himself as a professional and facilitator who engages with all parties through a collaborative professionalised approach. He has an entrenched belief that despite encountering a wall of state restrictions, NGOs are destined for an enabling position, as opposed to the state, to reach the poorest of the poor. He tried to visualise what he meant by relating it to an image of a large ship (i.e. the state with governing power) juxtaposed with small boats (i.e. CSOs with community power). The former cannot travel through small streams and reach difficult places but smaller boats can.

CCERD registered directly with the district-level[6] people's committee (i.e. district government) in the form of a fund, but this government body played a minimal role in its organisational development and decision-making. It started its operation quite early, as opposed to its counterparts elsewhere and its emergence occurred when the notion of an organisation outside the state auspice was something that the local governments found uneasy to understand and accept, especially local governments in rural area. Hence, it is not too difficult to understand why the local authorities remained suspicious about its presence. Registering with the local government to attain a legal standing, the organisation has had to confine itself to and comply with the terms and conditions stated in the registration. Unlike many of its counterparts which can wait years to secure registration, CCERD waited only a few months. In part it secured registration quickly because it was the continuation of the INGO development project that had been implemented in the district for several years. In addition, Mr Linh used to work for this project and so he had been able to set up some level of mutual understanding with local communities and the local authorities.

The common trend for VNGOs' engagement during 1990s and early 2000s was welfare service provision (see Chapter 1), and CCERD followed that pattern. The organisational activities were funded by various donors, including ICCO, GIZ, SEF, GGF, along with Oxfam. Its main office is located in the township of the district that has approximately 90,000 inhabitants. It is a rather simple one-storey workplace with three rooms, one of which is reserved for the director and also, the meeting room of the organisation, while the other two are for the staff members. It also has a working station in a far remote commune, one of its project sites. It has roughly ten core staff all holding bachelor degrees in areas such as the Environment, Forestry, Social Work, Economics, and Community Development. The director has a masters' degree in Economics, which indicates that the staff are all professional and well educated. The NGO allowed me to base myself at its office, thus I could spend time in the workspace to observe and engage in activities. I was able to observe its operational dynamics as well as interact with its clients. Working with them gave me the impression that these people were compassionate, professional, and development-oriented.

---

[6] District level government is sub-provincial level government. Vietnam generally has four administrative levels: central, provincial, district and commune.

Its main project sites are the two mountainous borderland communes of the district, which is home to the ethnic minority group called Bru-Van Kieu and forest land conflicts between local communities and the state forestry company prevail. After long-standing development engagement efforts with grassroots communities and the local government, CCERD decided to integrate land issues into its activities. The director explained as follows:

> "Lack of or no access to arable land makes poor people unable to escape from poverty, and combatting poverty without addressing its root cause (i.e. land entitlement) seems to be barking up the wrong tree. The ethnic minority Bru-Van Kieu is in severe shortage of land and they have long been trapped in chronic poverty. Hence, it is pertinent to focus our intervention on this group. Our prime goal is to help them understand their rights to land and then help them acquire land use certificates." (Interview, 10th February 2015, Quang Binh)

Map 2. Quang Binh province, Vietnam

3. Context of mobilisation

3.1. Land conflicts in Vietnam in brief

> "We, farmers, used to be considered the vanguard force in the cause of national liberation and defence. We were enthusiastic to dedicate ourselves and give up our land for the national struggles. But now they are trying to impoverish us by confiscating our land. We are falling into destitution. […] Hopeless, powerless, and betrayed, if you ask me how I feel. Famers' interests are betrayed in peace time."
>
> *(Interview with a landless petitioner/victim of injustice on March 29th, 2015 in Hanoi)*

"A piece of land is worth a piece of gold" *(Tấc đất tấc vàng),* the Vietnamese proverb captures the ultimate importance of land in the Vietnamese people's tradition. Since the opening of the economy in 1986, land has embodied a notion of wealth and aggressively drives people of all kinds to pursue it. Pressure on land expansion for industrialisation and modernisation has skyrocketed, which has consequently crowded out agricultural production and exposed a large part of rural populations to livelihoods insecurity and impoverishment. While the country is known as a good example of poverty reduction (poverty headcount fell from 58 percent in the early 1990s to roughly 10 percent in 2010), most of the gains from economic growth have gone to the urban rich who only make up roughly 10% of the whole populace (Wells-Dang, 2013). Meanwhile, 90% of those trapped in poverty are living in rural areas and their livelihoods are highly dependent on agricultural and forest land. Currently, as aforementioned, 70% of the country's population inhabits rural areas and the Vietnamese are known to have among the lowest land endowments per capita in the world, i.e. each agricultural household possesses less than 0.5 hectare on average according to Oxfam (2012).

Paradoxically, private ownership of land is not permitted in Vietnam, and people can only acquire land use rights. Article 53 and 54 of the Vietnam Constitution stipulate that land is owned by the entire people and that the state, on behalf of the entire people, administers the land for the people. In its exercise of the people's ownership rights, the state allocates and leases land to organisations, households and individuals to use. The revised Land Law 2013 gave the state authority to withdraw land for economic development purposes, whereby farmers' land is

withdrawn for private interests such as the construction of private estate, industrial zones, golf courses, or beach resorts. The existing research (e.g. Hiebert and Nguyen, 2012; Hansen, 2013) highlights that the persistent denial of private land ownership and the use of ambiguous concepts in the handicapped land-related legislations constitute the root cause of land conflicts. This is the crux of the matter and inhabits the heart of debates on land conflicts in Vietnam nowadays. This ambiguity and vagueness has paved the way for high-profile contentious land acquisitions across the country. It is a fertile ground for conspiracies and decisions overlooking needs and interests of the affected communities, who are often thrown into destitution and become impoverished after forced displacements and land dispossession. Labbé (2015) writes that, the socialist land regime fails to protect peasants from state-backed land seizures because the CPV modifies the socialist land regime to nurture land-grabbing practice through collusion of the state and corporates. Once land is withdrawn, farmers become landless, powerless and voiceless. Compensation is low and unfair, which means farmers have to flee their villages to the urban cities to seek security. However, reports of many types have shown that they end up with low paid jobs in urban locations (Phuc *et al.*, 2015).

Land conflicts have been bursting out across the country since the late 2000s (Dang, 2009; Labbé, 2015). This worsening social tension can be evidenced in the large volume of petitions and complaints lodged to corresponding state agencies regarding land loss. As the Vietnam Development Report 2010 noticed, the complaints lodged over land disputes have surged considerably over the past ten years, making up to about 70-90% of all petitions and complaints (VDR, 2010). In the period 2008-2011, for example, the Communist government received 1.6 million written petitions, accusations and other complaints concerning land disputes (e.g. complaints over compensation, denunciations of violations of the land law, land access conflicts or demands for the return of land) (Kerkvliet, 2014).

Land loss has led powerless peasants to take to the streets in hundreds of small-scale protests across cities and towns in Vietnam. Notable in land struggles by powerless peasants, is the absence of the Farmers' Association *(Hội Nông Dân),* the party-owned mass organisation that claims to represent farmers' rights and interests. Despite its declared mandate, it rarely helps its 'represented' group, and indeed, often contributes to impeding public protests (Kerkvliet, 2014). In the

CCERD-led mobilisation, as we will later see, the NGO, however, did not bypass mass organisations, rather it co-opted them into its mobilising structure and took advantage of the MOs' structural links with local government structures to make them work for its mobilisation.

In brief, land protests, as Ben Kerkvliet states, have been widening the arena for public discourse and criticism in Vietnam. The fights of peasants in protecting their land and against state-backed corporate interests since the early 1990s "have helped make way for workers, market vendors, urban residents, and others to publicly air their grievances as well" and while "officials' tolerance is not boundless, but it is far greater now than before" (Kerkvliet, 2014, p.38)

3.2. Forest land conflicts and state forest companies

The main clients of the case study NGO were ethnic minorities living in two mountainous communes of Quang Binh province, among the hotspots for forestland conflicts. This section introduces briefly why and how forestland conflict has broken out in recent years between local poor and state forest companies (SFCs).

Whilst conflict over agricultural land continues unabated by virtue of the ongoing mushrooming of industrial and urbanised expansion projects, conflict over forestland displays similar resonance. If the affected subjects of the former are mainly living in peri-urban cities, those of the latter are from ethnic minority groups dwelling in mountainous areas, whose traditional way of life and customs are closely bonded with forest and forestlands and whose livelihoods are also heavily reliant on the forests.

The country is home to fifty-three ethnic minorities that comprise 14 percent of the national population, but account for as many as 70 percent of the extremely poor population (measured by the standardised national poverty line) (World Bank, 2010). Since *doi moi*, the government has launched a matrix of development policies and programmes aimed at eradicating hunger and poverty and improving

the socio-economic conditions in upland regions. Such far-reaching reforms have been, however, controversial for their fragmentation, mismanagement, lack of sustainability as well as for obscuring diversity and difference of ethnic identities (Taylor, 2008). Deep-rooted poverty within ethnic minorities has failed to be tackled, because its root cause, i.e. lack of land for cultivation, has not been effectively dealt with (SPERI, 2012; To *et al.*, 2014). At the same time, forestland mismanagement by SFCs is rampant and the continued allocation of land to these institutions remains an upsetting practice against the impoverishment facing local ethnic minorities. According to SPERI (2012, 2014), almost 65 percent of all upland ethnic minority households nationwide lack access to forestland.

To address forestland conflicts, the national government has issued forest land reform policies since the 1990s, under which SFCs are required to transform from state-run businesses into hybrid state-private entities. Through this process, the state's control is supposed to diminish in favour of space for communities, households and individuals to participate in the use and management of forestland. Also, under these policies, the state institutions that are performing ineffectively are required to return disputed land to local communities. A number of government decrees were put in place so as to accelerate this process. Yet, the privatization process in reality is lagging far behind and their ties to the state have remained relatively unchanged. In terms of management, the SFCs are nominally controlled by the provincial people's committees or the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD). Due to their connections with the state, the SFCs in many instances have resisted enforcing the state policies that request them to return some part of their land to local communities. Critically, the recurring practices of the SFCs undermine the state legitimacy in the eyes of local communities, since villagers conceive them as representative agents of the state in their locality. As a result, the state's efforts to address poverty and inequality have been impaired by the SFCs (To *et al.,* 2014).

As a matter of fact, the central policies regarding forest land reform are bypassed or ineffectively enforced at local levels. The evidence shows that much of the disputed forest land area that should have been returned to the local poor has remained under the management of the state institutions (To *et al.*, 2014). Under the socialist land regime, forestland and natural forests are owned by the state. Vietnam is covered with roughly 13.8 million hectares of forestland, yet most of them are owned by state-run agencies and are neither used nor managed effectively. Lacking

land for cultivation, local livelihoods are negatively affected and thus the local poor have to encroach onto state-managed forest land areas to cultivate or seek timber for daily subsistence.

Existing studies on forest land conflicts in Vietnam also demonstrate that the dispute resolution mechanism between SFCs and villagers often reaches deadlock on account of a weak legal framework and lack of manpower (To *et al.*, 2013). The available legal framework, for example, impedes the commune government from resolving disputes effectively. Whilst this government level is closest to and has everyday interactions with local communities, its function, according to the Land Law, is only limited to mediation. This means that once mediation falls into an impasse, the role of this local power structure is accordingly over, since they are not authorised to make a decision that goes beyond the mediation role. Moreover, most SFCs are managed by provincial governments or the Vietnam Forest Corporation (VINAFOR) under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, which has higher authority than commune and district governments. CCERD, as we will later see, identified the huge potentials of commune leaders given their close relationship with local communities.

In the context of the forestland conflicts above depicted, I will now explore the local forestland conflict in my research site, where CCERD orchestrated mobilisation to help local communities to claim back their land entitlements.

3.3. Forest land conflict at the research site

> "Forest land is not only our life, for it is also our tears, our sweat and our happiness. Right behind me is the forest of massive hectares, but it does not belong to us. It has been controlled by the state-owned forest company. Living next to the forest for decades, my family can't even have an inch of land for cultivation. Much of the area of these forests has been subject to dispute for years, those having too much land fail to manage it, whilst those with too little or almost none are chronically poor and can't get access to it."
> (Interview, 24 December 2014, Quang Binh)

The revelation above by a Van Kieu ethnic minority poor female, who had been involved with CCERD's activities for many years, captures well the dynamics of

forestland conflict in my research site. Truong Son, among the poorest communes of Quang Binh province and once the most fiercely devastated area during the American war, is CCERD's main project site. This mountainous commune covers a quite large area of 77,534 hectares taking up 65% of the total area of Quang Ninh district, and being home to 4,400 people. 60% of the population belongs to the ethnic minority group called the Bru-Van Kieu[7]. The commune, compared with other localities, has the largest coverage of forest land that occupies 95% of the total commune area. Most of it is managed by state entities. Specifically, these state institutions manage the total area of 70,000 hectares (nearly 90%) whilst the commune government controls 6,121 hectares (8.3%) and local people as little as 1,413 hectares (1.9%).

Table 4. **Forest management structure by forest user group in Truong Son commune**

Forest user group	Area (ha)	%
State entities	70,000	89.8
Commune people's committee (i.e. commune government)	6,121	8.3
Villagers	1,413	1.9
Total	77,534	100

(Source: CCERD report of 2013)

---

[7] The Bru-Van Kieu ethnic minority were originally very reserved, and tended to live in isolation from other ethnic groups. I was told that if one has a quarrel with his neighbour, he often chooses to leave his home village for a while to avoid conflict.

Figure 17. Bru-Van Kieu ethnic minority females and their children

(Source: Researcher)

According to the commune government report of 2013, the number of poor[8] households in the commune stands at 52%, whilst that of the Van Kieu group stands at over 80%. Local poverty is more exacerbated by virtue of the disadvantaged geographical location and underdeveloped traffic system and infrastructures, the lack of access to electricity and clean water. However, the main issue is related to the severe lack of available productive land.

Formerly, Van Kieu's livelihoods relied on traditional slash-and-burn agricultural practices, forest production and petty agricultural cultivation. Originally, the first households that settled down in the villages cleared the waste land, grew cassava and swiddened rice near river or streams. The traditional cultivation method was considered harmful to the environment, so the state mobilised ethnic minorities to terminate this practice and shift to sedentary methods. The Van Kieu people complied. Nonetheless, the government was unable to redistribute adequate productive and forest land to them, for most of the quality land had already been allocated to forest management boards and SFCs (To *et al.*, 2013).

---

[8] A new poverty line was announced for the period 2011-2015 by the Vietnamese government, whereby it is VND750,000/person/month in urban areas and VND550,000/person/month in rural areas. US$1 equivalent to VND21,000 (World Bank, 2012).

The Long Dai Forest Enterprise, one of the prime players in the forest land conflict in Truong Son commune, was established in 1981 and changed into Long Dai Forest Company in 2010 to correspond to the Decree 200/2004 ND-CP, which provided for the reorganisation, innovation and development of state forest enterprises. Its main functions focus on forest management, protection, and forest products processing and services. The company is under the official control of the Quang Binh provincial people's committee. When established, it was given an extensive forest land area to manage, including that which villagers had put great efforts into clearing and also, where they used to swidden rice and grow cassava. Once the company obtained its land use certificate, it prevented the villagers from accessing their former land, claiming that it had exclusive rights to the timber and land and declared villagers' logging and cultivation illegal. Because of a lack of labour, the SFC decided to hire local villagers to plant forests for it and promised that once the trees were mature to harvest, the villagers would receive a proper share. However, when the timber was mature enough to be harvested, the labourers did not receive their share as the company did not want to pay them. Under the forestland reform policy, the company had to establish contractual arrangements with households for forest plantation (which means that households would be able to increase income if they were integrated into these contracts). However, instead of signing contracts with local villagers to help them reduce poverty, the company in many cases decided to make arrangements with people from outside the village. This exacerbated local tensions. Without having land, the local villagers had to 'break the fence' (see Chapter 1 for fence breaking practice) for their daily subsistence through a number of contentious actions, such as encroaching upon the company's land to cultivate, engaging in clandestine logging on company land, and deforestation (according to CCERD's report).

The local villagers repeatedly sent petitions to the commune and upper-level governments and met with the local people's elected representatives. Nevertheless, there was no effective response from the government officials. In practice, the villagers' acts of defiance were not only limited to encroaching or logging, for they also orchestrated other overt offensive acts, for example by collectively preventing the company from continuing with plantation after it harvested the timber or by blocking the roads to the forest (To et al., 2013 and confirmed in my own interview data).

The SFC's vast forest land surrounding the villages and homes of ethnic groups contrasted. In the subsequent period, when landless farmers were mobilised to participate in organised action with various stakeholders, they began to raise their collective concerns about the SFC and the possession of land.

In brief, there were two reasons underlying land conflicts in Truong Son commune. First, the unfair land allocation worsened social tensions locally. Faced with no livelihood option, local households had no choice but to encroach onto the company's land in order to grow crops. Moreover, the SFC excluded the village inhabitants from its labour contracts and offered employment instead to outsiders. The absence of effective conflict resolution mechanisms constitutes the second reason. As aforementioned, according to the existing land law, while the commune government has potential to foster social cohesion at the grassroots level by addressing land conflict, its real power is actually significantly less and restricted to mediation. Hence, once the mediation becomes deadlocked, this government level has no more room for manoeuvre.

4. NGO-led activism: embedded activism

This section details the processes through which CCERD orchestrated its embedded activism to ensure better redistribution of resources for the local poor. Embedded activism, as indicated in Chapter 2, refers to a form of activism defined by Ho (2007) that is led by a formally organised structure or engages with authorities. That is, it uses institutionalised structures along with formal channels such as state laws, policies, officially promoted values, or state-propagandised agenda as well as mainstream media to frame mobilising structures around controversial issues in a non-adversarial manner. The NGO-led activism in this research can be considered an embedded form of activism because it is led by CCERD, a formally organised structure; and is controlled by the state via a web of legalistic requirements and bureaucratic practices. Although its mobilisation took place at the implementation stage of the policy process, it represents an important form of activism in a political context still dominated by a top-down policy making process. Being embedded in this way, the NGO is able to carve out more room for manoeuvre to support the implementation of policy. This results in the delivery of better policy outcomes.

The success of CCERD-led activism in this research suggests that the NGO's ability to influence the redistribution of forest land was based on three intertwined factors. First, it built loyalty among its clients owing to its development roots, which helped it increase participation and legitimise its position locally. Second, it worked with and through the bureaucratic structures of the state, as well as taking advantage of the available structural links pertinent to the institutions that it allied with. According to Houtzager (2003), structural links that bind state and society together are what collective actors representing subordinated social groups tend to crystallise around to mobilise activities and seek political opportunities. CCERD, in this research, strategically connected itself to wider coalitions to manipulate these structural links to make them work for its collective goal. Third, it articulated strategically the interplay of both formal and informal activism.

4.1. CCERD: from development roots to community mobilisation

4.1.1. From development roots: building legitimacy as a social organisation

Emerging in 2003, CCERD began its life by implementing a number of humanitarian activities and livelihood development initiatives such as innovative livestock models, micro credit for poor women, building technical and political capacities of both local communities and local governments, promoting indigenous culture of Bru-Van Kieu people, and supporting village infrastructural development, and so forth. VNGOs, Hannah (2007, p.243) indicates, are "rational, law-abiding, constructive, and working for the betterment of their nation", and CCERD has similar traits. The NGO has strong development roots, and a strong focus in the communes on land struggles. CCERD initiated a wide array of pragmatic livelihood models to help local villagers raise income including the introduction of innovative models to raise cattle, pigs, chicken, growing cassava, and planting forest. These successful models were eventually adopted into the official agricultural development policies by the local government as evidenced in the district government decree No. 232/TTr-

UBND. All these efforts contributed to enhance CCERD's legitimacy at the local level.

The local development engagement efforts of the NGO are in fact the process through which it has been building legitimacy as a locally-based social organisation working side by side with local communities and local government.

Being a local NGO means that CCERD has to live up to expected standards and expectations. In other words, the NGO has to gain and enhance its legitimacy in the eyes of local communities and local authorities through its performance. According to Suchman's (1995) framework, implementing development efforts locally is actually the process through which CCERD builds pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy. Pragmatic legitimacy, according to the author, derives from getting things done effectively for clients or the audience (i.e. addressing social needs). This kind of legitimacy is relatively straightforward in that it is a direct exchange between the NGO and its specific constituents involving the delivery of social services on the one hand and gaining client or customer loyalty on the other. Cognitive legitimacy relates to conformity to established cognitive structures in society, what is often described as having a 'taken-for-granted' status (Suchman, 1995). The latter is strongly resonant with the role of NGOs in development promoted by the academic and practitioner worlds for over twenty years, where they are believed to be pro-poor, efficient, participatory and committed to empower the local poor.

A classic development intervention by NGOs in Vietnam is to provide micro finance for the local poor. Compared with other developing countries, for example Bangladesh, micro finance NGOs in Vietnam are much smaller in terms of scale and size. Micro credit for the Van Kieu female poor has been implemented since the early days of the NGO operation. Currently, CCERD has about 500 regular customers structured into 30 credit and saving groups in its project sites. Each loan is worth VND 1,500,000 (equivalent to £55). It is worth noting that in Vietnam, even if a NGO like CCERD works with the female poor, it is not allowed to represent them by law and it cannot claim to be membership-based. Instead the NGO has regular clients or beneficiaries. The organisation in Vietnam that 'officially represents' women is the mass organisation Women's Union.

Elsewhere Karim (2001) has argued that the provision of credit has been used to create dependency of the poor on the NGO and by implication strengthen the 'hold'

of the NGO over its clients. This leads to a conclusion that the debt relation oils strong patron-client relationships. This however is not the case for CCERD. CCERD is not a powerful patron to its clients because it has to work with and through the Women's Union to deliver credit to the female local poor. If a client is unable to repay a loan, they are not excluded from other goods and services provided by the organisation. The level of dependency between clients and the NGO is therefore not intense. However, this is not to say that loyalty between the clients and the NGO is not strong. The implication of this reflection is that being a client of CCERD or not makes little difference in terms of fighting for land. CCERD itself is not a member of the land redistribution committee, and so has no power in deciding 'who gets what'. Therefore the argument that "credit subjects the poor to the mandates of the NGO" (Karim, 2001, p.93) does not resonate with the reality in my research site. Community mobilisation led by CCERD aimed at helping the local poor (both clients and non-clients) to claim land, is considered a social mandate. If the NGO performs its mandate effectively, it can expect to receive organisational legitimacy and prestige.

There are two reasons why the NGO's micro finance work was successful. First, it works through the existing formal structure of the state, i.e. the Women's Union (WU), the party-owned mass organisation (MO), which is structured at all levels of society and currently has more than 15 million members. This institution has credit officers based in villages and is strongly linked with grassroots communities. CCERD sought to appropriate the large-membership base of this structure to publicise and promote its activities. The WU, at the grassroots level, lacks resource and wants to strengthen its capacities. Embarking on a partnership with CCERD would therefore help it partly address these limitations. Second, when the local poor participate in the NGO projects, they are not perceived as passive beneficiaries, but rather CCERD approaches them as the subjects of their own development. This is in line with the organisation's commitment to participation and self-development – a commitment that is favoured by NGOs globally (White, 1999). When women enroll in a micro finance project for instance, they will not only have access to a proper loan but they will also be empowered through skills training on financial management and planning. In particular being given opportunities for networking and sharing, they will have additional access to a number of innovative income raising opportunities. A Van Kieu member of a micro credit group highlighted this in the following way:

"Credit members are poor, even extremely poor. […] We don't have physical collateral to be able to borrow from commercial banks. Nor do we know how to get access to concessional loans from the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies, because it is bureaucratic. It is too difficult for the poor to approach these money lenders. Yet, we can get easier access to small-scale loans provided by CCERD, and they give us a platform to get connected to one other and provide mutual support. In particular, now I know more people, I can talk and share with other group members about my day-to-day problems, as well as sorrows. I don't feel alone." (Interview, Truong Son commune, 15 December 2014).

'I don't feel alone', the revelation of this poor woman is reminiscent of Devine (1999), when he contrasts 'having no one' and 'having nothing' as two expressions of vulnerability and hopelessness, arguing that the former is a far more profound and precarious state. Understanding this sense of insecurity and vulnerability among the local poor, CCERD adopted development strategies to organise them into self-help and self-reliant groups such as farming interest groups and core farmer groups within villages, and farmer networks at a wider level, so that they could have a common platform from which to act in favour of their own interests. When living in poverty and in an isolated region, the need of networking or sharing is profound. It should again be noted that Truong Son, the site of land conflict, is a mountainous isolated commune and by setting up these groups or bringing people together in specific platforms, CCERD successfully addressed one of the underlying causes of poverty: remoteness and lack of solidarity.

These groups play an important role in realising the organisation's community development activities. The key members of these groups are trained and empowered with technical skills in areas such as farming, forest plantation and protection, and legal knowledge. Then, they become nuclear components helping the organisation by imparting training for the other members in their groups and for the wider communities. During land mobilisation, CCERD used the strength of these groups (i.e. informal structures) as active mobilising forces to improve the legal awareness of their communities, as well as to recruit wider participation. They became an integral part of the mobilising process, and CCERD deployed this social capital effectively by bringing the groups to the frontline of mobilisation and asking them to take on lead roles such as acting spokespersons of community groups in communication with the government structures, the SFC and the media.

Rural NGO fieldworkers in Vietnam, like elsewhere, are associated with much less desirable positions compared to the NGO bureaucrats working in Hanoi. In contrast to the government bureaucrats, the NGO workers come in daily contact with the villagers, visiting them in their homes in order to build local bonds, as well as to understand their needs and to gain local knowledge. Going to the poor in this manner, Hashemi (1997) indicates, reduces the threatening distance between the urban educated and the rural poor, as it helps mitigate rural stratification. In particular, when the NGO's target groups in this research mostly involved the poor ethnic minority people, understanding and upholding their customs and indigenous knowledge was a principle avidly pursued. An experienced staff member stated:

> "Van Kieu people are known as reserved and quiet. During the early days, when visiting their settlements, it was not easy to approach the females of the household, because they were very shy, timid and tended to keep themselves distant from visitors […] It is necessary to acknowledge this culture while working with them. Patience and persistence is needed. […] Besides, they are very honest, veracious, and sensitive …Once you make them feel distrusting, there is no way for you to make them count on you again… So, we must be very careful […]". (Interview, 22 December 2014, Quang Binh province)

So far, I have discussed how CCERD started its life as a development institution, building its identity locally as a social organisation, being a 'benevolent' partner with local communities and grassroots level government, building and enhancing its pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy. I will discuss later its relationship with the bureaucratic structures of the state and why it had to engage with these available power structures in its mobilisation process. Key to this is the proposition that as a registered organisation in Vietnam, CCERD needs to carry out campaigns and mobilisations that accommodate the status quo even if the intention is to challenge this.

4.1.2. To community mobilisation

Critical to CCERD's organisational development was the timely calculation of when and how it should integrate non-conventional areas in its activities. In 2009, after six years of operation, CCERD decided to become more political by becoming more

directly involved in land issues. In particular, it decided to support ethnic minorities (its primary clients) to access their land entitlements. Through a non-adversarial approach, CCERD identified potential and strategic partners, both locally and beyond, including them in its mobilising structure and organising activism accordingly.

The shift by the NGO to more political action was based on three interrelated factors. Internally, after long-standing engagement in community development, CCERD came to realise that the task of addressing poverty could not ignore the most important cause: the dearth of accessible arable land. Poverty, especially for the upland communities including the Bru-Van Kieu group, is not a technical problem but a systematic and structural one that is deeply rooted in unjust land distribution and land right deprivation. Given this, CCERD, aware of its social mandate (see above) had to engage in the land question both to support its poor clients but also to reduce potential social unrest and tension. Importantly, during that period its development roots enhanced its positive relationship with local government and other key local actors (e.g. village heads, MOs), as well as managing to build loyalty among its clients. Land rights advocacy, in general, the director revealed, had been initiated by donors in 2003, but CCERD did not think then it could engage with such a sensitive topic. This was because the organisation was still at the embryonic stage of its development, when loyalty and community linkages had yet to be firmly established. Moreover, during this period the term 'civil society' or the whole concept of a civil society organisation working outside the state's auspices was still a highly sensitive concept, let alone the fact that this NGO was based in a rural area and working at the sub-national level, where levels of antagonism directed to NGOs from local government, tend to be higher.

Externally, CCERD, as well as many of its counterparts had to adjust themselves to respond to a new donor emphasis in which funding for direct intervention projects became less available, and more emphasis was put on policy mobilisation and impact, good governance, and rights-based approaches. This donor shift partly rests in the fact that Vietnam had been upgraded to the middle-income country in 2010. The changing donor focus opened up a political space that local NGOs could occupy based on their proximity to the poor. Yet, this space can be either an opportunity or a challenge for NGOs under the existing political constraints of Vietnam, where the necessary institutional preconditions for associationalism are still missing and top-down policy making process is still heavily exercised. CCERD was not only

responding to this shift in donor focus when it began to engage with land issues. Civil society networks, some established by INGOs such as Oxfam had begun to focus on land issues. CCERD was a member of such a network.

The last factor lies in the opening of a political opportunity structure, which triggered the NGO action. The stark discrepancy in land ownership between the SFC and local Van Kieu is indicative of the contradiction that had endured over time in the commune. Villagers repeatedly sent numerous petitions and complaints to the local government to alert them to how land shortage was negatively impacting upon their livelihoods. The latter's response however was inconsequential. Local people no longer felt the local government could represent their interests.

Villagers' pressures intensified over time and reached a peak when they refused to vote in the election of the commune people's council in 2010. This surprised local officials who always believed the community was too timid and reserved to publically resist in that way. This was also a threat to local officials' reputation. Vietnamese people have the right to vote for people's elected deputies at all levels, but this is considered a 'sham' democratic practice, because public votes count for nothing (Lewis, 2016). People often vote with no idea about who the party-nominated candidates they are going to vote for are. People are not allowed to nominate candidates, and instead they go to vote for very unfamiliar names with unfamiliar faces that they have never seen or heard about, because these candidates are not local residents but outsiders nominated by the CPV. Who will be elected, who will be not, all in all, is calculated in a political game by the factions within the party itself.

Voting is not mandatory by law in Vietnam, but local leadership has to prove to their superiors that they are committed to the CPV and effective in the job. Post-election, it is not uncommon to hear phrases such as 'in the light of the glorious leadership of the communist party, under the excellent propagation and mobilisation of local authorities, almost 99% of the population at our locality are excited to go voting to exercise their democratic rights'. If a community decides not to vote, the reputation of the local leaders is at stake: 80 or even 90% turnout signals poor performance and a lack of commitment to the party.

The election boycott by villagers was also a manifestation of their resistance to the local authorities, which again is an unusual practice. Many protesters were clients of

CCERD. Being better informed and more prepared to act, these clients circulated information within their communities and facilitated the process that led to the collective boycott. While the NGO was not involved in this process, the impact of its initiatives from earlier days (i.e. establishing these small-scale membership groups) was important. The momentum behind the resistance was strong and went beyond what the commune government had anticipated. They could not let this get to higher government levels. Consequently, the authorities sent a senior official who had the same ethnic background as the villagers to persuade them to resume their participation in the election. In doing this, the local authority had to make concessions and promised to make stronger effort to deal with the dearth of land facing the villagers. The village leaders were then invited to a meeting led by the commune government, at which they reiterated all the urgent needs, concerns, and discontent that had been repeatedly ignored. Both the parties co-produced a report, which was lodged with the provincial level government and the SFC. However as indicated above, the structure of accountability here was weak: the authority of the commune government is limited to dispute resolution mechanism only and it has no authority to manage the SFC.

The boycott opened up a political opportunity for the NGO to enter the fray officially. This is akin to the transformative events observed in the Trees Movement which triggered a step-up in terms of activism. Mr Linh stated as follows:

> "This was the right time for us to enter the fray to support the commune government and local communities. We participated so as to intensify pressures on higher levels of governments and the SFC. Yet, we were not agitators, our activism was not violent, in fact villagers did not wage any violent acts, all they did was carry out a peaceful boycott."

In terms of the land mobilisation for the local poor, there are four main outcomes that are directly associated with CCERD's involvement. First, CCERD helped the local government and villagers to identify the exact parcels of disputed land based on empirical and historical evidence. This was achieved by investigating existing records and carrying out empirical research. It found out that there was actually more land owned by the SFC than had been originally indicated. It is important to notice that measuring forest land is a much more complicated and time-consuming process than can be imagined. It requires manpower and financial resources. CCERD coordinated, provided technical support, and brought villagers and commune

officials together to perform this collective exercise. The parcels of disputed land were recorded officially by local government. This empirical evidence also became very important information that CCERD used to draw attention from national media and central government structures. These land parcels were eventually returned to the commune government for redistribution among local people. Second, CCERD was instrumental in identifying forest land that had been used ineffectively, and identifying irregular or unfair labour practices. Third, once land was returned to the local government, CCERD played an important role in ensuring that its subsequent redistribution was implemented in a fair, transparent and participatory way. Fourth, it supported villagers to procure official land use rights certificates. In total, 3,700 hectares of forest land from the SFC were returned to the commune government for redistribution among landless villagers. By 2014, 150 local households within the commune had received legal certificates.

What is notable regarding these outcomes is that CCERD was not the actor that controlled or mediated access to land, nor was it a member of land redistribution committee or anything similar. The mobilisation success did not result in growing membership for the NGO, nor was there any remarkable shift in the balance of power between the local elites and the NGO. Being a client of the NGO was not used at all to decide the allocation of land. Rather, this is a case study of mobilisation led by a rural-based, medium-sized NGO that successfully built loyalty among its clients, placing its clients as well as the grassroots government at the centre of its mobilising strategy. It then couched activism within and through bureaucratic structures of the state, connecting itself to wider coalitions and taking advantage of the available structural links to its allies. The aim of the process was to put collective pressures on the higher level government and its affiliates so as to make them respond positively.

In the next section, I examine the dynamics of the mobilisation process that CCERD orchestrated.

4.2. CCERD – Local mobilisation

Collective mobilisation remains a risk-laden activity in Vietnam, especially on the part of NGOs. Hence, CCERD had to calculate risks when it decided to get involved

in land issues. Although it worked in a real hot spot for land disputes, CCERD knew it could not stay at the frontline of land claim struggles. Its legal status is guaranteed through its formal registration and this imposes legal bounds. As such CCERD has constrained autonomy to challenge local political power overtly. Autonomy is understood in this thesis as the ability of civil society actors to act and to determine their course in accord with their interests or values and desires when negotiating with the state. Embedded in the state and adhering to its regulatory requirements opens up guarded space for CCERD to act 'autonomously'. However it has no authority to legitimately 'represent' local landless farmers to the upper power structures. Therefore its aim is to mobilise local actors to act for themselves and to integrate them in wider strategic coalitions, through which they could stand up to exercise their land claims effectively.

After the boycott, CCERD quickly supported a number of actions. The first was to identify key mobilising actors locally including local communities, local government, and mass organisations (MOs) (i.e. Vietnam Fatherland Front, the umbrella organisation of all MOs). In the first key meeting that it organised with these actors, it signalled that its involvement was not to convince them to stand up to the provincial elites, nor to agitate for local people taking to the streets or engage in any act of violence. Instead, it explained that it aimed to help create a collective leverage and exert influence on the upper political structure so as to secure a positive policy response to their demands. The core message from CCERD was that the local poor landless would be at the centre of the mobilising strategy and given opportunities to exercise their voice and act in favour of their own interests. Yet, in order to bring this process to success, local actors would have to act as a collective entity and the NGO would play a facilitating role.

4.2.1. Generating legitimacy for mobilisation

Reaching consensus on mobilising collectively, the next challenge was to decide what to do as a collective entity. CCERD brought to the table all the legal documents of the central government regarding forest land reform and enlightened local actors with the existing legal basis.

Although CCERD enjoyed good relations locally, it still had to ensure that the mobilising strategy was seen to be legitimate. In the first meeting, CCERD stressed the legality and rightfulness of the land claim safeguarded by the existing national land reform policy that had yet to be enforced effectively at the local level. In so doing, it highlighted the legitimacy of the proposed action, and this was meant to help participants feel more comfortable to act. By showing that the actions conformed with existing laws and regulations, CCERD helped build a consensus among the local actors on the legitimacy of the collective action. In other words, their actions were lawful, enshrined in law and policy, and were intended to make policy delivery better.

CCERD, as a formal structure defined in this thesis, mainly exercised its activism through formal structures and channels and in quite overt ways. Its actions were embedded in the official legal framework on forest land reform, which was the Resolution 28-NQ/TW by the Political Bureau dated 16/06/2003 and the Decree No.200/NĐ-CP by the Government dated 03/12/2004. Decree 200 specifically stipulates that the disputed land between local people and SFCs would be measured and returned to local government and local communities for management and production. However, these formal policies are often not implemented at local levels. Rules or directives are broken, re-interpreted, or ignored. This is the crux of 'fence breaking practice', seen throughout Vietnam and explained in Chapter 1. By implementing what was set out in Decree 200, CCERD could not only say it was acting legally and legitimately, but it was also delivering on key government commitments. The Decree was therefore an important bargaining tool in discussions at local levels.

In my research area, the central policies on land redistribution were blocked at the provincial level by a combination of provincial government and its affiliate, the SFC. CCERD's approach helped it challenge this collusion but also reinforce the status quo; it challenged vested interests by appealing to other vested interests. It appropriated available formal channels to engage with local actors in an attempt to help them think differently and take more pro-active action in the land claiming process. Through these channels, CCERD wanted to break the ground of confusion and passivity, which had remained for long, whereby no one knew exactly what to do, who to meet, how to forge cohesion or how to mobilise collectively.

It focused its efforts on building legal and political capacities, as well as enhancing awareness of local communities and local government regarding the legal framework. Strengthening their understanding of why these policies failed to be enforced at local level and why the SFC was able to circumvent them, was an important component in CCERD's mobilising strategy. Once people were appropriately informed, they acted differently and they made informed decisions accordingly. I will bring more in-depth insight into the NGO's strategies of legitimation in the chapter that follows.

4.2.2. Co-opting local political power structures

To help local communities claim land, cultivating a strong coalition with relevant local actors was a priority for the NGO. To make mobilisation a success, CCERD had to work within and through the existing bureaucratic structures of the state. Locally however officials can be risk averse and are therefore not incentivised to undertake innovative ideas. The final objective of CCERD's mobilisation was to make the provincial political power deliver policy outputs effectively. It therefore had to engage with the lower political power structures, i.e. district and commune governments, along with local poor to make inroads into the provincial government. The role of these government structures is distinguishable in two senses. First, they are institutions responsible for directly delivering various public services to local people. Second, they frequently have to engage with the upper levels in time-consuming day-to-day bureaucratic meetings and other forms of interactions, which are nevertheless important channels to convey local land issues. The involvement of the NGO from a local official's standpoint, might cause more harm than good especially in sensitive cases such as land conflict that call into question of sensitive relationships and questions of state legitimacy.

To make local government structures feel more secure, CCERD allied itself with the district level mass organisation, namely, the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF). Generally speaking, the relationship between NGOs and MOs in Vietnam is quite antagonistic. The former often accuses the latter of enjoying multiple benefits but being incapable, self-interested and neglectful of the real needs of the poor. The latter, a favoured child of the CPV, tends to overlook VNGOs in many respects. MOs are given official roles in leading public consultation and policy monitoring, but they

are passive and ineffective (VEPR, 2015 and confirmed by my interview data). The antagonism towards the MOs by some VNGOs, as well as other civic groups (dissidents and independent activists) is entrenched because MOs are portrayed as defenders of the status quo, rather than agents of change or allies of the poor.

So why did CCERD have to reach out to the VFF and work through it? The VFF is the umbrella organisation of all MOs, such as Women's Union, Farmers' Association, Workers' Union, etc., and it is structured and organised throughout four levels of government (central, provincial, district and commune). Being a non-membership organisation, CCERD co-opted this formal structure in order to take advantage of the latter's large-scale membership and position or status. In doing so, CCERD could manipulate the available structural links that the VFF already has with local government structures. Mr Linh explained further:

> "The VFF's involvement will help break down the suspicion towards our motive, i.e. we are mobilising for the local poor, and help us exercise our mobilisation more explicitly. By partnering VFF, the local government would understand more about the legitimate objective of our mobilisation. More importantly, through the VFF, grassroots issues like land disputes can be transmitted to upper government structures in an official manner." (Interview, 12 February 2015, Quang Binh)

As Mr Linh said, the VFF's engagement would eliminate the suspicion towards the organisation's activities on sensitive issues such as land use rights or grassroots democracy. In practice, the VFF at the local level faces multiple difficulties regarding resources and capacities. They themselves are in need of capacity building and financial assistance. CCERD co-opted the VFF through an agreement contract that focused on policy propagation for local communities. The content of the policy information to be disseminated was guided by CCERD, most of which centred on land rights for ethnic minorities. A range of activities were conducted aimed at enhancing local people's awareness on their land rights and what benefits they could enjoy according to the existing policies.

Working with and through the VFF opened up a guarded space for CCERD to make inroads into the government structures in an effective way. CCERD took advantage of the structural links of the VFF with the local political power to consolidate the local government's involvement in the mobilisation process. So how did CCERD engage with these structures?

In the aftermath of the villagers' boycott, the commune officials felt embarrassed because they were pressured by both the villagers and the upper government at the same time. One commune leader informed me:

"In fact we really wanted to back the local people, but the role of commune government is very limited. The only thing we are authorized to do is to mediate. Despite the fact that the disputed land lies within the commune boundary, there is not much we can do except for mediation. The SFC is under the provincial government, so even for the district government, there is not much they can do if the provincial government doesn't want to support us".

The reason why CCERD wanted to co-opt this government level is because it plays a key role in local everyday politics of villagers. There exists a strong tie between commune officials and villagers for everyday activities. The commune leadership is the knot, which implements national policies at the grassroots levels. If the knot is weak, this negatively affects the delivery of policy outputs at grassroots levels. Its role is, Mr Linh explained, also considered as a village gate keeper, who can help the organisation access specific groups within the commune. It is very difficult to organise grassroots activities without the support of the commune leaders, because their presence encourages local people to participate in the NGO's mobilising activities. Additionally, CCERD appealed to this formal structure to take advantage of its position as a conduit to transmit collective messages to the upper level. Due to the close relationship between the commune leadership and villagers, CCERD sought to enhance the commune authorities' capacities and to empower the grassroots communities at the same time, whereby these two actors would work complementarily to build a stronger collective voice. It engaged both actors in a series of activities through formal channels such as empirical research of disputed land, training activities and site visits.

With the support of the commune leadership and the VFF, the district government was tactically integrated into CCERD's mobilising activities. I was intrigued about the value of the site visits. In discussion with staff, I was repeatedly told that the visits gave them a broader understanding of land issues and conflict resolution. This helped officials realise that land disputes occurred in many other places. Why was this important? One respondent told me:

"The local authorities are very sensitive and proud. If for some reason we do something that might shame them, they will retreat. And obviously this is not good, because they are our buffer; we need them to be able to implement our activities. When visiting other conflict sites they realise that land dispute is not only unique to their locality. Learning from experience and good practice means pride is maintained and motivation strengthened." (Focus Group Discussion, Quang Binh 01st March 2015)

An information exchange mechanism between the NGO and local authorities was established and sustained with strong commitments from both sides. Over time CCERD's credibility increased further, and local officials accepted the NGO as a reliable source of information and consultation before their engagement with the upper level and the SFC. In addition, they also provided further support for the NGO actions. This reflects how CCERD succeeded in working within and manipulating the bureaucratic structures of the state, conducive with its organised actions. Under CCERD's coordination, the commune and district leadership, the VFF and local landless collectively prepared a detailed dossier of land conflict to be sent to the provincial government. This important document included detailed empirical evidence on disputed land with specific figures and data, a list of intermediate and long-term needs of the local landless, and a set of recommendations and proposed solutions.

As part of its strategy, CCERD also engaged when it could with the government structures at the provincial level. Specifically, it disaggregated the provincial-level state apparatus to look for options to engage with those sections that were responsible for dealing with issues concerning ethnic minorities and forestland, i.e. the subcommittee of ethnic minority affairs, and the department of natural resources and environment. Again, through its links with the district government and the VFF, CCERD provided a better understanding of land conflict and the consequences of not having access to suitable land.

So far, I have examined how CCERD waged its formal activism through overtly working within and through bureaucratic structures of the state. However CCERD also reverted to informal channels to enhance the effectiveness of its formal activism. As mentioned previously, it placed local informal self-help groups and core farmer networks at the frontline of interactions with the government bodies, the SFC and national media. These groups are informal, because they are non-

institutionalised, unregistered, and work outside of the formally institutionalised structures. Their formation was initiated by CCERD but in fact they are quite independent from the latter. CCERD focused on enhancing the technical and political capacities of these groups and used them as spokespersons voicing the concerns of local communities to different stakeholders.

In short, advocating a collaborative approach, CCERD co-opted powerful local actors, such as the VFF and other bureaucratic structures of the state to build legitimacy and exert influence on related stakeholders. Working within and through these structures, CCERD anchored itself to the available structural links that its allies already had with the political power structures. All this opened up guarded spaces for CCERD to orchestrate further mobilisation. In addition to local mobilisation, CCERD had to reach out to actors at higher levels in order to make the mobilisation a success. I turn to this in the next section.

4.3. CCERD – Beyond local mobilisation

During the mobilisation process, setting up strategic links with different stakeholders situated at various levels plays a crucial role towards achieving the final objective. Understanding this importance, CCERD extended its efforts to establish vertical links with the influential formal structures at the central level including the Hanoi-based NGO Towards Sustainable Development, national media, and the state agency in charge of land reform known as VINAFOR.

In the first place, it is important to draw attention to the relationship between CCERD and the national NGO Towards Sustainable Development (TSD). During the course of its organisational development, CCERD partnered with some other NGOs based in different provinces in an informal network working on forest land for ethnic minorities. Specifically, during the 2009-2012 period, and under the support of a Dutch NGO, CCERD networked closely with these NGOs including TSD (based in Hanoi) and decided to bring land rights for ethnic minorities to the centre of their collective agenda. A number of joint activities were conducted, such as reviewing forest land policies (e.g. the said Decree No. 200) and providing suggestions for improving the quality of these policies. Given the local contexts and expertise of each organisation, activities were devised and divided correspondingly to fit into

the different organisational needs and capacities. This network gave CCERD the political leverage and opportunity to bring national government agencies and media to its local operational sites, including those with land conflicts.

TSD had a strong connection with the national media and some contacts within national government bodies. Consequently it was tasked with running the media campaign and bringing national political actors to the operational sites of its locally-based counterparts, where land conflicts were prevalent. Meanwhile, other organisations provided on-site evidence and data for TSD to organise communication activities and draw the attention of the relevant national agencies and bodies. Establishing a stronger national link with the TSD opened up links for CCERD to reach the national political structures and effectively mobilise greater support from higher level political agents.

As a matter of fact, at the local level, CCERD faced a number of challenges to involve the national media. This is not only because of the geographical remoteness of its operational sites, but also because of its close connections to the state. It is not difficult to imagine that the provincial government would respond negatively if it came to know that CCERD had invited the national media to shame them. Hence CCERD had to work behind the scenes and make sure TSD were taking the lead in inviting the national media. In the end when media representatives arrived at the conflict site to film evidence, the local authorities and the SFC had accepted it as a fait accompli and would not have known the role played by CCERD. Furthermore when the media arrived, CCERD again worked mostly through the same informal self-help groups it had trained. So the main discussions took place between the media and the informal self-help groups. The resulting documentary chronicled very well the suffering of the local landless and was broadcast nationwide. The documentary was widely regarded as having an impact upon the provincial government and the SFC.

As we have already seen, beyond the local level CCERD worked covertly with TSD, its counterpart in Hanoi, to generate greater political leverage so that local mobilisation could continue and expand. Another example of how this worked was a very successful national-scale workshop organised by TSD on land conflicts. The conference was held in Hanoi and included the participation of high-profile political leaders, government officers and media agencies. Again behind the scenes, CCERD provided much of the substantial content for the workshop and again used its local

level contacts in the self-help groups to act as spokespersons in the conference and to present narratives of those most affected by local conflicts.

CCERD sought to take advantage of TSD's links with important national political agents in charge of forest land issues, i.e. the Vietnam Forest Administration of Forestry (VINAFOR). This gave CCERD a gateway to the wider policy context of land reform. VINAFOR is tasked with reviewing and devising appropriate policy positions and presenting them to the national government, providing personnel and overseeing the actual implementation of the forest land reform policy (i.e. the Decree 200 and Resolution 28 mentioned earlier). By incorporating VINAFOR into the mobilising strategy, CCERD hoped to first take advantage of its structural links with the national government, which would enhance the legitimacy of its campaigns locally, and open up further room for manoeuvre. Also, by incorporating VINAFOR, CCERD hoped that government agencies would exert influence swiftly and effectively on the provincial government. While CCERD's mobilisation was on-going, VINAFOR was requested by the Political Bureau to review the implementation effectiveness of Resolution 28 on forest land reform. To do this, they had to pay field visits to several sites where land conflicts were taking place to capture real-life evidence. Again CCERD was quick to respond. It collaborated with TSD to make sure VINAFOR visited the Truong Son commune and investigated the dynamics of local level conflicts. The final investigation report was effective and resulted in pressures being exerted on the provincial government to respond positively.

It is important to note that NGOs in Vietnam are involved in the policy process in a very ad-hoc manner because there is no official platform or obvious forum where public consultation can occur. In practice, NGOs wait and if called to a state-led public consultation they will attend. This contrasts with experiences elsewhere where NGOs have a more formal space or platform to engage with government (see Devine, 2002 for a good example of government–non governmental collaboration on land reform). In Vietnam, the party-owned MOs are responsible for engaging with the state but ineffective, passive and lack imagination. As a result, VNGOs find it difficult to secure room to engage with the state on policy reform and implementation. This sheds light on the significance of CCERD's collaboration with VINAFOR – it opened up spaces that CCERD alone could not have created.

5. Conclusion

CCERD has built a successful mobilisation strategy by responding tactically to internal forces and external stimuli, as well as making careful calculations about the timing of specific interventions and about when to be visible or invisible in such investments. Locally it built overt relations with state representatives and the level of cooperation was effective. Nationally it built covert relations working through intermediary allies. In both cases the aim was identical: create pressure on the provincial government to respond favourably to the landless farmers in a way that is consistent with government policy. As an immediate result, 2,123 hectares were removed from the SFC and returned to the commune government for redistribution to the landless villagers. In subsequent years, the provincial government withdrew a further 1,600 hectares from the SFC.

The chapter has examined a particular form of activism led by a local NGO. The involvement of CCERD has to a certain degree improved the policy delivery mechanism, resulting in direct and intermediate benefits to landless farmers. It has also opened up further space for policy reform in the future.

In authoritarian contexts such as Vietnam, NGO-led collective mobilisation faces multiple political constraints due to the politically restricted environment. Given this, it would be politically naive to conclude that such activism will soon mature into a driving force for progressive change. At best NGOs implement a co-opted activism that accommodates rather than challenges the status quo. This accommodation however can generate change, albeit incremental.

With this case study, I have argued that despite being embedded in the state, NGO-led activism was able to pressure the government to introduce more positive responses to the needs of the local poor. Whilst the Trees Movement offers an account of a more autonomous and antagonistic form of activism, CCERD represents a more embedded and collaborative form of activism. This collaborative form of activism counters much of the literature on civil society that portrays state-society relations in a more conflictive manner. At the same time, it challenges the conventional wisdom of civil society activism in authoritarian contexts that tends to downplay the dynamic and political significance of NGO-led activism.

Drawing on the analytical framework presented in Chapter 2, I have examined the NGO led mobilisation using the three core themes of legitimacy, autonomy and (in)formality of activism. These themes will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 6, where I will engage directly in a comparative analysis of the two different forms of activism presented in chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 6: Comparative case analysis

NGO-led and grassroots citizen-led activism

1. Introduction

The two preceding empirical chapters have provided an analysis of two case studies that represent two different forms of civil society activism in Vietnam. In relation to the Trees Movement (TM), I argued that grassroots citizen-led activism, an emerging form of civic engagement in Vietnam, is likely to play a critical role in (re)structuring state-society relations in the country. This is because it signals to the ruling power how civilians can orchestrate rightful civic actions to oppose unaccountable government decisions and policies, as well as how they can make demands for a more participatory and accountable government through strategic non-violent collective resistance. The TM also signals the rise of critical green activism, in which the use of social media and digital tools is important to social and political action in Vietnam. Regarding NGO-led activism, I argued that, by taking advantage of its embedded relation into the state, working within and through bureaucratic structures, manipulating available structural links, as well as strategising around both formal and informal channels of activism, VNGOs are seeking to carve out more room for themselves to manoeuvre in critical actions. This case study also revealed the options that arise from local politics in Vietnam, where the state apparatus is not homogeneous, and relations between different administrative levels allow for fence-breaking, discretion and ad hoc alliances.

Whilst the TM showcases a transient, time-bound and more antagonistic form of activism in which discrete informal civilian groups organised themselves and stood up to the state, the NGO-led activism portrays a more sustainable, collaborative and embedded form of activism. Nevertheless, it is notable that despite having a higher degree of antagonism, the TM still had to couch its activities within the state agenda and discourse to orchestrate its mobilisation. The TM managed to get the state to reverse or halt its decision after concerted public resistance, i.e. the government temporarily stopped cutting trees and sanctioned some of those who were guilty, whereas the NGO-led activism successfully pressured the local government to deliver more progressive national policy outcomes to the local poor.

Both forms of activism express different forms of contentious politics in Vietnam, ranging from dialogue to advocacy through to contention.

In this chapter, I will apply the analytical framework set out in Chapter 2 in order to compare these contrasting forms of civil society activism. The comparative analysis is grounded in my empirical data and particularly guided by this framework, composed of three themes: legitimacy, autonomy, and formality and informality of activism.

In Chapter 2, I explained that these analytical dimensions were theoretically grounded and subsequently validated and triangulated through my empirical work on social activism in Vietnam. In particular, combining a relational approach with mainstream movement theories (political process and new social movement theories) paves the way to the development of these concepts. The former advocates looking at civil society in terms of relations and processes of interactions, and seeks to understand how civil society actors situate and express themselves in the relations that they respond to and become enmeshed within. Meanwhile, the PPT and NSM approaches allow for an understanding of why and how the activists come together in groups and networks, and which frames and strategies they build in order to mobilise (Alonso *et al.*, 2010). The strengths of both approaches also help to explain the mechanisms used by civil society groups with particular experiences and institutional characteristics to shape social reality of their mobilisations into distinctive legitimate frames that fit into the existing official discourse and political opportunity structure. In authoritarian regimes, since community mobilisations are not institutionally supported, civil society groups have to appropriate existing channels or even create new ones to achieve collective action (Tilly, 1978).

A relational approach helps to explore how legitimacy becomes an integral part of the processes through which civil society groups express themselves in relation to the state as well as political opportunity structure. The 'framing processes' of social movement theories is the term that particularly resonates with legitimacy, i.e. "frames help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organise experiences and guide action" (Benford and Snow, 2000, p.614). Framing processes incorporate a variety of factors namely, collective identities, beliefs, meanings, political ideology and discourse, as well as cultural practices, which once established allow collective actors to legitimate their activities, to garner bystanders' supports and to accelerate the mobilisation process (ibid). In this thesis,

legitimacy has been defined broadly to cover how an organisation can be socially accepted and recognised for acts that are right in reason and in nature, proper, admissible and justifiable; and can enjoy the support of an identifiable community (see Chapter 2). In this chapter, drawing on Suchman's (1995) framework on types of legitimacy (regulatory, normative, cognitive, and pragmatic) and legitimation strategies, I will directly examine how civil society groups generate and maintain legitimacy for their organisational structures as well as their collection actions.

Autonomy continues to be a topical concern of civil society theories (liberal tradition) as well as new social movement literature (e.g. Offe, 1985). Whilst the former recognises it as being structurally independent from the state, the latter advocates a type of collective action autonomous from the existing bureaucratic structures. In Chapter 2, I discussed the idea of 'relational autonomy' in order to set out the conceptual foundation for my own definitional development of 'autonomy' in this thesis. Under these relational views, autonomy is approached in terms of social relations rather than individual traits (Christman, 2008). These views also underscore the "social embeddedness of selves" along with the role of contextual social dynamics and power structures in the employment and development of autonomy (Christman, 2004, p.143). Drawing on the relational perspective, autonomy in this thesis is defined as the ability of civil society groups to act and to determine their course in accord with their interests or values and desires when negotiating especially with the state. Autonomy is analysed here in relation to 'embeddedness' in the state. It is not a collective goal (individual trait) that civil society groups seek to claim from the state. In particular, the research examines the significance of the varying relations to the state that civil society groups are enmeshed within. It examines, based on these varied degrees of embeddedness in the state, how civil society groups are able to express, organise and orchestrate activism towards achieving collective goals.

Whilst legitimacy and autonomy draw attention to the institutional characteristics of civil society groups, (in)formality sheds light onto the processes of social mobilisation, whereby different civil society groups associated with these characteristics strategically articulate the interplay of formal and informal processes or even create new channels (e.g. surreptitious platforms) to achieve collective goals. Again, the relational approach to civil society and social movement theories provide a strong base for the formation of this theme. The former considers civil society in terms of processes and relations and examines how it is constituted after such interactions. 'Mobilising structures' of social movements help to build

connectedness among members and collective identities (Diani, 1995, cited in Alonso *et al*. 2010). They are collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilise and engage in collective actions (McAdam *et al*., 1996). Formality and informality of activism are approached in this thesis in terms of processes and interactions performed by different structures, either formal or informal. Specifically, I define formal activism as a process through which different groups overtly engage with and/or perform their acts through formal channels and structures. In contrast, informal activism is a process through which different groups engage with and/or perform their acts through informal channels and structures in either an overt or a covert manner.

In this chapter, I argue that civil society groups in authoritarian contexts such as Vietnam have to couch their activities within the state agenda and discourse to exercise their activism, irrespective of their organisational structures, positions of legitimacy, or degrees of autonomy. Whether they are registered or unregistered, they have to navigate both formal and informal channels of activism to orchestrate collective action. Importantly, in order to attain success, they have to strategically manipulate the state agenda and discourse to legitimise their chosen courses of action. This finding suggests that in authoritarian contexts NGO- and citizen-led activisms have as many similarities as they have differences.

In the sections that follow I examine civil society activism in Vietnam through these key themes.

2. Civil society activism in one-party ruled Vietnam

The table below illustrates the key comparative points of the two forms of activism based on my analytical framework.

Table 5. Comparison of two case studies

	Trees Movement	NGO-led activism
Legitimacy	The TM did not need legitimacy in the same way as the NGO, because it was transient, time-bound, and issue-based. Yet, it had to build legitimacy for its action to recruit wider public participation and minimise state repression. • Generated regulatory legitimacy (i.e. complying with existing law and rules) • More concerned about generating **normative legitimacy**. The TM gained normative legitimacy through framing its mobilisation in line with wider societal values. Particularly, it developed mobilising strategies and a repertoire of actions in order to persuade the public of the rightfulness, propriety, urgency and efficacy of the movement. • **Legitimation strategies:** - Through nesting within the state agenda and discourse; - Through expanding membership	The NGO had to register with state bodies to obtain legal status as the first step of generating legitimacy. CCERD, as a local long-standing social organisation, needs to maintain this social identity for its existing social audiences. • Generated regulatory legitimacy (i.e. complying with existing law and rules) • More concerned with generating **pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy** - Pragmatic legitimacy: the NGO has to live up to socially pre-established expectations directed at it. Its pragmatic legitimacy is based on what it accomplishes for its audience (i.e. delivery of social services). - Cognitive legitimacy relates to conformity to established cognitive structures in society, what is often described as having 'taken-for-granted' status. This type of legitimacy is anchored in assumed NGO general characteristics such as: pro-poor, efficient, participatory, and empowering. • **Legitimation strategies:** - Through conformity to the state agenda and discourse; - Through manipulating the state agenda and discourse; - Through expanding participation

| Autonomy | - Not confined by registration or any tie to the state

- Less embedded relation to the state, which resulted in it having less protected space to wage activism

- Inherently more antagonistic and more overt in its challenge to the state legitimacy

- Maximised the political opportunities by quickly converting them into immediate strategic actions to recruit wider civilian participation

- Autonomous form of activism which echoed self-determined citizenship and self-organisation

- It had stronger resonance for the political elites but it is time-bound, episodic, and issue-based | - Confined by the web of legalistic requirements and bureaucratic practices, but this opens a more protected space for mobilisation

- Working through and within bureaucratic structures of the state, it followed a collaborative approach and exercised self-censored mobilisation within the legal bounds and limits of permissibility

- More embedded within the state, so its mobilising strategy was to depoliticise its activism. It managed to deliver change within the existing rules

- Within its existing opportunity structure, the NGO represented an embedded, cooperative, structurally linked, and more sustainable activism that is aimed to delivering change within the existing rules |
| **(In)Formality** | Internet-based, autonomous, antagonistic and politicised activism:

- Mainly exercised informal activism

- Being at a distance from the state, the TM did not work within and through bureaucratic structures of the state, nor did it have structural links like CCERD

Still had to couch its activities within the state agenda and discourse, existing formal channels, in order to wage mobilisation

- Mainly appealed to informal channels such as the virtual | Self-censored, embedded, collaborative and depoliticised activism:

- Mainly exercised formal activism

- Embedded within the state: CCERD mainly worked within and through bureaucratic structures of the state for mobilisation

- Allied with strategic formal structures at different levels and took advantage of available structural links

- Informal processes and covert arrangement were also made behind the scenes, when necessary, with its centrally- |

networks (i.e. Facebook), petition signing, and street protests to exercise their activism - The significance of surreptitious symbiosis between the registered group and the unregistered group of the TM	based counterparts and the national media to trigger mobilisation locally - Used its established informal structures (i.e. its self-help groups) to facilitate its mobilisation
Both forms of activism strategically articulated the interplay of formality and informality of activism.	Both forms of activism strategically articulate the interplay of formality and informality of activism.

2.1. Legitimacy

Under the authoritarian constraints of Vietnam, where state antagonism towards associational activities still prevails, legitimacy is a challenge that impinges upon organisational survival as well as collective action. A lack of legitimacy means that organisations can no longer operate. Although the significance of legitimacy is generally acknowledged, the notion has received little academic attention in civil society and social movement theories, and in Vietnamese scholarship.

Many of my interviewees revealed that legitimacy is a long-standing concern among CSOs in Vietnam, which particularly relates to how they are recognised as legitimate social actors. Generating and maintaining legitimacy, therefore, always remains a top priority of their organisational strategies. As previously explained in this thesis, in Vietnam, associations such as local NGOs must be registered with the state's governing bodies or state -affiliated institutions in order to obtain legal status. No registration means no legal status, and no legal status means organisational legitimacy is precarious. However, the registration process in many instances is long, complex and outcomes are always uncertain. Potential applicants are easily dissuaded from trying to secure registration.

For the Trees Movement and the NGO, legitimacy-building was an important building block for mobilisation. Legitimacy is a highly contextual and contested phenomenon (Walton, 2013) and building legitimacy is fundamentally a collective process of construction amongst a particular group, community or society of actors (Johnson *et al.*, 2006). Drawing on Suchman's (1995) framework and the strategies of legitimation staged by CCERD and the TM, I came to realise that both case studies sought to generate regulatory legitimacy for their activism by appealing to the official state agenda and discourse. The second similarity lies in that they sought to broaden their participation base to draw wider public support. This is important because wider participation indicates wider social acceptance of an organisation's framework of beliefs, values and actions. As Johnston et al (2006) indicate, generally legitimation involves building consensus among actors in the local context, whereby most people accept the object or mission of an organisation as legitimate. It is worth noting again that legitimacy has a contested nature, so once established, it needs to be maintained otherwise it will fade. This draws attention to the point that while both the TM and CCERD directed efforts to building and maintaining legitimacy, they did it in different ways. The TM did not need the same form of legitimacy as CCERD because it was transient, time-bound and issue-based. CCERD, on the other hand is an established social organisation that needs to maintain its social identity for existing social audiences.

Another critical distinction between the two rests on the fact that whilst CCERD is more inclined to pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy, the TM had a greater propensity for normative legitimacy. CCERD's stress on cognitive legitimacy relates to the point that it is a local registered NGO, which means it needs to deliver against certain mandates and objectives. These objectives reflect state ideology and donor requirements. Its pragmatic legitimacy evolves from the task of actually implementing social services and other local development efforts that address substantive needs of its constituency and wider community. In other words, its pragmatic legitimacy is justified on what the NGO accomplishes.

The TM focused on normative legitimacy gained by aligning its mobilisation with cultural beliefs and societal values shared by others in a given community or in a broader society (Douglas, 1986). Through this process, Johnston *et al* (2006, p.57) demonstrate, "what is becomes what is right". The normative legitimacy of the TM

implies that what the movement enacted resonated more with what was morally desirable rather than what was legally required. In particular, it designed its mobilising strategies to secure public acceptance of the rightfulness, propriety, urgency and efficacy of the movement. That is:

> "Our much loved old trees are being cut down with no justification, our greenery and environment is being damaged, we, citizens of Hanoi, must take action to save our trees, save our environment, and save our beloved city"

> (*Excerpt from fanpage 6700 People for 6700 trees, 19 March 2015*
> *https://www.facebook.com/pg/manfortree/notes/?ref=page_internal)*

In the following sections, I analyse how the TM and the NGO constructed and maintained legitimacy for their activism and at the same time I shed more light on the similarities, as well as the differences between them.

2.1.1. NGO-led activism

Legitimation by conforming to the state agenda and discourse

First of all, CCERD sought legitimacy for its organisation and actions by conforming to the existing state agenda and discourse to construct its identity as a social organisation.

In the first instance, CCERD used Government Decree No 177 to establish itself legally as a 'fund' registering with the district-level people's committee (i.e. district government). After registering with the local government, the organisation has had to confine itself to and comply with the terms and conditions stated in the registration. Once formally registered, CCERD then had to maintain its legitimacy by living up to the standards and expectations directed at it. In particular, it had to convince local communities and local authorities that it was performing effectively.

How does the organisation exactly demonstrate such conformity? As part of its legitimation process, CCERD adopted a specific discourse in that it presented itself as a '*social*' organisation working alongside the state to address local needs, resolve social concerns and tensions, and play a role as a conduit between the authorities and grassroots communities. In asserting its nature as a social organisation, it aligned itself well with the communist party's agenda around 'the socialisation of the welfare service'. The unifying discourse is captured in the party's favoured maxim 'state and people work together'. The NGO director- Mr Linh described it in the following way:

> "The term 'civil society' has not been officially admitted by the state in any legal document. This obviously affects the way we work. So, we have to be very flexible and cautious. For example we always seek the proper language, tone, and approach to work with the local authorities. For example, in every form of communication we emphasise our identity as a social organisation rather than a civil society organisation, or we say we are a scientific and technological organisation that addresses SOCIAL issues". (Interview, 22 December 2014, Quang Binh province, emphasis added)

By accentuating '*social*' characteristics, CCERD depoliticises its identity, creates a 'guarded' rhetoric for the organisation that legitimises its actions. The organisation upholds a non-adversarial approach and stresses its complementary role to the state. This enables it to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the local authorities. As the director indicated in the quote above, finding a proper language, tone, and approach to work with the local government is of importance especially in a political setting such as Vietnam, where the institutional preconditions for NGO legitimacy are unsettled, uncertain and precarious.

CCERD is a locally based organisation, with its leader and the majority of staff born in the same locality. This helped the organisation to find a pathway to make itself appear more proper, authentic and appropriate to its local audiences. The grassroots services it rendered were decided upon taking into consideration local needs as well as a good understanding of the local culture. CCERD's target groups mostly pertain to the Van Kieu ethnic minority, and the organisation is committed to promoting their culture and strengthening their livelihood options.

In Chapter 5, I provided evidence of how CCERD works within and through bureaucratic structures of the state rather than bypassing them to conduct its

organisational activities, as well as to mobilise collectively. By working through these local power structures, CCERD has been able to enhance its symbiotic relationships with them, and also strengthen its legitimacy. As Mr Linh explained:

> "Once legitimacy is established, it places you in an enabling position to act. You can imagine … it is like a guarded space that you will work within. Confined to district level and based in rural area, we are not as fortunate as, for example, our counterparts in Hanoi, who are able to enjoy a more open environment. Having said that, this doesn't mean we don't have any advantages. On the contrary, we have a strong advantage, i.e. we were born here, come from here, live with the local communities and understanding their local culture, which all in all allows us to gauge their response effectively and make our timely adjustments."

Mr Linh's revelation points to the advantage of being a cultural insider. This position allows the organisation to find an appropriate locally-tailored approach to meeting the pre-established social values and expectations directed at it and hence, making it more proper and legitimate to its local audiences. Tactically, CCERD makes itself present in local communities' everyday lives by finding ways to remind people of its presence and mission. As a result, people see it as a legitimate actor in the policy landscape.

By conforming to the state agenda and discourse, working within and through bureaucratic structures of the state, as well as disseminating its identity and interests with local communities, CCERD has managed to gain and enhance its pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy. It deploys the 'guarded' space it is afforded to find ways of further enhancing its legitimacy. However, in order to nurture collective mobilisations, CCERD needs to do more than just secure local legitimacy. Johnston *et al.* (2006, p.60) argue that once "local validation" is established, the next stage is diffuse and validate. In order to accomplish this, Suchman (1995) suggests that an organisation must manipulate pre-emptively the existing institutional environment to ignite novel explanations of social reality. The plausibility of doing so, lies in the capacity of the organisation to reach beyond its boundaries. This is discussed in the following section.

Legitimation by manipulating the state agenda and discourse

Going beyond the conformist strategies, CCERD also manipulated the existing institutional framework at the national level to legitimise and frame its collective mobilisation accordingly. With an identity as a *social* organisation, CCERD had a safe and legitimate space to advocate for and support local communities to gain access to land. This was a complex process involving collaborations with provincial authorities and the institution that owned the land, i.e. the state forest company (SFC) under the provincial government. In order to engage with these institutions, CCERD needed to protect and further legitimise its actions.

CCERD knew that several forestland policies had already been put in place by the national government via a number of decrees, and these were supposed to support local communities to access forestland. However the laws were not being enforced at the local level.

CCERD took advantage of this and framed its mobilisation efforts as geared to the implementation of state policy. By referring to state policy, CCERD could legitimately engage with local authorities. Manipulating the existing framework, as Suchman (1995) explains, means the organisation had to write new interpretations of social reality. Before CCERD began its work, land disputes were deadlocked. Local people would in vain submit complaints regarding the lack of arable land to different levels of government. The provincial government was unresponsive partly because it was closely linked to the SFC. The district government was also unresponsive because of pressure coming from the province, and the commune government had very limited power and lacked capacity to act. So there was no communication between the different administrative levels, and no way of making them engage with each other.

CCERD co-opted the VFF and commune government structure to help raise legal awareness and increase capacity to engage with land disputes. The fact that they could appeal to the state policy was crucial to securing the cooperation of the VFF and the commune government. During their interactions, CCERD made the VFF and

commune more aware of the rights to land protected in the existing policies, provoked them into thinking differently about policy implementation, enabled them to take pro-active action in the land claiming process, and enlightened about why policy intentions failed to be implemented. Reinforcing the idea that the actions were in support of state policy was important. As one local villager stated:

> "Without CCERD's support, we couldn't have known about such policies, we couldn't have known about the benefits that were reserved for farmers like us […] Once we were aware of our rights, we wanted to demand that these rights be realised." (Interview, 23 December 2014, Quang Binh)

The NGO coordinated local actors to agree on a mobilisation strategy but each actor was approached in a different way. Local villagers were integrated into a range of advocacy activities as empowered spokespersons able to directly address higher level government and SFC officials. The commune and district governments were made more aware of the plight of landless farmers and trained to find policy solutions.

Legitimation by expanding participation

The broadening of the participation base, Johnston *et al.* (2006) explain, is synonymous with increasing legitimacy, as expansion signals the success of an organisation in securing support and resources.

Collective mobilisation is still risk-laden in Vietnam, especially led by VNGOs. As a result, VNGOs tend to engage in what I have called co-opted activism that by implication accommodates rather than challenges the status quo. To reduce potential risk, CCERD deliberately built legitimacy by increasing the number and range of collaborating stakeholders at local and national levels. At the local level, it mobilised the participation of key local actors, namely the MOs, the VFF, district and commune government, and some parts of provincial government. As Mr Linh stated:

> "Obviously when people know little, they will respond little. So, getting them informed becomes a key component in our mobilising structure. Also, through engaging with them, we have articulated so much on-site information about land conflict locally. We have become familiar with

people's problems and understand their concerns. They think of us and come to us as a reliable channel to reflect their concerns about land issues. We carefully recorded all this information, since it would be used as valuable inputs for our mobilising strategy and valuable evidence. This also helped us leverage support from institutions in Hanoi." (Interview, 15 February, 2015, Quang Binh).

To mobilise participation and support at the central level, CCERD allied with a range of critical institutions. With its novel empirical knowledge of land conflict, CCERD became a strong point of reference for the media, other NGOs and especially for the government bodies in charge of reviewing land policies. Its reputation opened doors. This is evidenced in the conference, organised by CCERD and co-hosted with the national NGO TSD, entitled 'Research findings of land conflicts in some regions'. This became a landmark conference which attracted the attention of media, government, donor and civil society representatives. As a result of the conference, land issues, especially those faced by ethnic minority groups, were catapulted on to the national agenda and were covered in the mainstream media.

Besides engaging with the national media, CCERD also used its expertise to attract the collaboration of national political agents responsible for forestland reform (VINAFOR). Indeed CCERD managed to get the forestland conflict in Truong Son commune incorporated into the review report of VINAFOR. This gave even greater national policy exposure to local land conflicts and was instrumental in the subsequent decision of the provincial government to withdraw land from SFC and return it to the local communities.

2.1.2. Grassroots citizen-led activism: The Trees Movement

"You can't make them (i.e. the city government) stop their wrongdoings if what you do is illegitimate. The trees cutting by the government is wrong and undemocratic, but we have to legitimate our acts. We have to legitimate our resistance. We have to show them that we are law-abiding citizens. Our acts are urgent but rightful. We have to use legitimate pressures to shame

them for their wrongdoings". (Interview with a dissident, 01 May 2015, Hanoi)

A good point of entry is to clarify a crucial point regarding legitimacy in the TM, i.e. to whom were the TM campaigners deemed legitimate?

The TM was a social movement, the impact of which was time-bound and transient. Hence, its claims and need for legitimation are different from those of CCERD. Notwithstanding this, it still had to secure and maintain its identity as a legitimate actor or movement. More explicitly than the NGO, the TM's legitimacy was attached to the number of people it could attract to sign up. Increased participation signals wider social acceptance of the validity and propriety of its actions, i.e. the two core values of legitimacy. This is in line with Johnston *et al.*'s (2006) argument linking legitimacy to widened participation.

The TM sought to be legitimate to the state and the public. This was because the state response remained uncertain and unpredictable, as the quote above implies. For the TM, this makes the task of aligning mobilisation actions to the state discourse very challenging. Moreover, the government was the target of the TM's mobilisation and activism. So the TM had to ensure it was seen as legitimate by the same agent it was trying to mobilise against. It needed to be seen as legitimate by the government otherwise it faced oppression and repression. The only way to do this is demonstrate growing public support. To draw in more people, the TM needed to convince them of its legitimacy by reinforcing its rightfulness, validity, urgency and propriety. How did the TM legitimate its activism? In the next section, I analyse two overarching strategies undertaken by the green campaigners.

Legitimation by nesting within the state agenda and discourse

The TM had neither formal registration nor legal status, nor did it have CCERD's pragmatic legitimacy. Its legitimacy was much more precarious than that of CCERD. At the same time, the nature of the TM activism was more antagonistic than that of

the NGO case study because its activism directly targeted the government. Legitimation in the TM, therefore, became more challenging. So far, the existing literature on legitimacy has been much focused on NGO legitimacy and far much less on social movements. Efforts on how to define legitimacy in the context of a social movement are under developed. In this thesis, legitimacy has been construed in terms of how to be socially accepted and recognised for those acts that are right in reason and in nature, proper, admissible and justifiable and thus, enjoy the support of an identifiable community. This definition has been adopted to provide a broad understanding of the term and it encompasses the strategies of legitimation by the TM. To secure legitimacy, the TM had to work very hard to convince participants and the wider community that their actions were desirable, urgent, appropriate and valid by making connections between proposed activities and the state agenda, while also provoking people to transform their love for the city into direct action.

Like CCERD, the grassroots activism in the TM also had to connect to the state agenda and discourse to work with and legitimate its mobilisation. Faced with greater political constraints, the TM mobilisers could not let their activism be divorced from the state official discourse and their link was built around fundamental citizenship rights as guaranteed in the national constitution and state-propagandised maxims about democratic rights and norms. The kind of rights included freedom of speech, freedom of association and demonstration, and the right to take part in social and state management. A senior official of a foreign embassy in Hanoi put it as follows:

> "Oh… you know … I am surprised. It seems to me they (i.e. the trees campaigners) are more organised and they change the tactics. They express themselves in a nice way, I mean in a legitimate way. Especially, they refer to the national constitution, human rights council, and the prime minister's speech… You know… it is interesting. They are using exactly the government's own words. They use it as a starting point, as a point of entry for their actions. This surprises me and it signals a sign of the development in civil society action in Vietnam now, I suppose." (Interview, 21 April, 2015, Hanoi)

By nesting within the state agenda, the TM campaigners demonstrated that their acts were rightful, valid, and safeguarded by the highest level legal document of the country, i.e. the Constitution. This gave the TM much needed 'guarded' shelter for activism. It also helped the TM prove to the wider community that its acts were

legitimate, since they were in accord with the state agenda and discourse. The legitimacy generated helped to draw in wider participation, which as indicated above, signalled broader societal acceptance. The TM stated on its Facebook page the following:

> "Our constitution allows us to speak out to show our love for our city, to act for our city. Tree after tree is being cut down, please join us to exercise our constitutional rights to save our trees".

> *(Excerpt from* Facebook page of Group Green Hanoi dated 04 April, 2015
> https://www.facebook.com/groups/vimothanoixanh*)*

In addition to adopting the official state legal documents in its mobilising strategy, the TM also appropriated state-propagated maxims on democratic governance, such as "People know, people discuss, people do, and people monitor" and converted them into glaring slogans written on the banners raised up in the street protests. Coe (2015) argues that when civil society networks in an authoritarian setting employ state-propagated values to frame mobilisation, they can be effective. Articulating the state discourse and agenda rather than opposing it, the TM campaigners criticised the city government's unusual decision to cut down healthy trees, whilst at the same time they questioned the state's adherence to its propagandised commitments and agenda. In other words, the state was violating the values that it was propagating itself. This framing strategy was successful. The government had to listen and make concessions by temporarily halting the project, sanctioning key staff and investigating fraud and irregular allegations. This was in response to public pressure that was not triggered by aggressive violent actions but by the love and responsibilities of the city citizens.

The argument I propose is confirmed further when we look at the way the state responded to different groups in the TM. Whilst Group 6700 People (organised around registered NGO staff members) was treated with consent, Group Green Hanoi (independent activists and dissidents) was met with force. For example, when group 6700 People turned up at the government offices to address the citizens' petition, there was no evidence of obvious state aggression. However when Group Green Hanoi did the same act, it met with resistance, discrimination and intimidation. The difference in state treatment reflects the different levels of legitimacy enjoyed by the groups that made up the TM.

The above reflection draws attention to the point that 'who is legitimate in the eyes of the state' really matters. Legitimacy shapes the ability to act and shapes state response accordingly. Let us consider Group 6700 People. Its legitimacy allowed it to be a pioneering group within the TM, but it also restrained the group from taking forward proposals when these were judged to be susceptible to higher levels of state surveillance and perhaps intimidation. In contrast, although Group Green Hanoi did not enjoy the same legitimacy as Group 6700 People, it allowed the TM to advance a form of activism that challenged the status quo and questioned state adherence to its committed agenda and propagandised values. It allowed the group to overtly demand that the city leadership prosecute those responsible for the tree cutting project. While its legitimacy was more precarious than the registered group, it enjoyed space to advance a more progressive form of activism. However it was careful not to act lawlessly. It could not afford to draw attention to itself on the basis of unlawfulness. Its repertoire of mobilising actions involved both conventional events such as direct meetings with the government or using legal means to question the legitimacy of the government project, and unconventional methods such as peaceful demonstrations on five consecutive Sundays in the city centre. The surreptitious symbiosis between the registered (Group 6700 People) and unregistered group (Group Green Hanoi) was instrumental in maintaining the momentum for the movement and refraining early state repression. Taken altogether, this created unprecedented civic resistance amid the increasing level of state intimidation and coercion.

Legitimation by expanding membership

While CCERD mainly played the role of an intermediary between the local community and relevant government agents to help its represented groups claim land, the TM groups with their cross-cutting membership base, used this as an enabling factor for their legitimacy building and became directly involved in addressing collective issues. The latter played multiple roles: as an intermediary, a leader, and also a member standing side by side with others in the movement.

The second strategy the TM employed to secure legitimacy was to expand its membership base. There are two salient points to be considered here: voluntariness and leadership, with the former concerning ordinary people and the latter associated with the role of the core teams of the TM groups. In what follows I look at both points.

It is important to clarify that the TM membership was not formally established, was voluntarily, loosely and horizontally structured, and cut across the social spectrum. It was quite different from CCERD which dealt with a target constituency (local landless farmers) and engaged in a 'contractual' or 'exchange' relationship implemented in the delivery of social services to clients. For CCERD, legitimacy depends on delivery of services. For the TM, legitimacy depends on moral support or voluntariness. The bottom line for the TM groups was to convince people that their acts were moral and consistent with certain social norms and beliefs (Zelditch and Walker, 2003). What were these norms or beliefs? A conviction that, 'saving the old trees' meant saving Hanoi and triggered greater accountability.

The leadership of the TM groups played a discernible role in mobilising wider social support. Behind the scenes, they made strategic calculations of when to do what and how. As trees were being cut down, the leadership had to make quick decisions that could be implemented swiftly and which could have impact in a short timescale. All of this needed to be achieved without inviting state repression. The TM movement brought together an unusual alliance involving Group 6700 People (i.e. driven by registered NGO staff members) and Group Green Hanoi (i.e. driven by independent activists and dissidents). This phenomenon is path-breaking for civil society activism in Vietnam, and acts as an incubator for future organised citizen-led activism.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the TM Facebook groups were structured as concentric circles, whereby the core position of each group was inhabited by administrators and task force teams. The core team of each group was aware that in order to make the collective action a success, it was needed to expand the participation base. An independent activist, also a frontline member of Group Green Hanoi, explained this in the following terms:

> "In any social movement, you don't win by only having support from your base, you have to get the crossover support of those in the middle. Between

simply clicking the 'Like' button to taking to the streets there exists a huge gap of consciousness and motivation because of fear, lack of information, lack of awareness, lack of safety, fear of suppression, etc. All of these become an impediment for people to act and we need to reach out to as many as possible, including those who are still undecided, so as to get them involved and secure wider support". (Interview, 20 April 2015, Hanoi)

As this implies, understanding the nature of different levels of participation was pivotal. It was important to secure the participation of those still fearful or undecided in order to take the activist agenda forward. With a broadened membership base, the TM was able to make claims based on its legitimacy, which in turn helped it to avoid or at least minimise the coercion risk. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that the TM did not claim to stand or act for a certain group. Instead, it sought to reach out to the general populace. They targeted every Hanoian and then showed to the government that they were acting as Hanoi citizens who loved their city, not on behalf of any political group. It is also important to note that even though the leading groups in the TM differed in terms of backgrounds (independent activists vs. NGO staff, for instance), they quickly united behind the scenes to maintain a non-violent and peaceful spirit.

The first strategy the TM utilised to mobilise more participation concentrated on rights awareness raising, as well as injecting urgency into their calls for action. The government tree-cutting project was a violation of democratic procedures; with the authorities having failed to consult with the people, failed to embrace people's opinions and concerns seriously, and failed to be accountable for their acts. The TM not only resorted to citizenship rights protected in the Constitution to generate legitimacy for its actions, but it also tactfully appealed to other specific national state laws and policies to expose the misconduct of the city government. These included the law on the capital city and the Government Decree No. 64/2010 on urban green trees management. It also appealed to state-propagated democratic values.

Another tactic that the TM campaigners effectively used to help people mitigate fear and participate in the movement was to disclose on the mobilising groups' pages or key campaigners' pages the experiences they encountered with security officers. This was to help new participants be well informed and prepared to respond and react in similar situations. In practice, the law on demonstrations has

yet to be approved in Vietnam, yet the conversation excerpted below between a security officer and a tree protester at the police station illustrates how well the green campaigners were equipped with legal information:

> Security: Tell me why you were at the lake (i.e. the rally point) this morning? Do you know that rallying in crowds is illegal?
>
> Protester: (silent)
>
> Security: Tell me why you were at the lake?
>
> Protester: It is my personal freedom. I am not obliged to answer your question about my personal freedom, nor am I obliged to report to you about it. By the way, there is no law saying that being at the lake is illegal.
>
> Security: Do you know that rallying in crowds is illegal?
>
> Protester: OK, just to save my time and your time, I have to tell you this: demonstration is one of fundamental citizenship rights mentioned in the Article 25 of the Constitution. At present, the National Assembly hasn't passed the law on demonstration, this postponement means the government has not shown responsibility to the people on this. And there is no specific law stipulating that public demonstration is not allowed. So people are allowed to do what is not forbidden by law."
>
> Security: (silent and moves to the next question)
>
> *(Excerpt from Facebook of an activist, 26 April 2014, Hanoi)*

This excerpt is among numerous experiences shared by key green protesters on their Facebook pages, aimed at improving the awareness of the green participants, especially newcomers, about the citizenship rights that they were entitled to and to reiterate the legitimacy of the movement. The consciousness of citizenship rights was improved remarkably among the TM participants because of these tactics. When people know about their rights, they will feel confident and take action. This improvement could be seen clearly in many students who participated in the TM, when they refused to be present at the police station when being requested to do so. One student expressed this as follows:

> "The public security sent a request to my house in the form of an invite, whereby they wanted me to be present at the police station at the time X on the date Y. But I refused to do so because I didn't commit any crimes. Citizens cannot be arrested or detained unless they are caught committing crimes or there is an arrest warrant. If invited to the police station, I have

the right to refuse an invite because this is my right." (Interview, 30 April 2015, Hanoi)

The TM campaigners also demonstrated their solidarity to stand side by side with the participants who were harassed by public security. For example, Group 6700 People set up an 'advisory unit' with the participation of lawyers to provide legal support for those who were harassed or intimidated by public security.

The TM groups successfully tapped into another important trigger for mobilisation: people's emotion. The trees are important for Hanoians because they symbolise the city's beauty, uniqueness, and attractiveness. The image of large healthy century old trees was portrayed by the TM as a historic symbol of revolutionary victory Hanoi of days gone by. Cutting the trees was like cutting Hanoi's history and roots.

Vocabulary also played an important role in the TM's mobilising structures. The mobilising messages the TM groups articulated reflected urgency, severity, efficacy as well as correctness of participation and taking action. These messages were transmitted throughout the movement, not in a hierarchical manner, but horizontal one and on the basis of lawfulness, collectivism, and the exclusion of any act or intention that might cause violence.

The TM offers an interesting insight into how different mobilising groups sought to stand up to the government's arbitrary decision to cut down thousands of large old trees, as well as challenge the hegemonic norms of the ruling power. As has already been seen, while both case studies have different organisational structures and positions of legitimacy, they both have to operate within the state agenda and discourse to seek legitimacy for their activism. Although CCERD has a stronger standing in terms of legitimacy, it is still exposed to risk. The TM meanwhile had a more precarious level of legitimacy, managed more confrontational forms of activism, and yet still had to couch its activities within the state agenda and discourse.

2.2. Autonomy of activism

Autonomy is the second aspect that has strong analytical resonance in civil society activism in contemporary Vietnam. I have used autonomy to refer to the ability of civil society groups to act and determine their course of actions in accord with their interests or values and desires when negotiating especially with the state. CCERD was embedded within the state due to its obligation to secure formal recognition. This embeddedness opened up avenues for critical activism that targeted local power holders' performance. It gave CCERD guarded or protected room for manoeuvre. By comparison the TM was an informal civilian network that had no formal connection to the state. It therefore lacked the guarded space enjoyed by CCERD. This gave it more freedom to support riskier acts of mobilisation but also put it under constant threat of repression.

The different degrees of embeddedness civil society groups enjoy have opened up different types of space that have shaped how they express, organise and orchestrate activism. I argue that given the extent of embeddedness that is available to them, civil society groups become attuned to their connections to political power and decide to act accordingly. They become strategic by manipulating their differing levels of embeddedness.

2.2.1. NGO-led activism

CCERD is a registered local NGO embedded within the state via a web of legalistic requirements and bureaucratic procedures, but it is financially independent from the state. This means it has to work within legal bounds and is constrained in terms of what it can say about or do with the state. It mostly works through and within the bureaucratic structures of the state such as the local government, the VFF, and mass organisations and advocates a collaborative co-opted form of activism that upholds rather than challenges the status quo. Working through these existing formal structures opens up opportunities for the NGO to manipulate the links it has with these institutions. For instance, working with the VFF opened up guarded space for CCERD (see Chapter 5) to forge productive links with local government. This resonates with the concept of 'embedded autonomy' put forward by Peter Evans (2012), which argues that developmental states are successful when they are

both autonomous from and embedded in a dense network of social ties that enable them to aggregate social inputs, negotiate and provide appropriate incentives for social institutions to thrive. While Evans' account deals with state institutions, it is applicable to civil society activism. Being embedded in the state enabled CCERD to create productive ties with state institutions, and this created a guarded space for CCERD to pursue its agenda. CCERD managed therefore to convert its embeddedness into productive ties.

CCERD took advantage of guarded space to generate autonomy for itself, building its legitimacy as a social development organisation and as a friend and ally to relevant local actors. As outlined in Chapter 5, CCERD developed its activism over time. As it became more confident, it became more political through its involvement in community mobilisation and land advocacy. Nevertheless it had to work hard to find a proper tone, language, strategy and approach to mobilise effectively. For instance, it had to appeal to the official discourse (i.e. the existing state policies) to frame its mobilising strategy and sought to depoliticise its mobilisation by framing the question of land conflict as one of livelihoods of local people. It championed a collaborative approach and exercised self-censored mobilisation by following closely the existing formal rules. It also had to establish vertical coalitions with formal structures at the national level by negotiating relations behind the scenes. It could not be seen to be actively mobilising at this level because overt antagonism to the state would threaten its legitimacy and existence.

CCERD activism did not breach the limits of institutionalised mobilisation nor did it attempt to change the formal rules. It mobilised to ensure existing laws (i.e. the existing central state policies) were properly enacted. This change, Leftwich (2008) describes, is that which takes place within the existing rules. He explains, while its outcome is unlikely to produce radical shifts in the structure and relations of power, change within the limit of what is permitted does not mean that it is insignificant. The CCERD director accepts this:

> "We have no intention of challenging or changing the existing rules of the formal structure. We want to help the government instead of complaining about it. Our actions are to help local government to deliver better policy outcomes for the local poor." (Interview, 15 January 2015, Quang Binh)

Given the embedded nature of the NGO-led activism, it would be naïve to conclude that this embedded form will become a driving force for civil society activism that promotes radical change in state-society power relations in Vietnam. Nevertheless, NGO led change is not inconsequential. Registered NGOs in Vietnam, as observed, have been seeking political opportunities to engage further in the policy process, either through state-led public consultation or their own initiatives. Their efforts are aimed at delivering pro-poor policy outcomes to the marginalised communities. Such incremental change has transformative potential.

2.2.2. Grassroots citizen-led activism: The Trees Movement

Unlike CCERD, the TM was not embedded in the state and worked outside bureaucratic structures of the state, combining online activism and offline activism. Since it was not embedded, it could exercise its autonomy on the margins of what is acceptable and engaging in more antagonistic activism. This brought significant risks.

The TM was in fact more vocal and critical than CCERD. Given that, it did not have long-standing engagements with local communities, it had to take advantage quickly of opportunities that opened up. In so doing it had to be able to mobilise people. The real comparative advantage of the TM was it could react quickly, and react with numbers.

The TM had a broad-based focus for its activism, i.e. environmentalism. This helped it recruit a wide section of the population and also allowed it to appeal to different kind of emotions and motivations. The Group Green Hanoi posted on its group page:

> "[…] We need to create a precedent, i.e. the government must be accountable for its wrongdoings. […] we, citizens, are entitled to request a transparent and accountable government and we can do it. Public protests are only one component of our action agenda that step by step aims to promote a transparent and responsible government."

The TM activism was in principle anchored in self-determined citizenship and self-organisation, and aimed at demanding a more accountable democratic government. It had greater resonance for the political elites, because it involved activated citizens who voluntarily took to the streets. The TM participants understood the need to act because they were owners of the city. While the embedded activism observed in CCERD represented a long-term, sustainable co-operation and wanted to deliver change within the existing rules, the TM was more autonomous and focused on a sporadic, time-bound, and issue-based agenda. The TM wanted to change the rules of the game (Leftwich, 2008) (i.e. the decision making process must be more participatory and accountable otherwise people would resist), which differs from CCERD's seeking change within the existing rules. In sum, while it signalled stronger resonance in terms of provoking the ruling power than CCERD, the TM's impact was time-bound and transient.

While the TM overall embodied an autonomous form of activism, its component mobilising groups were characterised by different kinds of connection to the state. Group 6700 People (registered NGO based) took advantage of its embedded connection to the state to become the path-breaking group of the movement. It is also because of this relation that made them diminish some of its activism. Being at a more distant position from the state, Group Green Hanoi had more freedom to advance the movement further and challenge the status quo. The TM also reflected upon how the state exercised its selectivity towards different mobilising groups with regard to their degree of institutional embeddedness. The state was more tolerant towards the groups with closer connection and more coercive to those groups dissociated from its auspices.

2.3. Formality and Informality of activism

"King's rule stops at the village bamboo gate" is an ancient Vietnamese proverb and captures nicely the tone and pace of Vietnamese politics. Specifically it highlights how the formal (i.e. rules) has limits and the informal (village) remains powerful. For

both, CCERD and the TM, the interplay between formality and informality was important for the success of their respective mobilisations.

In the thesis, formality of activism has been construed as a process through which different civil society groups overtly engage with and or perform their acts through formal channels and structures. Informality on the other hand refers to a process through which different groups engage with and or perform their acts through informal channels and structures in either an overt or covert manner. In this light, CCERD can be seen as a more formal organisation and the TM a more informal one. If the membership of the former is organised, discrete, and hierarchical, the membership of the latter is loose, unstructured, and non-hierarchical.

In terms of the formal-informal continuum, both CCERD and the TM shared certain characteristics. Both acted within the law and, even if there were some differences, both acted with reference to state priorities or discourse. Second, both made use of both formal and informal channels and as such both faced the same challenge of how to manage this. In the following sections, I focus on the differences between the two organisational forms.

2.3.1. NGO-led activism

In the first place, the formality of the CCERD-led activism could be evidenced in its strategic use of its available structural linkages to state bodies and agents. Structural links, according to Houtzager (2003), bind state and society together, and offer opportunities for collective actors representing subordinated social groups to develop strategies of action. Houtzager's structural links in this case study include official institutional arrangements such as the Politburo's Resolution No 28 and the Government's Decree 200 on forest land reform, and formal structures such as mass organisation Vietnam Fatherland Front, and the national NGO based network located in Hanoi.

The most important formal opportunity for CCERD appropriated was the established legal framework on forest land reform. This was the hook that the NGO used to legitimise its land mobilisation. Although there was local level resistance, this was overcome by reference to a higher level order.

The legal framework was a necessary but not sufficient condition for successful mobilisation. The NGO had to incorporate other formal support into its mobilising structure, and it had to continually find ways to forge links with the government power structures. This is where the collaboration with the party-owned mass organisation (MO), the Fatherland Front (VFF) was so important.

In Vietnam, the VFF and other MOs are organised from central to grassroots levels, and are are regarded not only as propagation brigades but also as gatekeepers for the party state. As a gatekeeper, the VFF could easily have created barriers to prevent the NGO from gaining access to the targeted local community groups or to divert it to less sensitive areas. This kind of hindrance was seen in the TM when the MOs in the neighbourhood clusters, along with the civil defence forces and public security officers turned up at the homes of the campaigners and tried to stop them from joining the rallies. They were also active in disseminating derogatory information about the protesters across the neighbourhoods.

CCERD deliberately targeted the VFF. As discussed in Chapter 5, it signed an agreement contract with the VFF to co-implement its activities. In co-opting the VFF, CCERD could take advantage its large-scale membership and its established structural links with local government structures. CCERD convinced the VFF that it could play a key role in delivering benefits to the poor. This was strategically important for the VFF. At the same time the VFF would access capacity building inputs as well as some funds to complement their meagre allocation of state budget. So in effect: a win-win situation. The involvement of the VFF meant that doors were opened with local authorities and any potential resistance was weakened. Mr Linh clarified further:

> "The FF's involvement helped undermine the cynicism or sensitivity rumoured around land claims for the ethnic minorities and also formalised our mobilisation. Formalisation here, I mean, is about transmitting the

grassroots land claims to the upper levels in a formal way." (Interview, 20 February, 2015, Quang Binh)

In many ways CCERD illustrates a good case of an organisation building success on the back of its ability to work effectively behind the scenes in more informal ways. Thus its formal presentation depends on the behind the scenes work. A good example of the behind scenes work is the relationship CCERD forged with the NGO Toward Sustainable Development (TSD). TSD again is a formal, registered NGO with national outreach. CCERD was keen to collaborate with TSD because it had good connections with political bodies and agents in Hanoi such as VINAFOR, as well as with donors and the media. Being a local based NGO, it was difficult for CCERD to directly access these resources. Moreover it did not want to overtly provoke national government structures, and in many ways TSD managed that relation for CCERD. CCERD on the other hand provided much needed grassroots information on land conflicts to TSD so that TSD could engage with national government more effectively. TSD's success not only catapulted CCERD's locality into national government's spotlight but also put pressure on local government to deal with land conflicts in CCERD's operational area.

How did this relation benefit CCERD's mobilisation strategy? Earlier in the thesis, I referred to the escalating land conflict in Quang Binh. VINAFOR was tasked with reviewing the implementation of the Politburo's Resolution No 28, i.e. the party's official document on forest land reform. In order to conduct the review, VINAFOR had to collect on-site evidence concerning forestland management across different parts of the country. CCERD came to know about this plan from TSD, and started working behind the scenes to have Quang Binh included in the review. It was successful and the result of this is that Quang Binh suddenly received national policy attention. National media were also invited to the site. Local officials came to know about this but when they turned up they had little choice but to commit to the agenda set out by CCERD. The relationship between CCERD and TSD resonates with what Mica *et al.* (2015) refer to as 'formally embedded informality', i.e. a combination of formal and informal approaches that are carefully managed to achieve particular goals.

Informality was also extended to the local authorities with frequent interactions such as dinner meetings, casual exchanges and meetings. Nevertheless, Mr Linh explained that this type of informal activity was not deployed on a frequent scale:

> "Land mobilisation is not meant to bring benefits to CCERD, but to local communities and common interests. So, it is essential that mobilising activities be official, open, and transparent. If we make the relationships between CCERD and the local authorities personalised and clandestine, we will end up with some consequences that we don't expect. For example, we might cause more suspicion. If this happens, collective mobilisation will become even harder. At worst, they might think that our mobilisation tactics derive from some sort of conspiracy or are set up for personal interest".

Also, regarding informality, CCERD appropriated the informal structures that it established, i.e. self-help voluntary groups, and placed them at the core of the mobilisation process. During mobilisation, CCERD used these members as spokespersons for the local communities in interactions with government officials of all levels, the media and the SFC.

CCERD mainly appealed to formal channels and structures to orchestrate its mobilisation. However that is not to say it bypassed informal activism, for as Scott (1998) pointed out, formality always has an informal underpinning. Underpinning the NGO's formal activism lies a productive and informal dynamic.

2.3.2. Grassroots citizen-led activism: The Trees Movement

The TM is an informal civilian network and had to appeal to a formal channel at the national level, i.e. the Constitution to organise its activism. In particular, it resorted to the Article 25 and Article 28 of Chapter II of the Constitution, which stipulate clearly the fundamental rights that Vietnamese are entitled to:

> "Article 25: Citizens have the right to freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of access to information, assembly, association and demonstration. The implementation of these rights is stipulated by law.
>
> Article 28: Citizens have the right to participate in state and social management, the right to participate in discussions and to make

recommendations to government agencies on issues at the grassroots, local, and nation levels.

The State shall create conditions for citizens to participate in managing state and society; it shall also be public and transparent in receiving as well as responding to petitions and complaints of citizens."

Notably, from the beginnings of the movement and before taking to the streets, the TM groups sought opportunities to work through interactive formal channels established by the government such as visiting offices open to citizens located in almost every government department. This proved unsuccessful because the government could easily dismiss the TM as an illegitimate organisation and so refused to dialogue with them. When Group 6700 People for example turned up at the city government bodies to address the public petition, they were received in a very lukewarm way. It was the indifference of state officials that led the campaigners to decide upon more street based activism.

Another important formal activity that the TM quickly implemented was to organise a national workshop, which aimed to obtain scientific opinions concerning the propriety and legal basis of the tree cutting project. The scientific outputs of the activity were employed effectively by other mobilising groups in the subsequent periods of the movement, especially as useful inputs for their legal struggles.

The rise of the TM reflected the ambivalence of the formal structures, such as the party-owned MOs, which failed to play their constitutional role as the conduit between the authorities and the local people when social tensions escalated. Instead of providing support to the TM, the MOs were among the forces that tried to impede the green campaigners from attending the rallies. This underlines the fact that being state affiliates, the MOs do not want to move beyond their officially sanctioned channels to work with unauthorised groups and hence bring into doubt their claim to be 'representative' of the people.

The TM, like CCERD, had to manage its public actions and behind the scenes work. While publically therefore the TM seemed to be loosely structured and non-hierarchical, behind the scenes it was very well-organised, strategic and professionally-led. Publically it presented itself as a movement that relied on quite a lot of informal or non-conventional channels such as petition signing, adding TM

logos on Facebook, tying ribbons around old trees and so forth. However the interactions and negotiations behind the scenes were strategic, organised, prepared, and professional. A lot of efforts went in for example to deciding how to set up direct meetings with the city government, how to generate inspiring mobilising messages, how to create impactful banners and placards, how to organise rally points and street protests, and so forth. The overriding fear of attracting state repression meant that behind the scenes planning had to be meticulous and discerned.

The TM showed its strategic guile in the way it took advantage of political opportunities. For example it successfully transformed the provocative statements by the government officers into triggers for mobilisation. The Tree Hugs Picnic was a response to defamatory comments and accusations levelled at TM by a government official. The TM responded swiftly:

 "All we want to do is to save the trees and the city but the government doesn't want to communicate with us. There are so many things that we have to do, and we have to do without hesitation, because they don't give us even a minute to spare. Tree after tree is being chopped down. We are trying as much as we can. It might be not enough, or we may be too late to save trees. However, because of this, we have to raise our voice so that there will be no more environmental destruction like this in the time to come. We are not the ones who try to hinder human progressiveness. What we all demand is transparency, consultation and public respect. Nature needs also to be respected. Tomorrow we will go for the Trees Hug Picnic to show our love to the city, our love to the nature, our love to the environment. We can sing, dance, or hug trees…"

(Quoted from fanpage of Group 6700 People, 18 March 2015
https://www.facebook.com/pg/manfortree/notes/?ref=page_internal)

To conclude, the mobilisation strategies of CCERD and the TM had similarities and differences. While CCERD can be seen as a form of cooperative, embedded, and structurally-linked activism; the TM reflects a more autonomous and antagonistic form.

3. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have compared my two cases by looking specifically at three areas underpinning my analytical framework: legitimacy, autonomy, and (in)formality. The chapter has argued that civil society groups in authoritarian contexts, such as Vietnam, have to couch their activities within the state agenda and discourse to exercise their activism, irrespective of their organisational structures, positions of legitimacy, as well as degrees of autonomy. On the face of it, NGO-led activism appears to be formal and the TM more informal. Nevertheless, behind the scenes they both had to manage formal and informal opportunities and relations. This finding has led me to question the distinction often made between NGO-led and citizen-led activism. It suggests that in authoritarian contexts there are significant similarities in the way these different activisms are articulated and operationalised.

Both organisations needed different forms of legitimacy. The TM was transient, time-bound and issue-based whereas CCERD was a local long-standing social development organisation. What constitutes legitimacy for both organisation, differs. The TM needed to convince the public that its struggle was citizen focused and democratic. CCERD needed to deliver to landless farmers and therefore had to show that its work and mobilisation were contributing to this. It also had to show the government that it was operating within its agreed mandate. I highlighted this core distinction by associating CCERD with pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy needs, and the TM with more normative legitimacy needs.

Both organisations had different levels and kinds of autonomy. CERD was, through registration, connected to the state and had to work to an agreed and controlled mandate. Its connections to the state restricted some aspects of autonomy but of course opened up areas of activity or created room for manoeuvre that enhanced autonomy. The TM had no formal connection to the state and was in that respect more autonomous. However its lack of connection also meant it had no 'guarded or semi protected' room for manoeuvre. The risk of state repression was higher. So while it was able to support more antagonistic mobilisations, it was very restricted in terms of autonomy. The two cases show the significance of connections to the formal political structure, their impact on the types of mobilisation that are

possible, and their influence on organisations to mobilise and operate autonomously.

Both CCERD and the TM had to manage an interplay of formal and informal connections and events in order to orchestrate their activism. However CCERD worked mostly through formal structures and channels and had an identifiable leadership while the TM deployed far more informal channels and had a far more diffusive leadership.

CONCLUSION

The thesis has examined contemporary civil society activism in Vietnam and reflected upon the politics of state-society relations in the same country. This has been achieved through an analysis of two contrasting forms of activism, NGO-led and citizen-led activism with an examination that has located these in a wider historical context. The research has sought to understand how civil society groups characterised by different organisational structures, degrees of autonomy, and positions of legitimacy orchestrated collective action.

1. Key research findings

This research has demonstrated that forms of activism are closely associated with the degrees of autonomy, positions of legitimacy and organisational structures pertaining to specific civil society groups. Hence, understanding these features provides important insights into their actions and decisions. By highlighting these distinctive features, the thesis challenges those civil society theories that overplay the distinctions between citizen-led and NGO-led mobilisations, and those that portray an autonomous and conflictual state-society relationship. These are not analytically agile enough for authoritarian contexts like Vietnam. In authoritarian contexts such as Vietnam, civil society groups, regardless of whether they are formal and registered or informal and unregistered, have to couch their activities within the state agenda and discourse in order to implement an activist agenda.

Existing scholarship on civil society activism in Vietnam focuses on either state-led or society-led change, leading to two different political narratives: a strong state or a vibrant civil society. While under the former, the transformative role of the state is highlighted, under the latter, it is society that drives change. The thesis has contested these polarities with the argument that a strong state does not always mean state effectiveness and accountability, and that a vibrant civil society does not always lead to positive social outcomes such as political reform, democratisation

and so forth. Civil society vibrancy is still largely contingent on the space opened up for it.

It is important in concluding this thesis to retrace the process through which I addressed these issues. Following the thesis introduction that presented my research puzzle, chapter one provided a background understanding of state-society relations in Vietnam drawing on relevant existing literature. It examined two key perspectives, the strong state and the vibrant civil society, locating both in an historical overview of the ever evolving political landscape in Vietnam. It also provided a historically-rooted overview of civil society in Vietnam, with a particular focus on VNGOs and critical periods of civil society development.

Chapter two critically discussed the theoretical aspects regarding civil society activism in authoritarian contexts and particularly presented an analytical framework for understanding civil society activism in the Vietnamese context. The framework identified three distinctive features of civil society activism: legitimacy, autonomy, and formality or informality of activism. These features are anchored in the literature but were also subsequently validated and triangulated through my data collection and analysis. Whilst applied to the case of Vietnam, I would argue they are relevant to authoritarian contexts more generally.

Chapter three detailed the methods and research process I followed by tracing how I came up with my in-depth case studies, data collection, research questions as well as how I addressed research challenges and ethical issues.

The focus shifted in Chapter four to the start of my empirical analysis. Chapters 4 and 5 examined how the two in-depth case study participants orchestrated their mobilisation. Specifically, Chapter 4 explored a high-profile case of civil society action that was performed by different informal civilian groups. It showcased a broad-based citizen-led movement established to protest against the arbitrary government decision to cut down thousands of large old trees lining the streets of Hanoi. I used this case study to argue that citizen-led activism, an emerging form of civic engagement, is likely to play a critical role in effecting change and (re)structuring state-society relations in Vietnam. This is because it signalled to the

political elites that ordinary civilians are able to organise rightful civic actions to oppose unpopular or unaccountable government decisions and policies. In particular, this form of activism accentuates the 'contested' nature of civil society activism, which has been long obscured by the rhetoric that civil society under authoritarian regimes like Vietnam is either co-opted or suppressed. This case study also points to the potential significance of critical green activism. Environmental issues have the potential to attract broad participation and can open new avenues for civilians in authoritarian contexts like Vietnam to mobilise for their rights and demand a more accountable government.

Chapter 5 presented a case study of NGO-led activism. It described how the NGO took advantage of its connections to the state, working within and through bureaucratic structures and negotiating structural links at different levels. Since it was more embedded within the state than the citizen-led movement, it was able to pursue a more collaborative approach. This led to a local government response that favoured the clients of the NGO.

Chapter 6 engaged directly in comparative analysis of the two contrasting forms of activism based on three domains indicated in the analytical framework: legitimacy, autonomy, and formality or informality of activism. The chapter identified similarities as well as differences between the NGO and the citizen-led movement, and analysed the implications of this for successful mobilisation as well as for state-society relations in Vietnam.

Whilst the TM has portrayed a transient, time-bound and antagonistic form of activism, in which discrete informal civilian groups organised themselves and stood up to the state, the NGO-led activism showcased a more sustainable, embedded, and collaborative form. Despite being an informal structure and exercising contestation, the TM still had to couch its activities within the state agenda and discourse to orchestrate its collective actions. The unprecedented phenomenon of a symbiotic relationship between registered (NGOs) and unregistered (dissidents and independent activists) groups in the TM, served as an incubator for more organised and antagonistic collective action. My analysis concluded that the embedded NGO-led activism is unlikely to produce radical shifts in the political structure and power relations of Vietnam, but this is not to say that its significance is trivial. The two case

studies, with different organisational structures and strategies of legitimation, illustrate two contrasting forms of activism as well as different forms of contentious politics in Vietnam ranging from dialogue to advocacy through to contention.

By providing in-depth insights into the key themes of legitimacy, autonomy, and (in)formality, I have addressed directly both research questions one and two of my thesis. With respect to Question 1 "What organisational forms do civil society groups adopt and how are these positioned in relation to the state?", my analysis has demonstrated that civil society groups with different organisational structures (either formally or informally organised), degrees of autonomy (the ability to act given the extent of embeddedness in the state) and positions of legitimacy (either given or ungiven), have to build and maintain legitimacy for their actions and organisational structures. In authoritarian contexts, such as Vietnam, state authority is still dominant and hence, any civil society activism has to operate within this dominance. The two cases show that there are quite different ways of operating within this dominance, with quite different outcomes.

Question 2 asked: "What strategies of engagement do civil society groups adopt in order to achieve their goals". My analysis suggests that under authoritarian regimes such as in Vietnam, all forms of activism are constrained by the state. Unregistered and informal groups mostly deploy unconventional methods and informal channels such as public demonstrations, civil disobedience, and petition signing while registered and formal groups mainly engage with policy makers and working through formal channels. However, my analysis also emerges that in order to make collective action a success these groups have to exercise activism in line with the state agenda and discourse.

The section that follows addresses Question 3 of my research: "How do the contrasting forms of civil society activism illuminate the evolving state-society relations in Vietnam?"

2. Reflecting on the politics of state-society relations in Vietnam

My research sought to examine contemporary civil society activism and reflect on its implications for broader state-society relations in the changing political landscape of Vietnam. As I collected data for my research I was struck by the perspectives of my interviewees. These can be divided into two broad camps. Those who worked with or for the NGO tended to have a more optimistic outlook and tended to see a future in which civil society would function effectively in Vietnam. In the vast majority of cases, this perspective was held by people who worked with the state. On the other hand those who participated in the TM tended largely to be more pessimistic and pointed to a future of struggle and antagonism as well as their experiences of repression. In the vast majority of cases, this perspective was held by people who had openly mobilised against the state.

Besides this rather general categorisation what other lessons can be drawn from the two in-depth case studies?

First, civil society groups in authoritarian contexts like Vietnam, have to orchestrate collective action within the state agenda and discourse irrespective of their institutional characteristics. As a consequence, being embedded in the authoritarian state matters, because it offers a relatively guarded space for civil society groups to accomplish collective goals. My research has also shown however that being embedded is not necessarily the same as being co-opted. At the same time civil society actors work to co-opt government. This was evidenced in the NGO case study where CCERD secured the support of national agents in order to pressure local government officials and in effect, force their compliance and cooperation.

Varying levels of embeddedness in the state open up different kinds of space and opportunities. Thus the NGO managed to trigger change but the change was operational in that it ultimately helped the state better implement its policies. This had a positive and arguably transformative impact upon landless farmers but did not produce radical shifts in the political structure and relations of power. Arguably it was never intended to do so. The citizen-led movement instead triggered

relatively little real tangible change but mounted a vocal and broad based protest against the state. This was a more direct challenge to the status quo.

Second, whilst the different civil society groups explored in this thesis are embedded in different organisational structures and occupy different kinds of space, they nevertheless orchestrate their collective actions through similar channels. During the mobilisation process, they both engaged in formal and informal activism to different degrees at different times so as to make full use of the political opportunity structures and maximise impact. The similarity in approaches to successful mobilisation suggests that the distinction made between NGO-led and citizen-led mobilisation may not be that strong. This also challenges the new social movement perspective that indicates that collective actors must work outside the existing bureaucratic structures.

Third, existing scholarship on state-society relations in Vietnam has focused on either state-led or society-led change. My analysis shows that the state is strong not in the sense that it is able to put in place sound institutional preconditions for the rule of law or to facilitate the healthy development of associational life and inclusive economic institutions. It is strong because it monopolises power. This gives it the upper hand when faced with opposition and criticism. The two previous points already unsettle the focus that argues change in Vietnam is society based. Civil society activisms can be transformative but only in an incremental way and, again, only if aligned to state discourse. It is likely that civil society activism will increase in the future and will take on innovative forms and expressions. My analysis suggests this growth and expansion will not necessarily result in a gradual weakening of the state.

Fourth, environmental issues have opened up a new arena of contestation for civil society activism in Vietnam. The severity of ecological damage has helped awaken an emerging urban middle class of citizens, who are more educated, innovative and increasingly concerned about the impacts of unselective, haphazard economic development on the natural habitat and civic life. They have become more vocal and willing to take a stand. Expansive use of digital and technological tools, including social media, has given an impetus to environmental activism in Vietnam. Under its umbrella, online and offline activism have been combined to exercise

public contestation towards laying down the first bricks for a more democratic and rule of law society.

The continued environmental activism, from protecting green trees (2015) to protecting coastal and marine life along with other ecological issues (2016 - to present) questions the state's credibility. Following the Trees Movement in Hanoi in 2015, the green activists continued to take to the streets demanding environmental justice when the heavily polluting discharge from the Taiwanese plant flowed directly into the sea causing a massive dead fish disaster across the north-central Vietnamese coast. This environmental destruction badly damaged the livelihoods of millions of fishermen as well as the eco-system. 2016 was a memorable year of associationalism in Vietnam, with multiple large-scale public protests focusing on environmental protection with thousands of participants across many provinces and cities. Taking to the streets is a civic response by activated citizens faced with ineffective legislative, executive and judicial processes and procedures. While independent activists, including new and old faces, have continued street and online activism, the registered NGOs and local experts have been trying to improve public awareness of the idea of 'environmental justice' through more formal channels such as mainstream media, communication activities and trainings.

There are two increasing signs regarding environmentalism in Vietnam recently that deserve mention. First, environmental activism is no longer urban-based and concentrated in major cities, instead it has been expanded to rural areas and across many regions. Second, environmentalism is now also moving to the areas concentrated by marginalised groups such as Christian communities. The active and large-scale participation of Christians in environmentalism sparks other contentions, which genuinely embarrasses the ruling communists and provokes more sophisticating repressive response. So might the environment open up new activist alliances and collaborations in the future? And how will this shape state-society relations in Vietnam?

It is however not a surprise to find that as environmental activism gathered pace in 2016, state repression seemed also to increase. In 2016 there were more arrests and force used against human rights bloggers, land rights activists and green campaigners. Many rights activists and citizens defending the environment faced

intimidation, legal harassment and physical assault. Repressive measures were used against the peaceful pro-environment marches in two big cities, namely, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Many protesters reported on their Facebook pages that they were beaten and detained for hours. What is more worrying for rights activists and dissidents is that the state crackdown on them still prevails even when foreign diplomats are present. For example, prominent activists could not attend the meeting with President Barack Obama when he visited Hanoi in 2016, because they were detained or put under house arrest. According to the Human Rights Watch Report 2016 for Vietnam (HRW, 2017), at least 19 prominent activists and bloggers were sentenced from 20 months to nine years in prison for their blogging or peaceful rights campaigning. In addition, eight other bloggers were also arrested for allegedly 'conducting propaganda against the state', the term frequently used to denounce critics. This response mirrors perfectly well the analysis presented in my thesis.

Vietnamese politics in 2016 and the early days of 2017 offer an uncertain terrain for dissidents and rights activists. Nevertheless, there are some positive signs arising from the activism led by formally organised associations (registered NGOs). In 2017 two national conferences on 'Promoting Environmental Justice' and the second, 'Annual Conference on the Role of Civil Society to cultural, socio-economic development in Vietnam' were organised by NGOs. So far, these two events have not encountered excessive police intervention. This again mirrors the analysis presented in my thesis because it is likely that the lack of repression is because the NGOs have a 'guarded space' to operate. The fact that they enjoy such guarded space is testament to their resilience, their political astuteness and their continued legitimacy.

The sense of resilience and legitimacy emerges from the rationale used for the second Annual Civil Society Conference, entitled "Philosophy of Development: lessons from the past and orientation to the future". It reads:

> "[…] After thirty years of renovation, Vietnam has made significant achievements in socio-economic development. […] However, accompanying this development is the emergence of many challenges and issues. For example, the widening economic inequality in Vietnam could result in inequalities in political participation. […] The discourse on 'industrialisation

and modernisation' has been advocated to justify the national resource allocation inefficiency, which leads to public debt and bad debt at an alarming level. The rapid urbanisation and commercialisation are eliminating cultural and natural heritage as well as local ethnic knowledge, which could undermine the national competitive advantages of Vietnam in the integration process. National success or failure much depends on the development philosophy upon which that country embarks. After 30 years of renovation, Vietnam has gained enough experience to look back, draw lessons and adjust its development philosophy. With the aim of contributing to the analysis of successes and failures, challenges and obstacles, and lessons learnt for the future development model, the second Annual Civil Society Conference will be focused on "Philosophy of Development: lessons from the past and orientation for the future for Vietnam".

From livelihood development efforts in the early days to the philosophy of development over twenty years later is illustrative of a long journey, which local NGOs have embarked upon. Discussing the philosophy of development is in fact to question the way in which the Communist Party is leading the country.

3. Towards civil society activism in authoritarian contexts: conceptual and empirical contributions

The thesis has provided an in-depth bottom-up account of civil society activism under the one-party rule of Vietnam. While the research does not aim to offer a list of recommendations for civil society activism in authoritarian contexts, it has pointed towards a number of empirical and conceptual contributions given that the existing literature on civil society activism in authoritarian contexts remains limited, fragmentary and lacks a strong theoretical paradigm.

First, this thesis makes an intellectual contribution by offering a conceptual framework that covers different forms of activism, i.e. NGO-led and citizen-led. It develops and applies an analytical framework for understanding civil society built

around legitimacy, autonomy and (in)formality. This has been applied to the context of Vietnam but could, I would argue, be applied in other authoritarian contexts. Above, I go into more detail about how these analytical concepts have helped shed light on my research context.

To date, there has remained an important lacuna in research on understanding relations between legitimacy and social movements. My research fills this gap by providing analytical insights into how the citizen-led movement has legitimised its actions to gain wider civilian participation, thereby making intermediate impact on the power holders. Looking at strategies of legitimation associated with a social movement rather than searching for an answer to the classic question 'whether a social movement is a legitimate structure', offers a more nuanced understanding of the nexus between legitimacy and social movements.

Second, my analysis has led me to question the distinction often made between NGO-led and citizen-led activism. This emerges from an analysis that found significant similarities in the way these different activisms are articulated and operationalised.

Third, the thesis has rejected the tendency that exists in much of the current literature to downplay NGO-led engagement at the expense of more antagonistic forms of activism, such as public protests and social movements. The existing accounts also tend to treat each form of activism separately, but my study has examined both of them with equal focus. The research has argued that a more nuanced understanding of evolving state-society relations can emerge from an approach that places equal emphasis on these different forms. It has involved attempting to problematise and disaggregate civil society activism into specific forms characterised by organisational structures, degrees of autonomy and strategies of legitimation. Moreover, the extent to which these forms have contributed to effecting change and restructuring state-society relations in Vietnam have been explored. These forms also reflect different episodes of contentious politics ranging from dialogue to advocacy through to contention in Vietnam, and illuminate the nature of social mobilisation in the country today.

Finally, the research has provided the first in-depth analysis of the Trees Movement, which is an important empirical contribution. It has also offered a timely bottom-up account of online activism, whereby the role of social media in social and political actions in authoritarian contexts is significant. There is no doubt that the use of social media has opened new arenas where civilians can mobilise and act, such that it is changing the way in which social mobilisation takes place in authoritarian contexts. With the Trees Movement, my research also provides an important empirical contribution to the very thin literature on the surreptitious symbiosis that can exist between NGOs and independent activists or dissidents in authoritarian contexts.

APPENDIX ONE

THEMES FOR INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

A. The NGO – CCERD	
55 interviews (including repeated ones) and 5 focus groups (with NGO staff and community members)	
The NGO leader and staff	• The NGO's emergence and development?
	• What issues does the NGO best resolve?
	• You claim to work for the poor. Why do you think poor people are poor? What do you do to address the extents of poverty at the locality?
	• What does the term 'civil society' and 'community mobilisation' mean to you?
	• What do you think about
	• Fields of activities: micro finance, land advocacy, etc.?
	• Who are the NGO's target populations?
	• What are the root cause of land conflict in the locality? Why did it happen?
	• How do local stakeholders involve?
	• Why did you embark on land mobilisation?
	• What are legal basis you use for mobilisation?
	• What are the strategies of mobilisation? How did you do it?
	• What are the difficulties, challenges as well as opportunities in land mobilisation?
	• How are the relationships between the NGO and mass organisations, local governments, and other NGOs at the local and national level? (i.e. coalition building at different levels)
	• How and Why did you engage with national stakeholders?
	• How did the local government respond to the organisation's involvement?
	• After mobilisation, how do the local actors respond

	to the organisation? How are your relationships with them?
Local communities, local officials, other local NGOs, mass organisations	• How long have you involved in the NGO's activities? Why involved? • What do you think about the NGO's activities at the locality? • What are the recognizable benefits that the NGO delivers to the local communities? • What is the NGO's relationships with you and other local stakeholders? • Why did land conflict happen and remain? What is the root cause? • What have you done regarding this issue? Obstacles? Challenges? • What is the role the NGO plays in claiming land for local communities? • How were land issues resolved since the NGO's involvement? • For you what other development areas should the NGO concentrate on?

B. The Trees Movement

Because of the sensitivity of the subject matter, focus group was therefore not utilized. 45 formal interviews were conducted with a wide range of actors who were closely associated with the movement (e.g. dissidents, independent activists, bloggers, rights activists, local NGO leaders, lawyers, writers, artists, housewives, journalists). However, besides formal interviews, a notable number of informal ones were complementarily conducted to accommodate the specific contexts and to get as much insight as possible of the movement.

Key themes covered in the interviews	• Motivation of participation in the TM? Perceptions of participants? Why involved in the TM? Why vocal? • Methods of activism? • Feelings? Beliefs? Targets? Aspirations? Tactics? • Repertoire of actions?

	- Fear of state repression? - Relationships with other groups in the TM? - State response? - Why did registered groups and unregistered groups have common voice in this movement? - What is the role of social media?

APPENDIX TWO – THEMES USED FOR DATA ANALYSIS

CCERD	- Emergence and Development - Critical phases of organisational development - Community engagement - Coalition building - What are political opportunities? - Transformative events - Strategies/tactics of mobilisation - Participation expansion - Structural links - Types of legitimacy - Legitimation strategies - Autonomy - Challenges - Opportunities - Types of space - State response
The Trees Movement	- Emergence of the movement - Emergence of different groups (why and how) - Differences between the groups - What are political opportunities? - Transformative events - Strategies/ tactics of mobilisation - Participation expansion - Types of legitimacy - Legitimation strategies - Autonomy - Challenges - Opportunities - Types of space - State response - Role of social media

APPENDIX THREE – TYPES AND NUMBERS OF ORGANISATIONS AND INFORMANTS

In relation to research ethics, it was compulsory for me to retain anonymity of respondents and organisations that I engaged with for empirical data collection. Moreover, I conducted a large number of informal exchanges in data collection. The table below presents the types and numbers of organisations and people interviewed.

The Trees Movement groups:	
(1) Group 6700 People	20 members
(2) Group 6700 Trees	07 members
(3) Group Green Hanoi	22 members
	(these members come from different backgrounds: lawyers, NGOs, dissidents, writers, housewives, rights activists, students, academics, journalists, etc.)
State-related agencies:	
(1) Ministry of Home Affairs	05 senior staff
(2) Commune government	02 senior staff
(3) District government	03 senior staff
(4) Provincial government	02 senior staff
(5) District mass organisations	02 senior staff
(6) VUSTA (Vietnam Union of Science and technology associations)	02 senior staff
(7) Members of Parliament	03
Local NGOs	05
International Donors/foreign embassies	04
INGOs	02

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abuza, Z., 2000. Loyal Opposition: The Rise of Vietnamese Dissidents. Harvard Asia Quarterly, 4(2).

Abuza, Z., 2015. Stifling the public sphere: Media and civil society in Vietnam. Media and Civil Society in Egypt, Russia, and Vietnam, p. 37.

Acton, L., 1887. Letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton. Retrieved on June, 29, p. 2009.

Alonso, A., Costa, V. and Maciel, D., 2010. Environmental activism in Brazil: the rise of a social movement. *Citizenship and Social Movements: Perspectives from the Global South, London and New York: Zed*.

Bach Tan Sinh, 2011. Civil society in Vietnam. In Chong, T. and Elies, S. (ed.) An Asean community for all: exploring the scope for civil society engagement.

Bălan, S., 2010. M. Foucault's View on Power Relations. Cogito Multidisciplinary research Journal, 2(2).

Beaugé, F., 2010. Vietnam's Mix of Marxism and Capitalism Brings Economic Progress.'. Guardian Weekly.

Beckman, B., 1993. The liberation of civil society: neo-liberal ideology and political theory. Review of African Political Economy, 20(58), pp. 20-33.

Beinin, J. & Vairel, F., 2013. *Social movements, mobilization, and contestation in the Middle East and North Africa.* Stanford University Press.

Benford, R.D. & Snow, D.A., 2000. Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. Annual review of sociology, pp. 611-639.

Blaikie, N.W., 1991. A critique of the use of triangulation in social research. Quality & quantity, 25(2), pp. 115-136.

Bogaards, M., 2009. How to classify hybrid regimes? Defective democracy and electoral authoritarianism. Democratization, 16(2), pp. 399-423.

Brooker, P., 2009. Non-Democratic Regimes: Comparative Government and Politics. Palgrave Macmillan.

Brown, L.D. & Jagadananda, L., 2007. Civil society legitimacy and accountability: Issues and challenges. Centre for Youth & Social Development.

Bui, T.H., 2014. Deconstructing the" socialist" rule of law in Vietnam: the changing discourse on human rights in Vietnam's constitutional reform process. Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs, 36(1), pp.77-100.

Buttigieg, J.A., 1995. Gramsci on civil society. Boundary 2, pp. 1-32.

Cavatorta, F. & Durac, V., 2010. *Civil society and democratization in the Arab world: The dynamics of activism.* Routledge.

Cavatorta, F., 2013. *Civil society activism under authoritarian rule: a comparative perspective.* Routledge.

Castells, M., 2012. Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the internet age. Cambridge: Polity.

Castells, M., 2013. Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age. John Wiley & Sons.

Chabanet, D. & Royall, F., 2014. From silence to protest: International perspectives on weakly resourced groups. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.

Chandhoke, N., 1995. State and civil society: Explorations in political theory. Sage Publications New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London.

Chandhoke, N., 2007. Civil society. Development in practice, 17(4-5), pp. 607-614.

Cheskin, A. & March, L., 2015. State–society relations in contemporary Russia: new forms of political and social contention. East European Politics, 31(3), pp. 261-273.

Chirkov, V., Ryan, R.M., Kim, Y. & Kaplan, U., 2003. Differentiating autonomy from individualism and independence: a self-determination theory perspective on internalization of cultural orientations and well-being. Journal of personality and social psychology, 84(1), p. 97.

Christman, J., 2004. Relational autonomy, liberal individualism, and the social constitution of selves. Philosophical Studies, 117(1), pp. 143-164.

Christman, J., 2008. Autonomy in moral and political philosophy. Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy.

CIVICUS, 2006. The Emerging Civil Society An Initial Assessment OF Civil Society IN Vietnam. Structure, 2, p. 3.

Clarke, S. & Pringle, T., 2007 Labour activism and the reform of trade unions in Russia, China and Vietnam. In: NGPA Labour Workshop, 2007.

Coe, C.A., 2015. 'Civilized city': how embedded civil society networks frame the debate on urban green space in Hanoi, Vietnam. Asian Journal of Communication, 25(6), pp. 617-635.

Collier, D., 1993. The comparative method. Political Science: The State of Discipline II, Ada W. Finifter, ed., American Political Science Association.

Collier, D., 2011. Understanding process tracing. PS: Political Science & Politics, 44(04), pp. 823-830.

Dang, L.H., 2009. *Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Development: An Illustration of Foreign NGOs in Vietnam* (Doctoral dissertation, Ohio University)

Dang Hung Vo, 2012. "Luật Đất đai và một số bức xúc không thể bỏ qua" [The Land Law and concerns that cannot be overlooked], Tuần Việt Nam, 29 October. http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/chtinh-tri/tuanvietnam/94429/luat-dat-dai-va-nhung-buc-xuc-khong-the-bo-qua.html [accessed 31 October].

Devine, J., 1999. One foot in each boot: the macro politics and micro sociology of NGOs in Bangladesh. University of Bath.

Devine, J., 2002. Ethnography of a policy process: A case study of land redistribution in Bangladesh. *Public Administration & Development*, *22*(5), p.403.

Devine, J., 2006. NGOs, Politics and Grassroots Mobilisation Evidence from Bangladesh. Journal of South Asian Development, 1(1), pp. 77-99.

Devine, J., Camfield, L. & Gough, I., 2008. Autonomy or dependence–or both?: perspectives from Bangladesh. Journal of Happiness Studies, 9(1), pp. 105-138.

Diamond, L.J., 1994. Toward democratic consolidation. Journal of democracy, 5(3), pp. 4-17.

Diani, M. 1995. *Green networks.* Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, UK.

Dilthey, W., 1979. Gesammelte Schriften: Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften. Teubner.

Dooley, L.M., 2002. Case study research and theory building. Advances in developing human resources, 4(3), pp. 335-354.

Douglas, M., 1986. How institutions think. Syracuse University Press.

Dworkin, G., 1988. The theory and practice of autonomy. Cambridge University Press.

Edwards, M., 1999. `Legitimacy and Values in NGOs and Voluntary Organisations: Some Sceptical Thoughts', in D. Lewis (ed.) International Perspectives on Voluntary Action. London: Earthscan

Edwards, M., 2001. Global civil society and community exchanges: a different form of movement. Environment and Urbanization, 13(2), pp. 145-149.

Ekman, J., 2009. Political participation and regime stability: A framework for analyzing hybrid regimes. International political science review, 30(1), pp. 7-31.

Erickson, F., 1986. Qualitative methods in research on teaching (pp. 119-161). Handbook of research on teaching.

Evans, P.B., 2012. Embedded autonomy: States and industrial transformation. Princeton University Press.

Farrington, J. & Lewis, D.J., 2014. Non-governmental organisations and the state in Asia: Rethinking roles in sustainable agricultural development. Routledge.

Fforde, A., 2005. CIVIL SOCIETY, THE STATE, AND THE BUSINESS SECTOR–PROTAGONISTS OF DEMOCRATIZA-TION PROCESSES? INSIGHTS FROM VIETNAM. Towards Good Society: Civil Society Actors, the State and the Business Class in Southeast Asia–Facilitators of or Impediments to a Strong, Democratic, and Fair Society, pp. 173-192.

Fforde, A., 2013. Vietnam in 2012: the end of the party. Asian Survey, 53(1), pp. 101-108.

Fisher, J. 1998. Non Governments: NGOs and the Political Development of the Third World. West Hartford: Kumarian Press.

Flyvbjerg, B., 2006. Five misunderstandings about case-study research. Qualitative inquiry, 12(2), pp. 219-245.

Fontana, B., 2002. Gramsci on politics and state. Journal of Classical Sociology, 2(2), pp. 157-178.

Foster, K.W., 2001. Associations in the embrace of an authoritarian state: state domination of society? Studies in Comparative International Development, 35(4), pp. 84-109.

Fowler, A.F., 1993. Non-governmental organisations and the promotion of democracy in Kenya. University of Sussex.

Gainsborough, M., 2002. Political change in Vietnam: In search of the Middle-Class challenge to the state. Asian Survey, 42(5), pp. 694-707.

Gainsborough, M., 2007. Globalisation and the state revisited: A view from provincial Vietnam. Journal of Contemporary Asia, 37(1), pp. 1-18.

Gainsborough, M., 2009. Privatisation as State Advance: Private Indirect Government in Vietnam. New Political Economy, 14(2), pp. 257-274.

Gainsborough, M., 2010. Vietnam Rethinking the State. London: Zed Books.

Gaventa, J., 2006. Finding the spaces for change: a power analysis. IDS bulletin, 37(6), p. 23.

George, A.L. & Bennett, A., 2005. Case studies and theory development in the social sciences. Mit Press.

Gergen, K.J., 1985. The social constructionist movement in modern psychology. American psychologist, 40(3), p. 266.

Gerschewski, J., 2013. The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes. Democratization, 20(1), pp. 13-38.

Giddens, A. & Giddens, A., 1974. Positivism and sociology. Heinemann London.

Glasius, M. & Ishkanian, A., 2014. Surreptitious Symbiosis: Engagement Between Activists and NGOs. VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations, pp. 1-25.

Goffman, E., 1983. The interaction order: American Sociological Association, 1982 presidential address. American sociological review, 48(1), pp. 1-17.

Goldfarb, J.C., 2007. The politics of small things: The power of the powerless in dark times. University of Chicago Press.

Goodrick, D., 2014. Comparative Case Studies: Methodological Briefs-Impact Evaluation No. 9.

Goodwin, J. & Jasper, J.M., 2004. Rethinking social movements: Structure, meaning, and emotion. Rowman & Littlefield.

Gray, M. L., 2015. Control and dissent in Vietnam's online world. TIASANG Vietnam Research Report. http://secdev-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Vietnam.ControlandDissent.Feb15.pdf.

Gray, M.L., 1999. Creating civil society? The emergence of NGOs in Vietnam. Development and Change, 30(4), pp. 693-713.

Guba, E.G. & Lincoln, Y.S., 2001. Guidelines and checklist for constructivist (aka fourth generation) evaluation. Retrieved June, 18, p. 2008.

Habermas, J., 1972. Appendix: Knowledge and Human Interests: A General Perspective. JJ Shapiro (Trans.), Knowledge and Human Interest, pp. 301-350.

Hamel, J., Dufour, S. & Fortin, D., 1993. Case study methods: qualitative research methods Series 32. A Sage University Paper.

Hannah, J., 2007. Local non-government organisations in Vietnam: development, civil society and state-society relations. University of Washington.

Hansen, K., 2013. Land Law, Land Rights, and Land Reform in Vietnam: A Deeper Look into "Land Grabbing" for Public and Private Development.

Harper, C., 1996. Strengthening civil society in transitional East Asia. NGOs, Civil Society and the State: Building Democracy in Transitional Socities. Oxford: INTRAC, pp. 125-140.

Haunss, S., 2007. Challenging legitimacy: Repertoires of contention, political claims-making, and collective action frames. Legitimacy in an age of global politics. Springer, pp. 156-172.

Helmke, G. & Levitsky, S., 2004. Informal institutions and comparative politics: A research agenda. Perspectives on politics, 2(04), pp. 725-740.

Herbert, S., 2000. For ethnography. Progress in Human Geography, 24(4), pp. 550-568.

Hewson, C., Yule, P., Laurent, D. & Vogel, C., 2003. Internet research methods: A practical guide for the behavioural and social sciences. London: Sage.

Heurlin, C., 2010. Governing civil society: The political logic of NGO–state relations under dictatorship. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations,* 21(2), pp. 220-239.

Heydemann, S., 2007. *Upgrading authoritarianism in the Arab world.* Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.

Heyzer, N., Riker, J.V. & Quizon, A.B., 1995. Government-NGO relations in Asia: prospects and challenges for people-centred development. Macmillan Press Ltd.

Hiebert, M. & Nguyen, P., 2012. Land disputes stir political debates in Vietnam. Critical Questions, 24.

Ho, P. & Edmonds, R., 2007. China's embedded activism: opportunities and constraints of a social movement. Routledge.

Ho, P., 2007. Embedded activism and political change in a semiauthoritarian context. China Information, 21(2), pp. 187-209.

Hoffmann, B., 2011. Civil society 2.0?: How the Internet changes state-society relations in authoritarian regimes: The case of Cuba.

Houtzager, P., 2003. Introduction: from polycentrism to the polity. Changing Paths: International Development and the New Politics of Inclusion, Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press.

Hulme, D. & Edwards, M., 1997. NGOs, states and donors. Macmillan Press.

Hyden, G., 2010. Civil society in Africa: Constraints and Opportunities for democratic change. Engaging Civil Society. Emerging Trends in Democratic Governance, pp. 249-264.

Invent the Future, 2015. Fight to win: How the Vietnamese people rose up and defeated imperialism. Available at: http://www.invent-the-future.org/2015/04/fight-to-win-how-the-vietnamese-people-rose-up-and-defeated-imperialism/ [Accessed on 27 January 2017]

Irvine, D., 2015. Art of war: Propaganda posters paint a different picture of Vietnam. Available at: http://edition.cnn.com/2015/03/17/travel/cnngo-travel-vietnam-propaganda-poster-art/ [Accessed on 27 January, 2017]

Jamal, A., 2007. Barriers to Democracy. *The Other Side of Social Capital in Palestine and the Arab World,* 12.

Johnston, H., & Carnesecca, C., 2014. Fear management in contemporary anti-authoritarian oppositions. In D. Chabanet & F. Royall (Eds.), From silence to protest: International perspectives on weakly resourced groups. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.

Jones, S., 2004. Introduction: ethics and internet studies. Online Social Research: methods, issues & ethics, MD Johns and SL. S. Chen and GJ Hall (eds.), Oxford: Peter Lang.

Kareithi, R.N. & Lund, C., 2012. Review of NGO performance research published in academic journals between 1996 and 2008. South African Journal of Science, 108(11-12), pp. 36-44.

Karim, L., 2001. Politics of the poor? NGOs and grass-roots political mobilization in Bangladesh. PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review, 24(1), pp. 92-107.

KEPA, 2011, Reflections on civil society in Vietnam. https://www.kepa.fi/tiedostot/reflections-on-vietnamese-civil-society-2011.pdf

Kerkvliet, B.J., 1995a. Dilemmas of development: Vietnam update 1994. Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University.

Kerkvliet, B.J., 1995b. Village-state relations in Vietnam: the effect of everyday politics on decollectivization. Journal of Asian studies, 54(2), pp. 396-418.

Kerkvliet, B.J., 2001. An Approach for Analysing State-Society Relations in Vietnam. Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia, 16(2).

Kerkvliet, B.J., 2005. The power of everyday politics: How Vietnamese peasants transformed national policy. Cornell University Press.

Kerkvliet, B.J., 2009. Everyday politics in peasant societies (and ours). Journal of Peasant Studies, 36(1), pp. 227-243.

Kerkvliet, B.J., 2015. Regime Critics: Democratization Advocates in Vietnam, 1990s-2014. Critical Asian Studies, 47(3), pp. 359-387.

Kerkvliet, B.J., Nguyen, A. & Bach, S., 2008. Forms of engagement between state agencies and Civil Society Organisations in Vietnam. WWW] http://www. ngocentre. org. vn/files/docs/Forms_of_Engagement_FINAL_COMPLETE. pd f.(12/09/09).

Kerkvliet, B.J.T., 2010. Workers' Protests in Contemporary Vietnam (with Some Comparisons to Those in the Pre-1975 South). Journal of Vietnamese Studies, 5(1), pp. 162-204.

Kerkvliet, B.J.T., 2014a. Government Repression and Toleration of Dissidents in Contemporary Vietnam. Politics in Contemporary Vietnam. Springer, pp. 100-134.

Kerkvliet, B.J.T., 2014b. Protests over Land in Vietnam. Journal of Vietnamese Studies, 9(3), pp. 19-54.

King Jr, M.L., 1992. Letter from Birmingham jail. UC Davis L. Rev., 26, p. 835.

Koh, G., 2000. *State-society relations in Singapore.* Oxford University Press.

Koh, D., 2001. Negotiating the socialist state in Vietnam through local administrators: the case of karaoke shops. Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia, 16(2).

Kuah-Pearce, K.E. & Guiheux, G., 2009. Social movements in China and Hong Kong: The expansion of protest space. Amsterdam University Press.

Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C., 1985. Hegemony and social strategy. *Towards a Radical Democratic Politics, London, New York*.

Landau, I., 2008. Law and civil society in Cambodia and Vietnam: A gramscian perspective. Journal of Contemporary Asia, 38(2), pp. 244-258.

Le, Q. B., Doan, T. H., Nguyen, T. T. N., & Mai, T. T., 2016. Ba´o ca´o phong tra`o bảo veˆˆ 6700 caˆy xanh ở Ha` Noi. http://isee.org.vn/Content/Home/Library/473/bao-cao-phong-trao-6700-bao-ve-cay-xanho-ha-noi..pdf.

Le Van Quang and Van Duc Thanh, 2003. Quan he giua nha nuoc va xa hoi dan su Vietnam

Leftwich, A., 2008. Developmental states, effective states and poverty reduction: The primacy of politics. *UNRISD Project on Poverty Reduction and Policy Regimes*, pp. 211-229.

Lewis, D., 2001. Civil society in non-Western contexts: Reflections on the 'usefulness' of a concept. Centre for Civil Society, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Lewis, D., 2013. Civil Society and the Authoritarian State: Cooperation, Contestation and Discourse. *Journal of Civil Society,* 9(3), pp. 325-340.

Lewis, 2016. Vietnam gets to vote in elections, but the Communist Party picks who's on the ballot. Available at: http://time.com/4344416/vietnam-elections-independent-communist/ [Accessed on 01 August 2016]

Lotan, G., Graeff, E., Ananny, M., Gaffney, D. & Pearce, I., 2011. The Arab Spring| the revolutions were tweeted: Information flows during the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. International journal of communication, 5, p. 31.

Lukes, S., 1974. Power: A radical view. London Macmillan.

Luong, H.V., 2003. Postwar Vietnamese society: an overview of transformational dynamics. Postwar Vietnam: dynamics of a transforming society. Singapore, pp. 1-26.

Luong, H.V., 2005. The state, local associations, and alternate civilities in rural northern Vietnam. Civil life, globalization, and political change in Asia: Organizing between family and state, pp. 123-146.

Lynch, M., 1998. Towards a constructivist genealogy of social constructivism. The politics of constructionism, pp. 13-32.

Mack, N., Woodsong, C., MacQueen, K.M., Guest, G. & Namey, E., 2005. Qualitative research methods: a data collectors field guide.

Madge, C., 2007. Developing a geographers' agenda for online research ethics. Progress in human geography, 31(5), pp. 654-674.

Marr, D.G., 1971. Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925. Univ of California Press.

McAdam, D., 1996. Conceptual origins, current problems, future directions. Comparative perspectives on social movements: Political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural framings, pp. 23-40.

McAdam, D., 2010. Political process and the development of black insurgency, 1930-1970. University of Chicago Press.

McAdam, D., McCarthy, J.D. & Zald, M.N., 1996. Comparative perspectives on social movements: Political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural framings. Cambridge University Press.

McAdam, D., Tarrow, S. & Tilly, C., 2003. Dynamics of contention. Social Movement Studies, 2(1), pp. 99-102.

McAdam, D., Tarrow, S. & Tilly, C., 2003. Dynamics of contention. Social Movement Studies, 2(1), pp. 99-102.

Mercer, C., 2002. NGOs, civil society and democratization: a critical review of the literature. Progress in development studies, 2(1), pp. 5-22.

Merkel, W., 2010. Are dictatorships returning? Revisiting the 'democratic rollback'hypothesis. Contemporary Politics, 16(1), pp. 17-31.

Meyer, D.S. & Minkoff, D.C., 2004. Conceptualizing political opportunity. Social forces, 82(4), pp. 1457-1492.

Meyer, D.S., 2004. Protest and political opportunities. Annu. Rev. Sociol., 30, pp. 125-145.

Meyer, J.W. & Rowan, B., 1977. Institutionalized organisations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. American journal of sociology, pp. 340-363.

Mica, A., Winczorek, J. & Wiśniewski, R., 2015. Sociologies of formality and informality.

Miller, L.B., 1972. FROM "LEGITIMACY" TO "LEGITIMATIONS". Kansas Journal of Sociology, 8(2), pp. 123-131.

Mishra, D., Vietnam Development Report 2012: Market Economy for a Middle-Income Vietnam. In, 2011. Joint Donor Report to the Vietnam Consultative Group Meeting, World Bank.

Morand, D.A., 1995. The role of behavioral formality and informality in the enactment of bureaucratic versus organic organisations. Academy of Management Review, 20(4), pp. 831-872.

Morgan, G. & Smircich, L., 1980. The case for qualitative research. Academy of management review, 5(4), pp. 491-500.

Morris, A. & Herring, C., 1987. Theory and research in social movements: A critical review. Annual Review of Political Science, 2, pp. 137-98.

Morris-Jung, J., 2015. Vietnam's Online Petition Movement. Southeast Asian Affairs, 2015(1), pp. 402-415.

Moses, J. & Knutsen, T., 2012. Ways of knowing: competing methodologies in social and political research. Palgrave Macmillan.

Nghiem, S. & Laurenceson, J., 2006. NGO Microfinance in Vietnam: Stakeholders' Perceptions of Effectiveness. International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability, 2(4), pp. 179-184.

Nguyen Lenh, 2013. Đã có đủ căn cứ pháp lý để thành lập một đảng khác ngoài Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam? Available: http://basam.info/2013/08/30/2003-da-co-du-can-cu-phap-ly-de-thanh-lap-mot-dang-khac-ngoai-dang-cong-san-viet-nam/. Accessed: 15 March 2015

Nhodo, L., Gukurume, S. & Mafongoya, O., 2013. Contestations and conflicting lifeworlds in conservation farming practices in Zimbabwe: the experiences of peasant smallholder farmers in Chivi south district in Masvingo. Russian Journal of Agricultural and Socio-Economic Sciences, 16(4).

Norlund, I., 2007. Civil Society in Vietnam. Social organisations and approaches to new concepts. Asien, 105, pp. 68-90.

O'Donnell, G., Schmitter, P.C. & Whitehead, L., 1986. Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospectsfor Democracy. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University PressO'DonnellTransitions from authoritarian rule: Prospects for democracy1986.

Offe, C., 1985. New social movements: challenging the boundaries of institutional politics. *Social research*, pp. 817-868

Oshana, M., 2006. Personal autonomy in society. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.

Pace, M. and Cavatorta, F., 2012. The Arab uprisings in theoretical perspective–an introduction. *Mediterranean Politics*, *17*(2), pp.125-138.

Painter, M., 2005. Public Administration Reform in Vietnam: foreign transplants or local hybrids? Asian Socialism and Legal Change, 267.

PanNature and MEC, 2015. "BIÊN BẢN TÓM TẮT Tọa đàm: Từ Đề án 6700 nhìn lại quy hoạch cây xanh Hà Nội" Hà Nội, 23/3/2015. The record of the workshop conducted by PanNature and MEC. Available at: http://nature.org.vn/vn/wpcontent/uploads/2015/03/Bienban_Toadam_CayxanhHaNoi_Noi_230315.pdf [Accessed 30 March 2015]

Pansiri, N.O., 2013. CASES, METHODOLOGICAL DILEMMA IN STUDYING EDUCATIONAL; International Journal, 1(2), pp. 2307-227X.

Parekh, B., 2004. Putting civil society in its place. *Exploring Civil Society: Political and Cultural Contexts*, pp. 15-25.

Perinova, M. (2005). Civil Society in Authoritarian Regimes. The Analysis of China, Burma and Vietnam. Thesis at Lund University, Department of Political Science, online:< http://lup. lub. lu. se/luur/download.

Pham Doan Trang, 2014. "Media censorship in Vietnam". In Asiasentinel. Available at: http://www.asiasentinel.com/society/media-censorship-vietnam/ [Accesed on 05 May 2015].

Pham Van Bich, 1999. *The Vietnamese Family in change: The Case of the Red River Delta.* Surrey, Great Britain, Curzon Press.

Phuc, N.Q., Zoomers, A. & van Westen, A., 2015. Compulsory land acquisition for urban expansion: A study of farmer's protest in peri-urban Hue, Central Vietnam.

Pietrzyk, D., 2001. Civil Society-Conceptual History from Hobbes to Marx. International Politics, 1.

Pilling, D. 2017. Vietnam must ditch state-sponsored crony capitalism. Financial Times. Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/e12e2fe6-bcb1-11e2-b344-00144feab7de

PPWG. 2016. Đời sống hiệp hội Từ góc nhìn của người dân. Nhóm làm việc vì sự tham gia của người dân (PPWG). Available at: http://isee.org.vn/Content/Home/Library/496/doi-song-hiep-hoi-tu-goc-nhin-nguoi-dan..pdf [Accessed on 15 August 2016]

Przeworski, A., 1991. Democracy and the market: Political and economic reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America. Cambridge University Press.

Ramasamy, P., 2004. Civil Society in Malaysia. *Civil Society in Southeast Asia*, p. 198.

Raz, J., 1986. The morality of freedom. Clarendon Press.

RDPR, 2015. BÁO CÁO NGHIÊN CỨU THỰC TRẠNG VÀ NHU CẦU SỬ DỤNG ĐẤT RỪNG SẢN XUẤT CỦA ĐỒNG BÀO DÂN TỘC THIỂU SỐ TỈNH QUẢNG BÌNH. Tài liệu hội thảo Thực trạng và giải pháp về quản lý sử dụng đất rừng giữa lâm trường quốc doanh và người dân địa phương

RFA. 2016. 30 detained in Hanoi over land-grab protests ahead of party meetings. Available at: http://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/protests-01122016142102.html [Accessed: 30 March 2016].

RFI. 2015. "Cây xanh làm thức tỉnh xã hội dân sự". Available at: http://vi.rfi.fr/viet-nam/20150406-cay-xanh-lam-thuc-tinh-xa-hoi-dan-su/ [Accessed 06 April 2015].

Rodham, K. & Gavin, J., 2011. The ethics of online research: The new challenges of new media.

Sakata, S., 2006. Changing Roles of Mass Organisations in Poverty Reduction in Vietnam. Actors for poverty reduction in Vietnam, pp. 49-79.

Schock, K., 1999. People power and political opportunities: Social movement mobilization and outcomes in the Philippines and Burma. Social problems, 46(3), pp. 355-375.

Schwandt, T.A., 1994. Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry.

Scott, J.C., 1985. Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of resistance. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Scott, J.C., 1998. Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed. Yale University Press.

Sidel, M., 1995. The emergence of a nonprofit sector and philanthropy in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Emerging Civil Society in the Asia Pacific Community. Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Silva, M.K., 2006. Civil society and democratic construction: from essentialist Manichaeism to the relational approach. *Sociologias,* (16), pp. 156-179.

Sinh, B.T., Chong, T. & Elies, S., 2011. Civil society in Vietnam. An ASEAN Community for All: Exploring the Scope for Civil Society Engagement, pp. 138-47.

Sinh, B.T., 2003. Civil society and NGOs in Vietnam: some initial thoughts on developments and obstacles. In: Paper presented at the Meeting with the Delegation of the Swedish Parliamentary Commission on Swedish Policy for Global Development to Vietnam, 2003. p. 2002.

Sinha, A. & Kanbur, R., 2012. Informality: Concepts, facts and models. Introduction to a special issue of Margin–The Journal of Applied Economic Research.

Smith, C., 2011. Egypt's Facebook revolution: Wael Ghonim thanks the social network. The Huffington Post, 11.

Smith, J. & Fetner, T., 2009. Structural approaches in the sociology of social movements. Handbook of social movements across disciplines. Springer, pp. 13-57.

SPERI, 2012. Workshop on land management and utilization in ethnic minority communities of the upland Vietnam. Available at: http://land.net.vn/upload/files/De%20cuong%20HT%20dat%20dai%20dan%20toc%20thieu %20so_final%203-10_.pdf [Accessed: 10 April 2016]

SPERI, 2014. Kết quả Tọa đàm: "Những bất cập, tồn tại về chính sách và thực tiễn trong công tác giao đất, giao rừng và sau giao đất, giao rừng". Available at: http://speri.org/upload/medias/file_1411586654.final(eng).compressed.pdf

Spires, A.J., 2011. Contingent Symbiosis and Civil Society in an Authoritarian State: Understanding the Survival of China's Grassroots NGOs1. *American Journal of Sociology,* 117(1), pp. 1-45.

Suchman, M.C., 1995. Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. Academy of management review, 20(3), pp. 571-610.

Tarrow, S., 1994. Power in movement: Social movements, collective action and mass politics in the modern state. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, P., 2008. Minorities at large: new approaches to minority ethnicity in Vietnam.

Taylor, W., Hằng, N.T., Tú, P.Q. & Tuyết, H.T.N., 2012. Civil Society in Vietnam - A Comparative Study of Civil Society Organizations in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. *The Asia Foundation.*

Tedlock, B., 1991. From participant observation to the observation of participation: The emergence of narrative ethnography. *Journal of anthropological research*, pp. 69-94.

Teets, J.C., 2014. Civil Society Under Authoritarianism: The China Model. Cambridge University Press.

Thanh Nien News. 2015. People see red as Hanoi starts cutting down 6,700 trees. Available at: http://www.thanhniennews.com/society/people-see-red-as-hanoi-starts-cutting-down-6700-trees-40014.html [Accessed 19th March 2015]

Thang Van Phuc, Nguyen Xuan Hai, Nguyen Ngoc Lam, Nguyen Quoc Tuan, 2002. Vai tro cua cac hoi trong doi moi va phat trien dat nuoc. Hanoi. Nha xuat ban chinh tri quoc gia.

Thayer, C.A., 1992. Political reform in Vietnam: Doi Moi and the emergence of civil society. The development of civil society in communist systems, pp. 110-129.

Thayer, C.A., 2009. Vietnam and the challenge of political civil society. Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs, 31(1), pp. 1-27.

Thayer, C.A., 2008. One party rule and the challenge of civil society in Vietnam. In: Viet Nam Workshop: Remaking the Vietnamese State: Implications for Viet Nam and the Region, City University of Hong Kong; 21-22 August; Hong Kong, 2008.

The Economist, 2015. "The internet in Vietnam. If a tree falls… online, will the communist party hear anything?" Available at: http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21648706-online-will-communist-party-hear-anything-if-tree-falls. [Accessed on 18 April 2015].

Thomas, C., 2013. The concept of legitimacy and international law.

Thomas, M., 2001. Public Spaces/Public Disgraces: Crowds and the State in Contemporary Vietnam. SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia, 16(2).

Thomas, M., 2001. Public Spaces/Public Disgraces: Crowds and the State in Contemporary Vietnam. SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia, 16(2).

Thurlow, C., Lengel, L. & Tomic, A., 2004. Computer mediated communication. Sage.

Tilly, C., 1978. From Mobilization to Revolution. *Reading, MA: Addision-Wesley*.

Tilly, C. & Tarrow, S.G., 2015. Contentious politics. Oxford University Press.

To, P.X., Mahanty, S. & Dressler, W.H., 2014. 'A new landlord'(địa chủ mới)? Community, land conflict and State Forest Companies (SFCs) in Vietnam. Forest Policy and Economics.

To, P.X., Nghi, T.H. & Zagt, R., 2013. Forest land allocation in Viet Nam: implementation processes and results. Preservation, 2(15), pp. 1,931,000.

Tuần báo văn nghệ TPHCM, 2015. "Những hội nhóm, diễn đàn mạo danh để chống phá sự bình yên của đất nước". Available at: http://tuanbaovannghetphcm.vn/nhung-hoi-nhom-dien-dan-mao-danh-de-chong-pha-su-binh-yen-cua-dat-nuoc/ [Accessed on 17 May 2015].

Uphoff, N. & Krishna, A., 2004. Civil society and public sector institutions: more than a zero-sum relationship. Public administration and development, 24(4), pp. 357-372.

Van der Pijl, K., 2009. A survey of global political economy. Centre for Global Political Economy-University of Sussex. Versão, 2.

VEPR, 2015. ƯỚC LƯỢNG CHI PHÍ KINH TẾ CHO CÁC TỔ CHỨC QUẦN CHÚNG CÔNG Ở VIỆT NAM. Available at: http://vepr.org.vn/upload/533/20160105/Uoc%20luong%20chi%20phi%20kinh%20te.pdf

Vietnam News. 2015. "Tree-felling fiasco: symptom of a deep-rooted problem" by Thu Huong Le. Available at http://vietnamnews.vn/opinion/op-ed/268085/tree-felling-fiasco-symptom-of-a-deep-rooted-problem.html. [Accessed on 26 March 2015].

Vietnam Right Now, 2015. "Battered and bruised, Green campaigners vow to fight on". Available at: http://vietnamrightnow.com/2015/08/battered-and-bruised-green-campaigners-vow-to-fight-on/ [Accessed on 10 August 2015].

Vietnamnet. 2015a. "Chặt 6.700 cây: Đề nghị thanh tra Chính phủ vào cuộc". Available at: http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/thoi-su/227248/chat-6-700-cay-de-nghi-thanh-tra-chinh-phu-vao-cuoc.html

Vietnamnet. 2015b. "Chặt cây xanh Hà Nội không phải hỏi dân". Available at: http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/chinh-tri/226164/-chat-cay-xanh-ha-noi-khong-phai-hoi-dan-.html. [Accessed: 17 March 2015]

Vinh, N.Q., 2006. Civic Organisations in Ho Chi Minh City: Their Activities and Aims, the Room They Have to Manoeuvre, and Their Relationship with Governmental Organisations at Local Level. Active Citizens Under Political Wraps: Experiences from Myanmar/Burma and Vietnam.

Vinod, M., 2006. THE CHANGING DIMENSIONS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: THEORY VERSUS REALITY. The Indian Journal of Political Science, pp. 783-792.

Vu, N.A., 2017. Grassroots Environmental Activism in an Authoritarian Context: The Trees Movement in Vietnam. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations,* 28(3), pp. 1180-1208.

Vu, T., 2014. The Party v. the People. Journal of Vietnamese Studies, 9(4), pp. 33-66.

Vuong, Q.H., 2014. Vietnam's Political Economy in Transition (1986-2016).

Vuving, A.L., 2010. A Tale of Four Players. Southeast Asian Affairs, pp. 367-391.

Walton, O., 2010. *Negotiating war and the liberal peace: national NGOs' legitimacy and the politics of peacebuilding in Sri Lanka 2006-7.* School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

Walton, O., 2013. 'Everything is Politics': Understanding the Political Dimensions of NGO Legitimacy in Conflict-Affected and Transitional Contexts.

Wells-Dang, A., 2010. Political space in Vietnam: a view from the 'rice-roots'. The Pacific Review, 23(1), pp. 93-112.

Wells-Dang, A., 2011. INFORMAL PATHBREAKERS: Civil society network in Vietnam and China.pdf>. DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY, University of Birmingham

Wells-Dang, A., 2014. The Political Influence of Civil Society in Vietnam. Politics in Contemporary Vietnam. Springer, pp. 162-183.

Wells-Dang, A., 2013. Promoting Land Rights in Vietnam: A Multi-Sector Advocacy Coalition Approach. In: World Bank Conference on Land and Poverty, Washington DC, April, 2013.

White, S.C., 1999. NGOs, civil society, and the state in Bangladesh: The politics of representing the poor. Development and change, 30(2), pp. 307-326.

Wiktorowicz, Q., 2000. Civil society as social control: state power in Jordan. Comparative politics, pp. 43-61.

Wischermann, J., 2003. VIETNAM IN THE ERA OF DOI MOI: Issue-Oriented Organisations and Their Relationship to the Government. Asian Survey, 43(6), pp. 867-889.

Wischermann, J., 2006. Societal and political change in Vietnam. An instructive example for Myanmar/Burma? Introductory and conceptual reflections. Active Citizens Under Political Wraps: Experiences from Myanmar/Burma and Vietnam.

Wischermann, J., 2011. Governance and Civil Society Action in Vietnam: Changing the Rules From Within—Potentials and Limits. Asian Politics & Policy, 3(3), pp. 383-411.

Wischermann, J., 2013. Civic organisations in Vietnam's one-party state: Supporters of authoritarian rule?

Wischermann, J., Bunk, B., Köllner, P. & Lorch, J., 2016. Do Associations Support Authoritarian Rule? Tentative Answers from Algeria, Mozambique, and Vietnam. GIGA Working Paper, 295.

Wood, G. (1985). The politics of development policy labelling. Development and change, 16(3), 347-373.

World Bank, 2012. Vietnam poverty assessment: well begun, not yet done – Vietnam's remarkable progress on poverty reduction and the emerging challenges. Avaialble at: http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2013/08/18124050/2012-vietnam-poverty-assessment-well-begun-not-yet-done-vietnams-remarkable-progress-poverty-reduction-emerging-challenges [Accessed on 20 August 2015]

Zelditch, M. & Walker, H.A., 2003. The legitimacy of regimes. Power and Status. Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp. 217-249.

Zelditch, M., 2001. Theories of legitimacy. The psychology of legitimacy: Emerging perspectives on ideology, justice, and intergroup relations, 33.

Zuo, J. & Benford, R.D., 1995. Mobilization processes and the 1989 Chinese democracy movement. The Sociological Quarterly, 36(1), pp. 131-156.