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Politics in Mountain Communes: Exploring Vietnamese Grassroots Democracy

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Introduction

Vietnam has been undergoing tremendous economic and societal changes during the past two decades. The launch of comprehensive reform programmes (*doi moi*) has opened Vietnam towards the world market and to many other global influences. Vietnam's transition from a planned economy to a market economy under state management is characterised by a heady fusion of socialist and capitalist ideas, the combination of which have created enormous socio-economic forces in Vietnam.

Reforms of the land law (1993) and the law on enterprises (1999) provided the impulse for economic growth and diversification, based on the reassignment of responsibility for the means of production to organisations, households and individuals. Vietnamese citizens have developed a tremendous desire for entrepreneurial liberty and innovation. The depoliticised 'mass man' of totalitarian communism, characterised as unable to articulate his needs and powerless to express him in a organised way (Ehrenberg, 1999:182), has evolved into a 'homo oeconomicus' exposed to a wide range of different influences and pressures making him less susceptible to the appeals of radical and anti-democratic ideas (Gill, 2000:4). In this new socio-economic situation policies and programmes require adjustment.

Although the Vietnamese leaders initially intended to reform the economy without major changes in the political tradition, the launch of *doi moi* has contributed to fundamental transformations of both the economic and the political spheres (McCormick, 1998:129). Market reforms have given birth to a legalised private sector, while the resulting economic forces have led to the revitalisation of groups and organisational activity at the local level and the emergence of associations formed as a result of local initiative (Thayer, 1995:52; Gill, 2000:4). The increased diversity of the economy and the enhanced complexity of economic decision-making have forced the Vietnamese leadership to turn its attention towards the regions and localities where new economic roles are assumed. It has also put the issue of political participation back on the agenda, a recurrent theme throughout Vietnam's modern history.

However, the Seventh Party Congress of 1991 firmly rejected calls for any form of political pluralism and a loosening of the Party's monopoly role. Rather, the Congress agreed to endorse gradual and limited efforts at political reform (Thayer, 1995:51). The government's political commitment to governance reform was acknowledged by adopting central principles, such as participation, transparency, accountability, effectiveness, efficiency, and rule of law (UNDP, 2001:7). These principles are regarded as guidelines in the process of strengthening the socialist democracy in the economic transition period.

In 1998, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) and the government issued Decree 29/1998/ND-CP on the exercise of democracy in the communes (Politburo of the

Communist Party of Vietnam, 1998; Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1998). The political leadership in Hanoi declared:

‘Democracy is the nature of our regime and State. Our Party and the State always respect and bring into full play the people's mastery, creating an enormous strength and making a decisive contribution to the success of our revolution’ (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1998:14).

In order to address such violations of the ‘people’s mastery’ as increasing bureaucracy, democratic deficits, inequality and bribery, the VCP and government embarked on steps to (re)establish and strengthen democratic regimes in the localities. They based the principles of exercising democracy in the communes on the words of Ho Chi Minh: ‘people know, people discuss, people execute and people supervise’ (Government Committee for Organisation and Personnel, 2000:29). The four levels of participation specified in Decree No. 29 were information-sharing, consultation, participation in decision-making, and monitoring and supervision.

Decree No. 29 came to be called the ‘grassroots democracy decree’ and received wide attention. It largely nurtured expectations for the pursuit of bigger political projects of decentralisation and democratisation, advocated more by liberal party members, and frequently supported by international development agencies involved in institutional and administrative reform in Vietnam. However, the concept of democracy promoted in the grassroots democracy decree involves many paradoxes and dilemmas.

This study explores the meaning of democracy and grassroots democracy in the context of Vietnam and asks how it is implemented and what it changes in the localities. The concept of democracy advocated by the VCP is followed down to the local political contexts of mountain communes, and is discussed by taking account of views held by those on the ground.

Notions of democracy in Vietnam

During Vietnam’s transition period calls for political participation and democratisation by both party members and international donor agencies have become louder. These calls are largely based on the assumption that greater democracy would contribute positively towards economic development (Crawford, 1996:vii). However, notions of democracy differ greatly between countries and political regimes. Officially, Vietnam's understanding of democracy is rooted in Marxist-Leninist ideas and the theory of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ (Ehrenberg, 1992:2). Vietnamese socialist democracy was established during the revolution in 1945.

In its official interpretation ‘socialist democracy’ is a term used for a certain version of democracy, which emphasises social justice and is considered to be superior to ‘bourgeois democracy’ (Wilczynski, 1981:535). In Vietnam, socialist democracy is defined as a regime where people are the owners (*lam chu*), and where every interest and power belongs to them (Government Committee for Organisation and Personnel, 2000:27). According to the theory of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, the working class can use this power to oppose the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and to suppress any attempts of counterrevolutions (Ehrenberg, 1992:2). The essential characteristic of Vietnamese socialist democracy, which largely distinguishes it from liberal democracies, is that the VCP plays the sole leading role. Polyarchic features and the multi-party system of western democracies are not compatible with the Vietnamese idea

of democracy. It follows the principle that 'Vietnam's Communist Party is the country's leader, Vietnam's government is the country's manager, and Vietnamese people are the country's owners' (Dau Hoan Do et al., 1999:12). The VCP asserts that the regime is democratic in nature because it represents the interest of the majority of the population, the peasants and the proletariat. However, only three per cent of the total population are Party members (Derbyshire and Derbyshire, 1989:709; Abuza 2001:2).

The standard operating procedure of democracy in Vietnam is the concept of democratic centralism. Pluralist opinions and conflicting views should be freely expressed and widely discussed at all levels of the party hierarchy. The party should take these opinions into account when making a decision but once the decision has been made the policy must be unquestioningly accepted and carried out by all party members. This concept theoretically permits dissent, but in reality it allows very little upward flow of views and opinions (Robertson, 1993:130). Democratic centralism is also defined by 'the part submitting to the whole, the minority yielding to the majority, lower ranks obeying upper ranks, and localities obeying the centre' (Marr 1994 in MacLean, 2001:16).

Despite many intra-party debates and changing economic realities the monopoly of political power held by the VCP is untouched. The Vietnamese notion of democracy differs significantly, therefore, from understandings of liberal democracy which are based on political pluralism, competition, and rule of law (Gutmann, 1993:413; Nuscheler, 1995:220). Also, the export of democracy through agendas such as 'good governance' advocated by international institutions like the World Bank and IMF (Laasko, 1995:217) has not yet encouraged polyarchic political features. Democracy in Vietnam has the character of a political project implemented in a top-down manner, rather than underpinned by an active civil society. Vietnamese socialist democracy involves the risk of the arbitrary use of power by political leaders. This makes many western observers sceptical about the democratic substance of the whole political system; critics often point out Vietnam's totalitarian and authoritarian tendencies (see also Ehrenberg, 1999; Gill, 2000; Abuza, 2001).

Grassroots democracy: a political project

Since the promulgation of Decree No. 29 on the exercise of democracy in the communes, direct democratic arrangements of the political structure at the local level have been promoted. All delegates are revocable, bound by the instructions of their constituency, and organised into a pyramid of directly elected committees (Held, 2001:199). Enhanced participation and more transparency of political and economic decision-making in issues concerning livelihood and well-being in the communes are central elements of the grassroots democracy decree. It re-defines roles, responsibilities and obligations in everyday politics in the communes, and seeks to strengthen the direct democratic links between the public and the authorities (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1998). The Decree No. 29 indicates a trend toward more accountability and debate in political practice in Vietnam.

The government and the VCP have recognised that putting in place effective governance structures at the local level is essential for a well-functioning economy, and for spreading the benefits of growth widely among the society. They have acknowledged the need for re-orienting the all-encompassing government of the planning era, towards a more enabling set of activities supporting and complementing

individual involvement in economic decision-making at the grassroots level. Decree No. 29 represents a set of legal rules that encourages local authorities actively to apply democratic principles when exercising their daily work duties, and it provides grassroots people with legal rights to take part in village- and commune-level economic and political decisions.

However, democracy in the communes – so-called grassroots democracy – has the character of a political project that is likely to be abandoned when political, economic and social circumstances change. There is a constant struggle between the need for a strong central administration to enforce laws and impose order, and the need for constraints on state bodies' power to create space for individuals rights at the grassroots level (Dau Hoan Do et al., 1999:12). Held (2001:199) points out that for democracy to flourish today it has to be reconceived as a double-sided phenomenon, concerned, on the one hand, with the reform of state power, and, on the other hand, with the restructuring of civil society. This entails recognising the indispensability of a process of 'double democratisation', the interdependent transformation of both state and civil society.

However, the political leadership's attitude in Vietnam is rather reluctant concerning the emergence of an active civil society and reactive in granting more political participation. Typically, the leadership looks at a small number of alternatives for dealing with a problem, and tends to choose options that differ only marginally from existing policy. Policy-making is serial, and new approaches to problems are continuously developed. As mistakes become apparent policies are re-adjusted. The model suggests that major changes occur through a series of small steps, each of which does not fundamentally challenge the whole system (Sutton, 1999:10). The political leaders justify their approach by referring to the experiences of other socialist countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. They are eager to prevent any political instability, and argue that the monopoly power of the VCP is the only way to prevent political and economic turmoil (Abuza, 2001:5). This strategy has encountered many criticisms from both VCP members and external observers, as it involves a voluntaristic component in the democratisation efforts.

Another characteristic of Vietnam's grassroots democracy is that its scope is conscientiously circumscribed by the central level of political decision-making. Grassroots democracy is an idea formulated by the party, which has defined its political scope with reference to marxist doctrine. In contrast to advocates of liberalism, who developed a theory of civil society because they sought to democratise the state, marxists developed a theory of the state because they wanted to democratise civil society (Ehrenberg, 1999:174). Grassroots democracy in Vietnam therefore does not result from an emerging civil society claiming basic democratic political rights, but has been implemented from the centre to the locality. This top-down character of the Decree No. 29 places massive constraints on its implementation. Officials of government institutions and administrative bodies at the provincial, district and commune level are advised to adjust their daily work to the principles of grassroots democracy. Actual empowerment and sharing final decision-making depend tremendously on the authorities' capabilities, capacities and conviction. Many officials tend to see implementing 'democracy' as simply another administrative duty. They frequently argue that the people do not need to be informed about all matters (MacLean, 2001:16). Such working attitudes hamper a continuous and rapid implementation process. Grassroots democracy tends to be perceived as a political experiment, which

materialises only when the state and VCP provide budgets for training courses, workshops, and regular meetings for government officials. The role of local authorities is crucial to the implementation of the decree, since their attitudes concerning the expression of opposing views and the representation of the local people determines whether or not concerns raised at the grassroots level are transmitted to higher decision-making arenas.

Local autonomy and democratic components of the political system

Since the grassroots democracy decree, relations between local authorities and the central state have been put back into focus. Turley (1980:185) reported that these links had been repeatedly strengthened during the Indochina Wars to enhance resistance and popular support of the VCP, but that their importance had diminished during peace time. Taylor (1993:318) and Glassner (1993:341) refer to the ambiguity of the local state. Different interests from those of the national dominant groups can control particular localities. Simultaneously, local groups can use the local state to promote their own policies, in opposition to those of the central state. Local–state relations are, therefore, typically loaded with tensions between the centre and the locality, mostly because of the unequal distribution of power between the two. Uneven development inevitably forces the central state to organise control of its territory through some local autonomy.

In Vietnam, the local state organises local agents in order to manage the country's territorial diversity. Historically, local authorities in Vietnam had a relative large amount of discretion in applying central policies, whether in times of guerrilla warfare, or in the wake of economic renovation when many reforms originated from the political periphery (McLeod, 1999:360; Dang Phong and Beresford, 1998:18). The central state's constant wariness of opposing social initiatives in the political periphery gave, however, rise to thorough control mechanisms, such as the household registration system or the network of neighbourhood police stations that kept almost all citizens under close surveillance (McCormick, 1998:124). In recent times these mechanisms have lost much of their rigour, and individuals as well as organisations and associations can operate more freely than ever before (Gray, 1999:711).

The political system of the communes includes elements with direct democratic characteristics. The National Assembly and the People's Councils represent the people most directly. At the local level the People's Council raises local concerns in the commune meetings and feeds the contents of resolutions and Government programme activities back to the villages. These regulations on the responsibilities and administrative duties of the communes, the smallest administrative unit closest to grassroots people, were set in place in the early 1980s (Council of Ministers, 1981). Decree No. 29 was supposed to strengthen these existing democratic elements.

The direct and representative democratic elements have always been strongest in the communes (Turley, 1980:181). The interlinkage between the People's Council, village headmen and local people is supposed to facilitate direct democratic political participation (see figure 0-1).

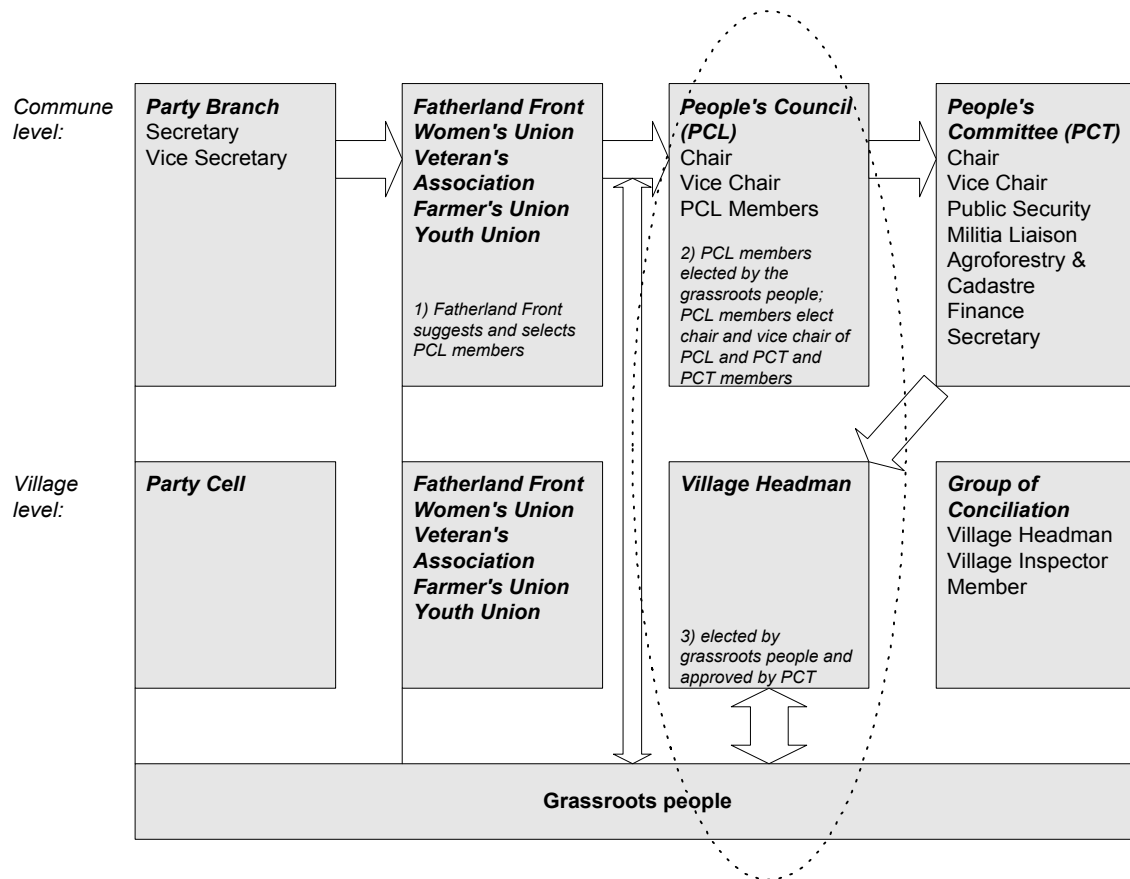


Figure 0-1: Political administration at the commune level (Source: Field data)

The diagram shows the political system with administrative bodies and mass organisations at the commune level. The arrows indicate the way the commune administration is established. The ellipse indicates the direct democratic realm between grassroots people, their direct representatives, and the commune administration.

In this realm of direct democratic exchange lies the potential for democratisation and decentralisation. However, the People's Council's and National Assembly's role remains rather formal and weak, although directly elected state organs have gained more real power and have been able to give more substance to their work since the launch of *doi moi* (Dang Phong and Beresford, 1998:91). Their direct link to the grassroots people makes the direct representatives who populate these organs, though only ideologically, the 'most powerful organ in the commune' (personal communication with People's Council chairmen, December 2000). However, their lack of budgetary power and independence from the party-state restricts their influence. The structure of direct democracy as vested in the People's Council and the National Assembly is a system of delegation which is, in principle, complemented by separate, but somewhat similar, systems at various levels of the VCP. Held (2001:199) claims that in practice complementary systems have meant party domination. Ultimately, it is the VCP through its local cells, embodied in all local institutions, that remains the sole political power at all levels of state administration. The VCP retains a broad-based legitimacy, since it has placed its members in strategically influential positions. Strengthening these interactions would require other state bodies, such as the VCP, the Fatherland Front, and the People's Committee, to begin to share a considerable part of their influence and power.

Politics in Vietnam are, however, characterised by ambiguous policy guidelines and edicts which provide scope for a lot of interpretation at lower levels. It is this flexibility and relative pluralism in the system which allowed experimentation with modified economic concepts, and ultimately contributed to the abandonment of the planned economy at the beginning of the 1980s. Local modification and even rejection of centralist party rule are common features of Vietnamese local politics. Dang Phong and Beresford (1998:77) show that during the early stages of economic renovation, for example, policies were no longer planned according to any theory or resolution, but arose spontaneously from the day-to-day needs of the population. This ‘foot-dragging’ process reflected not only the economic crisis confronting the centrally planned economy, but also political tensions over the gap between the national interest as articulated by the top leadership, and local interests as articulated by lower level officials (Dang Phong and Beresford, 1998:79). A certain degree of flexibility in local politics was therefore common, but did not reflect the existence of strong opposition against the regime.

In the villages, a level below the commune which is not recognised as an individual administrative unit, party directives and policies are disseminated through the members of the Fatherland Front and the village headmen. However, social and cultural life are also still organised according to local rules and customs and a certain degree of local autonomy are characteristics of the political system. An old Vietnamese maxim states that ‘the emperor’s rule has to stop at the village gate’, and this still contains an element of truth (Chaliand, 1969:21; Kleinen, 1999:11). Directly elected village headmen and members of the People’s Councils act as intermediaries between the political system and the local population. They are responsible for explaining policies to the people so that they know what is going on, discussing policy details and plans for implementation, supervising the representatives’ work, and actively participating in local decision-making. The following section discusses how grassroots democracy is understood and implemented in two mountain communes of northern Vietnam.

Politics in mountain communes

After an initial experimental phase with grassroots democracy in some communes all over the country, the Decree No. 29 became a national policy (Dau Hoan Do et al., 1999:12). Daily administrative and political work had to follow the principle ‘people know, people discuss, people execute, and people supervise’. In the northern mountain district of Ba Be, in Bac Kan province, the grassroots democracy decree was introduced in the years 1999 and 2000. The communes’ People’s Councils and People’s Committees of Dong Phuc and Nam Mau received training by the Government Committee of Organisation and Personnel, a government agency very close to the VCP. The training concerned the implementation of democracy in the communes. The training material outlines that government activities and policy purposes need to be made more transparent, and the responsiveness to local people’s needs and socio-economic conditions requires to be enhanced (Government Committee for Organisation and Personnel, 2000).

As understood by local cadres, democracy in the communes is closely linked with equitable socio-economic development, since more political transparency creates better conditions for rational decision-making and better allocation of productive resources. It

was said that ‘the People’s Committee has the power to manage the commune and to force people to follow the law. According to grassroots democracy, people must know about the decisions and resolutions. If some organs failed to let people know the socio-economic situation would not improve’. A VCP branch secretary argued that ‘if grassroots democracy was implemented correctly then there is no opportunity to violate the interest of local people. [However,] once people know and discuss they also have to carry out. If they fail to do so the authorities will treat them according to the law’. He continued by saying: ‘Local people must know about policies and resolutions. Within a certain frame people are free. This is democracy’. This understanding of democracy is prevalent in the communes, and does not challenge the narrow notions of socialist democracy discussed earlier. Democracy is a bounded framework in which people are free to act and to raise their concerns. Their influence to change political and economic decision-making is, however, limited. The statements of two local cadres make this very clear: ‘When local people want to respond to policies they can. Theoretically, people can influence higher level decision-making but in reality it never happens. Finally, people have to follow the Party’s objectives’.

Politics in the communes strongly depends on the low-level cadres’ understanding of socialist democracy and policies. Most of the local cadres are firmly rooted in commune life and village society, acting simultaneously as household heads and farmers, people’s representatives and the long arm of the VCP and the government. They assume multiple responsibilities as social and political change takes place through their intermediary function, and according to locally interpreted VCP directions. Being so close to local people, low-level cadres are generally responsive and accountable to local people’s needs and aspirations. A local leader said: ‘There is a general solidarity between the villagers, being local leaders or ordinary people, because all of them face the same livelihood needs and difficulties.’

Despite the seeming mutual respect between local authorities and grassroots people and shared attempt to work on better socio-economic conditions, there is also criticism. Some villagers blame local officials for a lack of sensitivity to their needs and knowledge. They complain that officials use a language that is not comprehensible, although the leaders’ responsibility is to help and to support the people. A party member raises the concern that ‘it is really difficult for the villagers to keep up with the local officials who have allowances, pensions and who are enjoying benefits from the government policies because they know better what is going on. They are also able to send their children to school.’ Such officials are better able to invest in their future than ordinary villagers. The relationship between local officials and villagers is also still influenced by the experiences of the collective period. A village elder argued that local officials do not take care of the people, referring to former times when co-operative members were always hungry and the co-operative headmen effortlessly received better and more food from the co-operative stores. Incidents of abuses of power and information also occur, such as illicit land claims or partial behaviour in situations of conflict resolution. Such developments erode popular trust in local leaders.

Local cadres, on the other hand, report that they sometimes face difficulties to let people participate and to encourage discussion according to the democracy decree directions. They say that due to the villagers’ low level of political and abstract knowledge, they experienced difficulties in discussing concepts such as land use planning and forest zoning. Claims that villagers have insufficient levels of knowledge are often used as an excuse for not consulting grassroots people. Paternalism is widespread among

government authorities. Dau Hoan Do et al. (1999:9) go a step further by exploring the uneven relationship between farmers and local authorities, or lower ranks vis-à-vis upper ranks, in which the former are always subject to the unassailable superiority of the latter.

Despite occurrences of discontent, exchange between the villagers and the local officials take place on a regular basis in the two communes. Village meetings are held at least twice a month, while People's Council meetings are held every six months. The equitable development of the whole village and commune community is still the major goal of politics in mountain communes. This reveals the vitality of socialist ideology in both official and unofficial life. Dang Phong and Beresford (1998:94) as well as Papin (2000:12) point in the same direction, and emphasise that socialist ideology remains particularly strong in the remoter areas. Low level cadres remain the stronghold of the VCP.

Policy implementation: adhering to grassroots democracy?

Local leaders, as the mediators between grassroots people and the commune and district departments, are responsible not only for information dissemination but also for policy implementation in ethnically and ecologically diverse environments such as in the northern mountain region of Vietnam. The better their knowledge and the better their information policy towards the village communities, the smoother and more successful the policy process. Their abilities to mediate between local complexities and central generalities are reflected in adapted forms of policies often referring to customary law and social practice, and therefore frequently differing from national policy guidelines (Sikor and Dao, 2000:33).

In Nam Mau and Dong Phuc communes, the responsiveness of local authorities to both local needs and governmental programmes finds its expression in diverse approaches to – and the varying pace of – policy implementation, as the following examples will show. In 1999, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) issued Circular No. 56/1999, which outlined the role and responsibilities of local communities for forest protection (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 1999:17; Nguyen Thuong Luu et al., 1995:32). By referring to the grassroots democracy decree, MARD advised local authorities to work out village conventions for forest protection together with the local population. This turned out to be a difficult task. Local cadres in Dong Phuc commune say that 'it was not possible to let people discuss the land use planning scheme because of their low level of knowledge.... Some people do not understand the content of the discussion, and this is when policy implementation fails.' The policy outcome of forest land allocation and land use planning is so far very diverse. Some village communities accepted the formal institutional guidelines suggested by the government. Others resisted them, and regulated their access to and control of productive forest resources according to local customs and social habits. The local authorities did not insist on pushing through an environmental policy concept that was not yet accepted by all local residents. Their working attitude gave rise to a non-linear policy process that respects and reflects a relatively slow local learning process about policy change by both local people and low-level cadres. Diverse responses, whereby official policy guidelines are not taken up in village rules and commune resolutions, is a form of local autonomy characteristic to the rural communes. It faces problems, however, when policy frameworks are applied more rigidly by external actors.

This is the case in Nam Mau commune, which has been attracting growing national and international interest since Ba Be National Park was established in 1992. A unique mountain environment with great biodiversity potential encouraged national and international conservation and nature preservation efforts. Since 1999 the National Park management board, made up of two central level government officials, has been assisted by a multilaterally-funded project for protected areas and resource conservation. The socio-political as well as the institutional situation for the local people living within the National Park boundaries has changed fundamentally. Policy instructions and environmental programmes of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development are pushed through in an increasingly strict manner, cutting down the livelihood opportunities of the local people, as well as their control over and access to natural resources which are essential for their well-being. Despite the policy guidelines of Decree No. 29 on consultation and participation of grassroots people in aspects concerning their daily lives, biodiversity conservation and natural resource management underlie the sole command of the National Park management board. Formally, some attempts had been made to consult people according to the grassroots democracy idea. The flow of information in externally organised village meetings concerning the elaboration of village conventions for the protection and development of forests was however highly biased. The MARD and Forest Protection Department representatives did not react to people's concerns and petitions regarding the imposed restrictions in natural resource use. They merely informed the villagers about their obligations, explaining the fines and sentences they would face when not behaving according to the regulations. Ready-prepared village conventions were distributed to bind the local residents to the guidelines for protection and development of the forest resources. One of the village headmen of Nam Mau commune reports that 'people feel forced and obliged to follow the National Park directions although they feel deprived of their rights. The payments for forest protection and patrolling are not adequate'. The commune authorities meanwhile try to keep the village communities co-operative. They say that, eventually, 'the villagers will benefit from the infrastructure the National Park provides'. However, they do not know what the National Park management board is about to decide because it seeks consultation and permission only at the provincial and central level.

The two examples of Dong Phuc and Nam Mau commune show that there are different modes of enabling participation of local residents in decision-making as stated in Decree No. 29. In Dong Phuc, local residents enjoy some form of self-determination and local autonomy in responding to policy changes concerning their livelihood systems. The local authorities are open to customary law and social habits that are valued for their community stabilising factors. The second example of Nam Mau commune reveals a case where central rules pass over local concerns despite the grassroots democracy decree. Participation is formally enabled through discussion, but is generally ineffective. The paternalistic behaviour of the National Park management board and the representatives of government ministries assigns pre-defined roles to local people. This attitude does not enhance participation and representation of local public interests in a wider political arena.

Grassroots people's active participation in decision-making appears to be a function of the extent of central state interest in the locality. Where state interest is strong then the level of self-determination is small; if it is weak, then local politics is more deliberate and involves both official and customary rule. The grassroots democracy decree does

not seem to enable consistent democratisation and decentralisation processes in the communes.

Conclusions: steps in a new revolutionary stage?

When the Vietnamese leadership issued the decree on the exercise of democracy at the commune level, it was responding to the socio-economic changes initiated by the economic renovation and to the requirements for establishing effective governance structures. The government speaks of a 'new revolutionary stage' that has been reached with the turn of the century (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1998:19). Another official document states that it is time to 'perfect' democracy (Government Committee for Organisation and Personnel, 2000:16). Decree No. 29 intends to strengthen the relationship between the public, the VCP, and the government via political participation and reflects attempts to enhance the VCP's legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

The concept of Vietnamese socialist democracy strongly implies the controlled implementation of democracy; it does not yet enable effective participation and discourse at lower levels of political and economic decision-making. Calls made by liberal VCP members for more freedom to express and to debate political and economic directions and policies are getting louder (Abuza, 2001:32). Criticisms concerning the slow change of working culture, and the unwillingness of some power-holders to retreat, touch on the self-image of the VCP and how it explains democracy. In the current understanding democracy is a political project to be implemented from above. It sets a frame within which freedom to express ideas and opinions is allowed. The VCP, however, strongly fights against opposition and social initiatives that might threaten its monopoly of power. Political participation symbolises one of the biggest challenges for the VCP today. In the transition period, the economy has become ever more complex and people are exposed to manifold influences with stronger international relations and conventions. The right to participation in economic and political decision-making may soon be claimed by more than just the three percent of the population who are active VCP members.

The decree on the exercise of democracy in the communes was implemented in 1999 in the studied mountain communes. Local authorities reacted positively to the decree, and sought to amend their working practices according to grassroots democratic principles. However, the implementation of Decree No. 29 is diverse. In one commune local people enjoyed relative autonomy and their political participation had a direct influence on the policy context of the locality. Their neighbours, however, were struggling within a more tightly controlled institutional and political framework, which did not enhance consultation with the people. Their political participation in decision-making concerning their livelihoods and well-being was heavily circumscribed.

The implementation of Decree No. 29 is also much influenced by the communication flow between local authorities and grassroots people. The political attitude of the local authorities, influenced by historical events, prejudices and social behaviour, is decisive in the implementation process. The strengthened role of local authorities through the democracy decree has often led to arbitrary use of power and knowledge. Other studies on the implementation of grassroots democracy reveal that only a minority of people are well informed about policies and programmes, rights and obligations, and especially

that ethnic minority groups of the northern mountain region have become politically marginalised (Dau Hoan Do et al., 1999:21; Government-Donor-NGO Working Group, 1999:94). Such circumstances impinge on the processes of democratisation and decentralisation in the localities.

Democratisation and decentralisation efforts in Vietnam are moreover slowed down because they are not actively embraced by the public. Politics in Vietnam have never really been in people's hands. Local people in the studied mountain communities considered political issues too risky to become involved with. Brocheux (1994:89) talks about the public's refusal to get engaged in political matters, whereas officials argue that local people lack sufficient knowledge, and that they are 'backward'. These views provide for many authorities explanations for economic crisis and political lethargy in the peripheral areas of the country. There is some evidence that local people have begun to believe such explanations themselves (Jamieson et al. 1998:28). The VCP's monopoly of power is therefore not much challenged by the citizenry in the political periphery.

Despite a lot of paradoxes and limitations, the decree on the exercise of democracy in the communes suggests a significant shift in guiding the authorities towards more consultation with the people, and encourages exchanges of views and information between citizens and political leaders. Although the steps in this 'new revolutionary stage' are still small, the grassroots democracy decree indicates a trend towards more discursive politics in Vietnam. Politics at the lower levels are supposed to become more responsive to local needs and people's aspirations. Given its claim to be the leading representative of the whole people, the VCP is now required firmly to face changing societal realities. In order to make the interaction between the public and the state work, however, it is high time for the VCP to shape a vision of an active Vietnamese citizenry that plays a strong role in the projects of democratisation and decentralisation.

Acknowledgements

This paper draws on research facilitated by Helvetas Vietnam and financed by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. I am immensely grateful to the people in Dong Phuc and Nam Mau communes, and to the local authorities who co-operated with my field research. Very special thanks go to my research assistant Tran Thu Huong. Catherine Locke, Cecilia Luttrell and Duncan McCargo provided valuable comments on previous versions of this paper. Of course, I remain solely responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation.