Performance-based Legitimacy: The Case of the Communist Party of Vietnam and Doi Moi

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This article examines the link between the legitimation process of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and its adoption of the Doi Moi (renovation) policy. It argues that socio-economic performance emerged as the single most important source of legitimacy for the CPV in the mid-1980s as its traditional sources of legitimacy were exhausted and alternative legitimation modes were largely irrelevant or ineffective. The CPV's switch to performance-based legitimacy has had significant implications for Vietnam's domestic politics as well as its foreign policy and has served as an essential foundation for the Party's continued rule. At the same time, however, it has also presented the CPV with serious challenges in maintaining uninterrupted socio-economic development in the context of the country's growing integration with the global economic system which is experiencing instability. It is in this context that nationalism, couched in terms of Vietnam's territorial and maritime boundary claims in the South China Sea, has been revived as an additional source of legitimacy in times of economic difficulties.

Keywords: Vietnam, Communist Party of Vietnam, Doi Moi, legitimacy.

Since its adoption of the Doi Moi policy in the late 1980s, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has enjoyed an increasing level of domestic and international legitimacy. Despite sporadic social
unrest and challenges by a small number of senior party officials, non-party intellectuals and pro-democracy dissidents, the absolute domination of the CPV over Vietnam's political system is likely to endure for the foreseeable future. Internationally, the image of Vietnam as an open economy and an active player in global affairs has earned the CPV wide international recognition.

One of the essential foundations of the CPV's success was the implementation of the Doi Moi (renovation) policy which was officially adopted in December 1986 at the Party's sixth national congress. The policy — which was primarily designed to turn Vietnam's centrally-planned economy into a market-based one — has helped transform the country's international image from Vietnam as a war to Vietnam as an economic success story. The economic reform under Doi Moi has indeed rejuvenated the "vitality" of the CPV which had experienced a sharp decline in its legitimacy mainly due to deteriorating socio-economic conditions.

Established in 1930, the legitimacy of the Party until 1975 was largely based on its leadership role in the country's military struggle for national independence and unification, and, to a lesser extent, its promise to build a modern and equitable society through public and collective ownership, central planning and mass mobilization. After the reunification of the country in 1975, the CPV was faced with the challenge of meeting that promise by developing the national economy to achieve a "socialist revolution". However, economic stagnation and flawed economic policies resulted in declining living standards nation-wide and plunged the country into a socio-economic crisis in the mid-1980s. Moreover, the image of Vietnam was tarnished by its military intervention and occupation of Cambodia from 1978 until 1989, which resulted in international economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation from countries outside the Warsaw Pact. The situation was further aggravated by the global retreat of communism, especially in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. All these factors caused the legitimacy of the CPV to sink dramatically, threatening its grip on power.

Faced with such difficult circumstances, the CPV decided to adopt the Doi Moi policy in 1986, a policy which resulted in far reaching changes to the country and the Party. This article locates the CPV's adoption of the Doi Moi policy as part of a wider process of the Party seeking political legitimacy. It argues that as the Party's traditional sources of legitimacy had been exhausted by the late 1980s, and alternative legitimation modes were largely irrelevant or ineffective, socio-economic performance emerged as the single most
important source of legitimacy for the CPV. The Party's switch to performance-based legitimacy has had significant implications for Vietnam's domestic politics as well as its foreign policy, and has served as an essential foundation for its continued rule. At the same time, it has also presented the Party with serious challenges in maintaining uninterrupted socio-economic development in the context of the country's growing integration with the global economic system which has been volatile since 2008. Against this backdrop, nationalism, especially regarding Vietnam's territorial and maritime boundary claims in the South China Sea (Biển Đông, or East Sea in Vietnamese), has been revived as an additional source of legitimacy in times of economic difficulties.

This article is composed of five sections. The first discusses the theory of political legitimacy and legitimation. The second section examines the CPV's legitimacy prior to the country's unification in 1975. The third section looks into the Party's legitimacy crisis in the 1980s, and the fourth examines the rationales behind the CPV's switch to performance-based legitimation. In the final section, the article discusses the implications of the Party's switch to performance-based legitimacy and the challenges therein, especially in the context of the economic difficulties Vietnam has recently been experiencing.

Political Legitimacy and Legitimation

Legitimacy is arguably one of the most important topics in the history of political philosophy.3 However, it is not easy to define or measure legitimacy, and political scientists have offered various definitions of the concept. A dominant thread in the literature on legitimacy is based on Weber's formulation of legitimacy. According to Weber, "the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige."4 Weber contends that no authority will be accorded to the ruler unless the ruler "possesses an acknowledged right to command" and the ruled have "an acknowledged obligation to obey".5 In essence, Weber's definition of legitimacy is pivoted on the notion of acknowledgement. In his view, the ruler's legitimacy cannot be substantiated if the ruled do not acknowledge the ruler's right to govern, thus refusing to submit to the ruler's authority. Another important element in Weber's formulation of legitimacy is the idea of "belief". The importance of "belief" has been criticized on a number of counts, including for equating legitimacy with emotion and popular opinion and making legitimacy a product
of government manipulation. "Belief" remains, however, undeniably essential in bringing about the acknowledgement by the ruled of the ruler's right to govern. Without successfully generating a belief among the ruled in its right to govern, rulership will have difficulties in winning acknowledgement from their people. Consequently, its legitimacy will be challenged sooner or later. Following Weber, other scholars have advanced their own definitions. For example, Friedrich defines legitimacy as "whether a given rulership is believed to be based on a good title by most of those subject to it". Meanwhile, Lipset contends that "legitimacy involves the capacity of the system to maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society".

Although legitimacy is originally a Political Science term, it has been increasingly integrated into the study of International Relations. A current thread in International Relations literature focuses on the legitimacy of states and international organizations in international society. For example, according to Donnelly, among the elements that constitute the structure of international society are "principles and practices of international legitimacy", and "principles and practices of domestic legitimacy". The structure of international society therefore embodies "rules for identifying who gets to count as member" as well as rules about "what conduct is appropriate". These rules, in other words, present two pillars of legitimacy: rightful membership and rightful conduct, respectively. However, the two dimensions of legitimacy are not independent of each other. Instead, they are interconnected and supplementary to each other; as Ian Clark argues, "domestic" legitimacy has always contained an essentially international aspect, not least because it gives rise to collective acts of recognition. At the same time, it has frequently been the case that "international" legitimacy has done much to bolster the "domestic" legitimacy of individual regimes.

It should, however, be stressed that a regime's legitimacy needs to be first and foremost based on domestic sources and the consent of those it rules. In this regard, each regime acquires and maintains its legitimacy through various means and by a never-ending process of legitimation. At no point should the cultivation of legitimacy be seen as adequate, as "legitimacy is multifaceted, highly contingent, and a dynamic feature of government". A legitimate government today could be rendered illegitimate tomorrow. Similarly, a type of regime may enjoy a high level of popular support in a given country, but in another, it could be seen as illegitimate. As Muthiah Alagappa contends, legitimacy is a social practice based on the interaction
between the ruler and the ruled; hence it must be framed in the socio-political and economic context of a specific society at a specified time.\textsuperscript{15} The legitimacy of different types of governments in different countries, therefore, should be examined through a customized lens rather than through a fixed and standardized one.

According to Alagappa, there are four major elements on which rulers can base their legitimacy, namely (1) shared norms and values; (2) the acquisition of power by the government in accordance with established rules; (3) whether power is exercised within set limits for the promotion of the people's collective interests; and, (4) if the governed consent to the rule of the incumbent.\textsuperscript{16}

The first element, namely norms and values, involves the belief systems or ideologies that help configure the political system and hence the structure of domination. As a result, the more the ruled accepts the ideology promoted by the ruler, the firmer the government's legitimacy will be. Therefore, every government needs to promote a certain ideology to buttress their hold on power, and more importantly, to forge a consensus in the whole society. However, to be successful, such an attempt should take into account the country's history and culture, and the material bases on which norms and values are shaped. In other words, those norms and values should be localized and contextualized to be compatible with the cultural and historical background of the local society.

The creation of shared norms and values also leads to the establishment of certain rules regarding the acquisition of political power. A government that acquires power through these commonly accepted and well observed rules will be viewed as legitimate. This element contributes greatly to the legitimacy of governments in well-established democracies, where rules regarding elections are normally well-established and fully observed. However, according to Alagappa, there are two cases where a government may enjoy initial legitimacy despite the absence of a well-established regime. The first is when a government assumes power following a politically defining moment, such as a revolution. The second situation relates to the charisma of an individual leader. The charismatic authority will be even stronger when it is deployed in conjunction with other bases of authority, especially a politically defining moment.\textsuperscript{17}

The third element, whether power is exercised within set limits for the promotion of the people's collective interests, signifies the ruler's proper use of power. The proper use of power is not only restricted to the observance with the law or other accepted rules and procedures, but also related to the effective performance of the
government, in which the promotion of collective interests of the community is essential. The issue of performance is more important for authoritarian and communist regimes than democratic ones, as the former normally do not come to power through established rules of power acquisition.18 Therefore, failure to maintain an effective performance, especially regarding economic development, will lead to a decline in the government's moral authority,19 which further compounds its lack of legal authority. This causality creates the foundation for the performance-based legitimation mode employed by many authoritarian and communist regimes.20

The last element in the structure of political legitimacy is the consent of the governed. This element is also crucial, as it reflects the acknowledgement, or recognition, by the governed of the ruler's right to issue commands. As discussed earlier, without public acknowledgement, there would be no authority. The public consent to the government may be expressed in different forms and at various levels, ranging from a lack of mass and organized opposition, and the compliance with the policies set by the government; to the obedience to commands issued by the ruler, as well as the public contribution to the achievement of common goals set by the rulers.

The significance of the above-mentioned bases of legitimacy for each regime may vary according to the regime's nature. In other words, the specific legitimation modes employed by each regime are subject to its perception of what is more relevant and favourable to its legitimation project. Building on works by Weber, Rigby and others, Leslie Holmes suggests that rulers can seek legitimacy via at least ten legitimation modes. He divides them into two categories, internal and external modes. Internal modes include: old traditional (e.g. divine right of monarch); charismatic (leaders emerging from a revolutionary change); goal-rational (leaders claiming the right to rule by knowing the most efficient and fastest way to reach the end-goal); nationalism (patriotism, defense of national sovereignty); new traditional (e.g. leaders revert to an earlier, typically charismatic, leader's approach to legitimize their own rule and policies); performance-driven, and; legal-rational (rule of law). External or international legitimacy can similarly be achieved in different ways: formal recognition (by other states or international organization); informal support (other countries showing support for the approach of a leadership), and; external role-model (leaders following the approach of another country or set of countries that constitute a role-model).21

These legitimation modes are normally employed flexibly by regimes and governments across the world. First, rarely does a
government employ only one legitimation mode. Instead, they might employ a core legitimation mode, supplemented by a combination of others. Second, when a regime or government is facing a decline in its legitimacy, it can shift its principal legitimation mode to boost its legitimacy. A legitimacy crisis will therefore occur if a regime or government cannot successfully move to an alternative core legitimation mode.

Unlike democratic regimes, communist regimes generally have a more complicated legitimation process. While most democratic regimes base their legitimacy on the legal-rational mode, communist regimes normally derive their legitimacy from a combination of sources, such as Marxist ideology, socialist goals, popular revolution, charismatic leaders, official nationalism and socio-economic performance. However, many scholars suggest that among these sources, socio-economic performance, which primarily involves the role of the government in providing social and economic benefits for its citizens, could be regarded as the single most important source from which communist regimes derive their legitimacy. This suggestion is upheld by the observation that there is an economic-political tradeoff upon which communist regimes’ socio-economic development is based. This tradeoff is described as a “social contract”, “social compact”, or “social compromise”. Accordingly, under communist regimes, certain civil liberties, such as free speech, an independent press, the rule of law and genuine elections will be constrained. In exchange, communist regimes promise to provide for its citizens a high level of social welfare, including a comprehensive and essentially free education and healthcare system, security of employment and stable prices, higher living standards and upward career mobility. These promises, while helping to justify the citizen’s abandonment of certain civil liberties, requires communist regimes to generate a large pool of resources to maintain its social welfare system. Such a goal will be unattainable without high and steady rates of economic growth. Therefore, maintaining a sound economic performance is essential for communist governments to honour their “social contract”, and thereby securing their political legitimacy.

The CPV’s Legitimacy Prior to 1975

In the period from 1945 when the CPV came to power until 1975 when Vietnam was unified under its rule, the Party derived its legitimacy from two major sources: nationalism and socialist ideals. In addition, Ho Chi Minh’s charismatic authority was also
a supplementary source of the Party's legitimacy. It was not until the 1950s, when the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was recognized by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and countries in the Soviet bloc, that the CPV regime enjoyed external sources of legitimacy.

Nationalism could be seen as the most important source of the CPV's legitimacy during this period. The proclamation of the DRV was a politically defining moment that gave rise to nationalist sentiment, and generated the major part of the Party's initial legitimacy. This was due to the fact that the CPV was the only party that succeeded in gaining independence for Vietnam since the country fell under colonial rule by France in 1885.

Following the CPV's declaration of independence, the Party successfully led the country through two wars against France and the United States during the period from 1946 to 1975, in which nationalism continued to play a significant role. The CPV's leadership during the two wars, which were seen by Vietnamese people as righteous causes for the protection of national independence and unification, generated moral authority for the Party. The fact that millions of Vietnamese people voluntarily joined the armed forces to fight for the CPV's causes proved that it enjoyed a high level of legitimacy during this period. Meanwhile, the triumphs of Vietnam under the leadership of the CPV in the two wars, with the country's national sovereignty fully restored, further enhanced its legitimacy.

In addition, the CPV's legitimacy during this period was also significantly buttressed by its envisioned goal of building a socialist system through socialist revolution. Beginning in 1953, for example, the CPV launched mass mobilization campaigns for rent reduction and land reform. Despite some "leftist" errors that did some damage to the CPV's reputation, the land reforms helped rally peasant support for the resistance wars, and enhanced the CPV's legitimacy as the policy gained popular support among the land-poor peasantry, the largest and most important power base of the Party at that time. At the same time, the CPV undertook industrialization and agricultural cooperativization as moves to improve socio-economic conditions, thereby precipitating the socialist revolution. Other policies aimed at creating a system of socialist egalitarianism, such as free education and healthcare in the DRV, also won popular support.

Another source of legitimacy for the CPV was derived from the personal charisma of Ho Chi Minh. Considered as the founding father of the nation, Ho Chi Minh won the widespread respect of the Vietnamese people due to his thirty-year voyage in search of
national salvation and personal attributes. Obviously, Ho Chi Minh's personal charisma lent the CPV more legitimacy not only until his demise in 1969, but even to the present day. However, as Ho Chi Minh did not seek to impose personal control over the CPV and the political regime, the Party put in place, as early as after the August Revolution in 1945, a system of "collective leadership", which was institutionalized at its third congress in 1960. This move, while contributing to the stability of the CPV, also downplayed the significance of Ho's personal charisma in the construction and maintenance of the CPV's legitimacy.

Lastly, external recognition was also a source of legitimacy for the CPV and its regime. The PRC was the first country to recognize the DRV on 18 January 1950. By the end of 1975, ninety countries had recognized and established diplomatic relations with the DRV. The recognition of the CPV regime by foreign countries obviously added weight to the CPV's claim to lead the country. It also facilitated the CPV's efforts in the two resistance wars, which, in return, contributed to the enhancement of the CPV's legitimacy. Moreover, Vietnam's close association with the communist bloc also helped to boost the ideological basis of the CPV's legitimacy. However, external recognition was never a significant source of legitimacy for the CPV in the years prior to 1975. While the number of countries that recognized and established diplomatic relations with the DRV was rather low, the Cold War and the division of the country at the 1954 Geneva Conference into North (the DRV) based in Hanoi and South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam) in Saigon were also major problems. In fact, the Republic of Vietnam was also recognized by many countries. As dual recognition was not a common practice at the time, the recognition of the Saigon regime by a country could be interpreted as a refusal to consider the DRV and the rule of the CPV as legitimate.

The "Lost Decade" and the CPV's Legitimacy Crisis

Although the CPV's legitimacy was firmly established in the DRV prior to 1975, the Party faced greater challenges in maintaining its legitimacy after successfully unifying the country in 1975. These included difficult economic conditions, the "rehabilitation" policy of the CPV towards former employees and military officers in the Saigon regime, and the deterioration of relations with China in the second half of the 1970s which led the two countries to war in 1979 and an outflow of refugees into Southeast Asia. According to
the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, at the end of 1992 there were 835,000 refugees from Vietnam, with the peak period being from 1979 to 1981.4 Obviously, the image of Vietnamese "boat people" perishing at sea and crowding refugee camps in neighbouring countries had a devastating impact on the legitimacy of the CPV regime at home and abroad.

Moreover, the positive international reputation that Vietnam and the CPV had earned during the two previous resistance wars was also tarnished by Vietnam's military invasion and subsequent decade-long occupation of Cambodia in 1978. Unlike the previous two wars against France and the United States, in which Vietnam benefited significantly from the anti-war movements across the world, even within France, the United States and its allies, this time Vietnam and the CPV failed to win international support for its military engagement in Cambodia\(^5\) and soon found its own "Vietnam war" there.\(^6\) The costs of occupying Cambodia, plus the sanctions placed on Vietnam by Western countries, further exacerbated Vietnam's economic problems and tarnished the legitimacy of the CPV. The ideological basis of the Party's legitimacy was also negatively affected by the decline of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.

Nevertheless, the biggest challenge for the CPV in the post-unification period was the management and development of the economy. At the fourth congress in 1976, the CPV declared that the nation's economy was entering a period of "transition to socialism", which it hoped to achieve in three phases from 1976 to 2010.\(^7\) However, right from the beginning, the CPV's expectations were dampened as the Second Five-Year Plan (1976–80) was considered a failure because major targets were unattained. As a result, although the fourth Party congress declared that the "cardinal task" and "highest objective" of economic development programmes were to improve the people's material and spiritual life, the people's living standard, in effect, deteriorated dramatically between 1976 and 1980.\(^8\) Wage earners were the most affected, as the real monthly per capita income for worker families and state employees in the North declined from an indice of 81.8 in 1976 to 57.8 in 1980.\(^9\)

The Third Five-Year Plan (1980–85), though better implemented, did little to improve the situation. Food shortages were not resolved forcing Vietnam to import 300,000 tons of cereals in 1984.\(^10\) Living standards did not rise, with the per capita national income estimated by the IMF in 1982 to be $160 (compared to $181 in Burma, $300 in China, and $749.2 in Thailand).\(^11\) In 1985, Prime Minister Pham
Van Dong himself acknowledged that per capita income had "not increased much compared to what it was ten years ago". The situation was aggravated by price-wage-currency reform in 1985 which caused inflation to rise by 487 per cent, sparking a severe socio-economic crisis.

The socio-economic crisis in the mid-1980s was indeed a serious blow to the CPV's legitimacy. The Party failed to deliver on its promise to improve the living conditions of the Vietnamese people through a socialist revolution after the war. As Gabriel Kolko puts it, Vietnam and the Party won the war but had lost the peace. In the Political Report to the sixth CPV Congress, General Secretary Truong Chinh acknowledged the decline in the Party's legitimacy by claiming that economic difficulties and the Party's failure to improve people's living conditions had contributed to "the undermining of the people's confidence in the Party's leadership and the managerial capability of state agencies".

As the legitimacy of the CPV declined sharply, resistance to some of its policies developed. For example, in the Mekong Delta in the newly liberated South, state socialist economic policies, especially the cooperativization of agricultural production, encountered large-scale resistance. By 1980, only 31 per cent of households in the Mekong Delta had agreed to join cooperatives and only 24 per cent of the land under cultivation belonged to cooperatives. The legitimacy of the CPV was even challenged by some of its senior members, who were disappointed by the Party's post-war political and socio-economic policies. In 1986, the Club of Resistance Fighters was established with the participation of war veterans and senior party members in the South. The Club demanded that the CPV launch extensive political and economic reforms. It also circulated newspapers criticizing the CPV's monopoly of political power and its post-reunification policies. The CPV's rule was also challenged by organized opposition political groups established by Vietnamese refugees overseas. Certain groups, such as the Front Uni de Lutte des Races Opprimées (FULRO), mainly active in the Central Highlands, even staged a "war of sabotage" and militarily challenged the rule of the CPV.

**Doi Moi and the CPV's Switch to Performance-based Legitimacy**

It was against the backdrop of widespread socio-economic crisis and political challenges to its authority that the CPV officially adopted the Doi Moi policy at its sixth congress in December 1986. The new
policy consisted of a series of economic reforms, including confirming the long-term development of a multi-sector market-based economy, renovating the economic structure, stabilizing the socio-economic environment, promoting science and technology and adopting an open-door policy in relations with foreign partners.\(^50\)

Although the CPV did lay emphasis on improving socio-economic conditions for the population as a source of legitimacy following unification, documents of the fourth and fifth congress show that the CPV still considered socialist ideals as the most important source of its legitimacy, which is well reflected in its determination to bring the country into a period of “transition to socialism”.\(^51\) However, successful socio-economic performance would virtually be impossible without Doi Moi. This is evidenced by socio-economic failures in the 1976–86 period and the successes in the post-1986 period. The CPV’s adoption of the Doi Moi policy can therefore be seen as its strategic switch to the performance-based legitimation mode.

The CPV’s decision was a rational choice, in view of the fact that by 1986 its traditional sources of legitimacy were exhausted. First, by 1986, nationalism and the CPV’s claimed “historical mission” of defending Vietnam’s sovereignty had almost lost their significance in the CPV’s legitimation process. The image of the CPV as a guarantor of national independence and unity had been superceded by that of a puzzled leadership battling again on the economic front, but without victory in sight. In effect, from 1975 to 1986, Vietnam under the CPV leadership was engaged in two more armed conflicts: a brief border war with China in February–March 1979, and a longer and more costly armed conflict with the Khmer Rouge and its allies in Cambodia. Initially these conflicts generated a surge in nationalist sentiment and support for the CPV, but the surge was short-lived. In particular the economic hardships caused by Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia, as well as casualties in the armed forces,\(^52\) called into question the rationality of the CPV’s policies. For example, former Deputy Foreign Minister Tran Quang Co considered Vietnam’s “too deep and too long engagement in the Cambodian issue” as one of the four biggest mistakes of Vietnam’s foreign policy in the 1970s.\(^53\) Moreover, Vietnam’s engagement in the Cambodian conflict also caused it to suffer from diplomatic isolation as ASEAN members, China and Western powers put pressure on Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia. While harming Vietnam and the CPV’s international image, the diplomatic isolation also hindered the Party’s efforts to revitalize the economy.
After nationalism lost its significance in the CPV's legitimation process following the unification of the country, it was socialist ideals that emerged as the most important source of the CPV's legitimacy. However, the Party's economic failures in the "lost decade" prevented it from generating a smooth socialist transformation across the country. The CPV's ideology was therefore eroded when people began to lose confidence in socialism. In other words, the CPV was breaching its "social contract" with the Vietnamese people, according to which its monopoly of power was largely based on its fulfillment of the promise of a wealthier and equitable society along socialist lines. Consequently, socialist ideals were no longer a significant source from which the CPV could derive its legitimacy.

The other two traditional sources for the CPV's legitimacy, Ho Chi Minh's charismatic authority and external recognition, did little to boost the CPV's legitimacy. Although Ho Chi Minh remained a lasting emblem of national unity, by 1986 the impact of his personal charisma on the CPV's legitimacy had declined significantly as it had been nearly two decades since his death. Moreover, it was not until the 1990s that the CPV began to invoke Ho Chi Minh's association with the Party as a measure to restore its legitimacy. The "Ho Chi Minh Thought" that the CPV now uses as one of its ideological bases along with Marxism-Leninism, for example, was not officially introduced into the Party's lexicon until 1991.54 Meanwhile, as noted earlier, by 1986, external recognition had not yet become a significant source for the CPV's legitimacy given the international diplomatic isolation that Vietnam and the CPV were suffering due to the ongoing occupation of Cambodia.

In addition, other alternative legitimation modes, as suggested by Leslie Holmes, were either incompatible or ineffective for the CPV to buttress its declining legitimacy. For example, while the old tradition mode (divine right to rule claimed by monarchs) was inapplicable to the CPV, political developments in Eastern Europe caused CPV leaders to shy away from the legal-rational mode. Similarly, the legitimacy derived from informal support (other countries showing support for the approach of the CPV) was insignificant due to Vietnam's diplomatic isolation. The new traditional mode (leaders reverting to an earlier charismatic leader's approach to legitimize their rule and policies) was largely irrelevant for the CPV, as Ho Chi Minh's approach was more related to the defence of national sovereignty rather than economic development. Meanwhile, the external role-model mode (leaders following the approach of another country or set of countries that constitute a role-model) could not generate an
immediate positive impact on the legitimacy of the CPV, not only because it took time for an external model to be studied, adjusted and applied to the Vietnamese context, but also because by 1986, there was largely no outstanding external model that the CPV could rely on. Although the Chinese Communist Party's introduction of economic reforms in 1978 could have been of interest to the CPV, the reform process was still in its early stages by 1986.

In sum, by 1986, most legitimation modes were either irrelevant, ineffective or becoming obsolete for the CPV. Against this background, socio-economic performance emerged as the only feasible legitimation mode for the CPV to remedy its sinking legitimacy and sustain the regime's survival. The Party's determination to promote socio-economic development as an essential measure to maintain regime survival is well resonated in the political report of the CPV Central Committee to the Party's mid-term congress in January 1994. The report identifies four major threats to the regime, namely lagging behind other countries economically; deviation from the socialist path; corruption and inefficient bureaucracy; and peaceful evolution. Lagging behind other countries economically is considered as the most serious threat because the Party believes economic underdevelopment will breed political instability and undermine its rule. Moreover, the CPV leadership also judged that economic development and improved living conditions would help ward off other threats to the regime, especially "peaceful evolution". Therefore, it is understandable why the CPV decided to promote socio-economic development through reforms under Doi Moi as the most important source of its legitimacy from the mid-1980s.

The socio-economic crisis in the late 1980s and the consequential sharp decline in the CPV's legitimacy explained the urgency behind the Party's then General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh's exhortation to "renew or die". Fortunately for the CPV, the reforms adopted under Doi Moi have helped to sustain it, if not strengthen its rule over the country. The most significant achievement that Doi Moi has brought to Vietnam is the country's impressive economic development accompanied by a dramatic reduction in poverty. Under Doi Moi, Vietnam registered an annual average GDP growth rate of 7.5 per cent for the period 1986-2006, making it the second fastest growing economy in Asia, second only to China. Accordingly, Vietnam's GDP by official exchange rate has increased from $9.8 billion in 1992 to $103.5 billion in 2010. Vietnam's per capita GDP has increased nearly eight times over the same period, from $144 in 1992 to $1,191 in 2010. The rapid development of the economy has benefited
the majority of Vietnamese, significantly contributing to a sharp reduction in the poverty rate from 58 per cent in 1993 to 14.7 per cent in 2007. The expansion of external economic ties has also played an essential role in the country’s impressive socio-economic development over the last two decades, bringing Vietnam not only valuable financial resources through overseas development aid and foreign direct investment, but also vital markets for its exports. For example, the expansion of foreign markets has been instrumental in increasing Vietnam’s export turnover by roughly 20 per cent annually, from $3.4 billion in 1992 to $73 billion in 2010, making exports account for about 71 per cent of the country’s GDP.

Significant economic achievements over more than two decades of Doi Moi have undeniably had a positive impact on the domestic legitimacy of the CPV. Although it is difficult to measure legitimacy, there are signs that the CPV’s legitimacy has not only been restored but significantly enhanced.

For example, except for small scale social unrest, there has been hardly any major political opposition movement within the country that seriously challenges the CPV’s rule, at least until recently. Although the absence of major resistance to the CPV might be due to the Party’s tight control of the opposition movement and the under-development of civil society within the country, the successful maintenance of political stability over the last twenty-five years suggests that the CPV has been enjoying a positive level of legitimacy. A number of factors related to the Doi Moi policy are attributable to this. First, while the poor economic performance of the CPV in the 1980s gave rise to criticism of the Party’s rule, the robust economic development achieved under Doi Moi until recently has helped to mitigate the discontent with the CPV’s monopoly of power. Second, smooth economic development under Doi Moi has made the Vietnamese people unsupportive of any attempt to challenge the CPV’s rule, which may lead to political instability and disruption of economic development, and thus the people’s well-being. Moreover, unlike in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when a number of the CPV policies such as agricultural collectivization and socialist transformation of commerce and industry in the South were met with widespread resistance, most policies introduced by the CPV to implement Doi Moi and to improve the people’s economic well-being have enjoyed widespread popular support.

The implementation of the Doi Moi policy also led to changes in the CPV’s foreign policy, thereby enhancing its external legitimacy. Today, Vietnam has diplomatic relations with 178 countries, including
all major powers and permanent members of the UN Security Council. In addition, Vietnam has also become a member of more than sixty intergovernmental organizations. In October 2007, for the first time since its accession to the UN in 1977, Vietnam was overwhelmingly elected to become a non-permanent member of the Security Council for the term of 2008–09. In 2007, Vietnam became the 150th member of the World Trade Organization, marking its full integration into the global economy after two decades of economic reform. These are noteworthy achievements for Vietnam in view of the fact that in the 1980s it was still suffering from diplomatic isolation and economic embargo. Among these achievements, however, the two most important landmarks that have had the greatest impact on the CPV’s project of revitalizing its legitimacy through socio-economic performance have been the country’s successful accession to ASEAN in 1995 and its normalization of diplomatic relations with the United States the same year.

First and foremost, accession to ASEAN and normalized relations with the United States both mean wider international recognition of the CPV regime. Moreover, in the former case, ASEAN membership has helped enhance Vietnam’s diplomatic standing and national security, and contributed to the creation of a stable and peaceful external environment conducive to domestic economic development. Membership of ASEAN also paved the way for Vietnam to join other international institutions and provided an initial springboard for it to achieve Hanoi’s long-term goal of integration into the global economy. In terms of economics, ASEAN membership was also a catalyst for Vietnam to further promote its domestic reform under Doi Moi. Accordingly, improved relations facilitated Vietnam’s learning of developmental experiences from the more developed members of ASEAN. Moreover, increased trade with and investment from ASEAN states have also contributed significantly to Vietnam’s economic development. For example, in 2010 exports to and imports from ASEAN countries accounted for 13.3 per cent and 19.3 per cent of Vietnam’s total exports and imports, respectively. Meanwhile, FDI from fellow ASEAN members accounted for 26.4 per cent of Vietnam’s total registered FDI capital by the end of 2010.

Similarly, after the CPV adopted the Doi Moi policy, the normalization of relations with the United States remained an issue of great importance to the Party. Politically, the normalization of relations with the United States, the most powerful country in the world, would be a highly symbolic event, marking the emergence of Vietnam as a fully legitimate player in the international community.
Economically, as the United States played a key role in major international financial institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank, the normalization of relations with the superpower would facilitate Vietnam’s access to funding from these institutions. Moreover, as the largest economy in the world, the United States would be an important market for Vietnamese exports. Vietnam could also take advantage of financial resources and transfer of technologies from US multinational corporations to promote its domestic development. Indeed, the biggest benefit that Vietnam has accrued from the normalization of relations with the United States has been trade. Since a bilateral trade agreement came into effect in late 2001, the value of two-way trade turnover has increased more than twelve times to reach over $20 billion in 2011. The United States is currently Vietnam’s biggest export market, accounting for approximately one fifth of its annual export turnover. US investment into Vietnam has also increased significantly in recent years, and the US was the seventh largest foreign investor in 2010.

In sum, the CPV’s legitimation process has gained significantly from Vietnam’s improved relations with ASEAN and the United States, through both wider recognition and especially economic benefits. Without improvements in these two key relationships, Vietnam’s economic success, and thus the CPV’s turn to socio-economic performance as the main source of its legitimacy, would have been impossible. Moreover, Vietnam’s increased reliance on external countries for its economic development — for which its relations with ASEAN and the United States are just two examples — also marks a major transformation in the legitimation model of the CPV. Prior to Doi Moi, domestic sources were essential in the CPV’s legitimation process, while external ones were marginal. During the Doi Moi era, however, external sources have become increasingly important for the CPV’s legitimation. After all, socio-economic performance under Doi Moi, and hence the CPV’s legitimacy, largely depends on the external resources secured through Vietnam’s expanded foreign relations and wider international recognition of the CPV regime. Such transformation validates the observation that legitimation is a never-ending process for rulers and that there exists an extensive interaction between domestic and external sources of legitimacy.

Implications of the CPV’s Switch to Performace-based Legitimacy

Although performance-based legitimation will continue to be the main source of legitimacy for the CPV in the foreseeable future, the Party
still faces major challenges in the long term. As Stephen White points out, socio-economic performance can only provide communist regimes with temporary and precarious legitimation.\textsuperscript{75} The main challenge for communist regimes in relying on performance-based legitimation is to maintain a stable and positive socio-economic performance over a long period of time, a daunting task. Therefore, in case Vietnam’s socio-economic development is interrupted, the CPV will be faced with great challenges in maintaining its legitimacy.

For example, the 2007–08 global financial crisis and its aftermath have negatively impacted Vietnam’s economic performance. The country’s GDP growth rate fell from 8.46 per cent in 2007 to 5.32 per cent and 6.78 per cent in 2009 and 2010 respectively. Although exports maintained their pace, imports also surged, causing the trade deficit in 2010 to increase to $12.4 billion, equivalent to 17.3 per cent of the export turnover of the same year.\textsuperscript{76} Meanwhile, since 2005, Vietnam’s inflation rate has been steadily rising. Between 2005 and 2010, Vietnam’s Consumer Price Index (CPI) increased by 64.32 per cent, and 2007 saw the highest year-on-year inflation rate at 22.97 per cent.\textsuperscript{77} Increased prices have, to some degree, offset the benefits of economic growth and considerably worsened living standards, especially of poor people. High inflation has also led to tightened monetary policies, leading to thousands of bankruptcies due to the lack of credit and high interest rates. For example, in the first nine months of 2011, 48,700 out of more than 400,000 businesses in Vietnam went bankrupt or ceased operations.\textsuperscript{78} Consequently, the country’s official unemployment rate has increased over the last few years, from 2 per cent in January 2008 to 2.9 per cent in January 2011.\textsuperscript{79}

The worsening economic conditions have presented serious challenges to the credibility of the government and the legitimacy of the CPV. For example, the near bankruptcy of the state-owned ship building giant Vinashin has led to severe criticism of the government of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung over the poor management of the economy in general and state-owned corporations in particular. For the first time in the history of the National Assembly, a deputy even called for a vote of no-confidence in the Prime Minister.\textsuperscript{80} Moreover, there have been 3,829 mass public protests nationwide in the last five years, of which 326 involved more than 50 participants.\textsuperscript{81} The harsh economic conditions over the past several years are at the heart of these protests. Meanwhile, taking advantage of the country’s economic difficulties, political activists have also expanded and intensified their activities, leading to a series of arrests and trials,
especially in the months that lead to the eleventh CPV congress in January 2011. Among the activists' major demands were the removal of Article 4 of the Constitution which guarantees the CPV's monopoly of power.

In response to the country's poor economic performance, the CPV has sought to bolster its legitimacy from additional sources to supplement its performance-based legitimacy. Among the most important sources that the CPV has resorted to is nationalism. The dispute with Beijing over ownership of the Paracel and Spratly Islands as well as maritime boundaries in the South China Sea has become a focal point in this effort. Although Vietnam's disputes with China have been a long standing issue in bilateral relations, it is noteworthy that Vietnam's position on the dispute and its reactions to China's moves in the South China Sea have been particularly strong and bold in the past few years. Although tensions in the South China Sea have been rising for a variety of reasons, including increased competition for access to maritime resources and China's more assertive policy, the CPV's revival of nationalism at a time of economic difficulties has also become an important driver of the dispute. As Greg Austin contends, there is a close link between sovereignty and regime legitimacy.

Consider, for example, Vietnam's robust reaction to an incident on 26 May 2011 in which a China Maritime Surveillance ship cut a cable towing seismic monitoring equipment of PetroVietnam's survey ship Binh Minh 02 that was operating in Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone. National leaders made unusually strong statements in defence of national sovereignty. On 8 June 2011, for instance, during a visit to Co To Island off Quang Ninh province, President Nguyen Minh Triet stated that Vietnam was determined to protect the islands it was claiming and that "we are ready to dedicate all to defend our native villages and defend sea and island sovereignty." A few days later, on 13 June, Vietnam conducted a live-firing exercise in the waters near Hon Ong Island off the coast of the central province of Quang Nam. Although Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the exercise as "a routine annual training activity of the Vietnamese navy" China's media accused the Vietnamese government of using it "to dissipate domestic pressure and buck up morale at home". In the National Assembly on 26 November 2011, in response to questions on the government's measures to defend national sovereignty against Beijing's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung confirmed Vietnam's undisputable sovereignty over the Paracels and Spratlys,
adding that it was China that had used force to seize the Paracels from South Vietnam in 1974. This is reportedly the first time a Vietnamese high-ranking leader has publicly acknowledged the forceful seizure of the Paracels by China.\textsuperscript{86}

In addition, to support its claims, Vietnam has accelerated the modernization of its armed forces, particularly the navy and air force. The government has placed orders for 6 Kilo-class submarines, 20 Sukhoi jet fighters and 4 state-of-the-art frigates from Russia.\textsuperscript{87} Despite economic difficulties, Vietnam’s defence budget has been steadily rising over the past few years.\textsuperscript{88} News reports concerning Vietnam’s military modernization efforts and images of its troops undertaking exercises have also been disseminated broadly through the state-owned media. In the wake of the Binh Minh 02 incident, Vietnamese authorities even went so far to allow anti-China demonstrations to be staged for ten consecutive weeks in Hanoi, which is extremely rare in Vietnam given the government’s strict control of public protests.

The above observations indicate that the Vietnamese government has resorted to nationalism not merely as a tool to rally popular support for its policy over its territorial disputes with China. Rather, its unusually strong nationalist reactions to developments in the South China Sea amidst domestic economic turmoil suggests that nationalism has become an additional legitimation tool for the CPV to offset the negative effects that economic difficulties have generated on its performance-based legitimacy. That said, one needs to be reminded that nationalism has long been employed by the CPV as a source of legitimacy. What should be noted here is that the CPV only lays stronger emphasis on nationalism as a source of legitimacy in times of economic difficulties when its performance-based legitimacy is in decline. Moreover, while nationalist sentiments may help enhance popular support for the CPV, the Party is well aware that the strategy may backfire if nationalist movements develop beyond its control. For example, after ten consecutive weeks the Hanoi’s People’s Committee finally banned the anti-China demonstrations in the summer of 2011. The Committee issued an announcement explaining that the demonstrations initially generated patriotic sentiment from the public, but later turned out to be detrimental to the country. The announcement alleged that “hostile forces in the country and overseas” were taking advantage of the demonstrations to carry out activities against the Party and State and undermine the country’s social order and political stability, code words for the Party’s rule.\textsuperscript{89}
The implications of the CPV's legitimation strategy are two fold. First, the CPV's reliance on performance-based legitimacy causes it to be vulnerable to external economic turbulence, which is apparently beyond its control given Vietnam's increasing integration into the global economic system. Therefore, the CPV needs to look for alternative legitimation modes to reinforce its performance-based legitimacy in times of economic difficulties. Second, as nationalism has emerged as a significant source from which the CPV can derive additional popular support, Vietnam's external relations may suffer. As shown by the above analysis, Vietnam's strong nationalist reactions to developments in the South China Sea have further strained relations with Beijing. The CPV therefore seems to be careful in using nationalism to buttress its legitimacy, never allowing it to go as far as causing excessive damage to its relations with China. After all, the CPV is well aware that a worsened relationship with China may exert negative impacts on Vietnam's economic development, and thus the CPV's performance-based legitimacy.

Conclusion

As traditional sources of legitimacy lost their significance and alternative legitimation modes proved to be either irrelevant or ineffective, socio-economic performance emerged as the only viable source of legitimacy for the CPV by the mid-1980s. The CPV's switch to performance-based legitimacy can, therefore, be seen as the main driving force behind the adoption of the Doi Moi policy in 1986. The case of the CPV's switch to performance-based legitimation through the Doi Moi policy testifies to the widely-held observation that legitimation is a never-ending project for rulers.

Although the CPV's decision has so far proved to be prudent, the Party's reliance on performance-based legitimacy has presented it with a new challenge: to maintain uninterrupted economic development. This is a daunting task for the CPV due to Vietnam's increasing dependence on external exchanges for its economic well-being. Against this backdrop, the Party has resorted to nationalism to prop up its legitimacy. However, nationalism-driven legitimacy, as demonstrated by Vietnam's reactions to rising tensions with Beijing over the South China Sea, may generate tensions in the country's external relations, which in turn can undermine Vietnam's economic development and the CPV's performance-based legitimacy.

In the long run, as Lowenthal contends, communist regimes have "no alternative to legitimacy based upon institutional procedure".90
Therefore, the most feasible supplementary legitimation mode that
the CPV can resort to in the future should be the legal-rational one.
In effect, while the CPV identifies economic reform as the primary
target of Doi Moi, it does not rule out political reform. The CPV
states that it seeks "to closely combine economic and political
reforms from the start, with economic reforms as the focus while
step by step conducting political reforms". Although political
reforms have not kept pace with economic reforms, certain moves
of the CPV show that it is looking to legal-rational legitimation as
a potential additional legitimation mode to support its performance-
based legitimacy.

For example, the CPV has recently decided to hold pilot direct
elections of chairpersons of 500 communal people's committees
in four provinces. In addition, the National Assembly has been
allowed to gain greater independence and the upcoming revision
of the 1992 Constitution is expected to embrace positive changes
to promote democratic reforms and good governance. The most
recent example is the decision by the National Assembly Standing
Committee in March 2012 to hold annual confidence votes for key
posts elected by the National Assembly, including the State President,
the Prime Minister, the Chairperson of the National Assembly, cabinet
members, the Chief Judge of the Supreme People's Court, the Director
of the Supreme People's Procuracy and the Chief State Auditor.
Accordingly, the decision may well be codified in the forthcoming
revision of the Constitution. These examples, while informing the
possibility of further political reform in Vietnam, also reflect the
CPV's continued efforts to maintain its political legitimacy, and thus
its rule over the country.

NOTES
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A state's political legitimacy is perceived differently by different groups.
Within a country, there may be groups of individuals that contest the political
legitimacy of the state. However, what matters is the perception of the state's
legitimacy by the majority of the people. See Carlyle A. Thayer, "Political
Legitimacy of Vietnam's One Party-State: Challenges and Responses", Journal
of Current Southeast Asian Affairs 28, no. 4 (2009): 48. For more information
on recent challenges to the CPV's legitimacy, see Carlyle A. Thayer, "Political
Legitimacy in Vietnam: Challenge and Response", Politics & Policy 38, no. 3
(2010): 423-44.


Ibid., p. 5.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid., p. 15.

Ibid., p. 21.


The most serious error was caused by local cadres who wrongly assigned the “landlord” label to a number of rich and middle class peasants, some of whom were subsequently executed. By the end of 1956, the CPV had acknowledged the errors and launched a campaign of rectification that lasted until 1958. The Party’s then General Secretary Truong Chinh, who was in charge of the land reform, was also forced to resign. See Edwin E. Moise, “Land Reform and Land Reform Errors in North Vietnam”, Pacific Affairs 49, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 70–92.


Ibid., p. 263.

For more details of Ho’s life, see Pierre Brocheux and Claire Duiker, Ho Chi Minh: A Biography (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).


India was the only non-communist country to acknowledge the People’s Republic of Kampuchea established after the fall of the Pol Pot regime.


Ibid., p. 82.


Ibid.


For documents of the fourth Congress, see CPV, Văn kiện Đảng toàn tập [Anthology of Party Documents], vol. 37 (Ha Noi: National Political Publishing House, 2004); for documents of the fifth Congress, see CPV, Văn kiện Đảng toàn tập [Anthology of Party Documents], vol. 43 (Ha Noi: National Political Publishing House, 2005).

During the wars against France and the United States, the CPV enjoyed a high level of popular support despite huge casualties thanks to its righteous cause for national independence. Meanwhile, Vietnam’s casualties in Cambodia were largely perceived as unnecessary and a consequence of the Party’s miscalculations, and thus a liability to its legitimacy. According to Vietnam’s official disclosure, 15,000 Vietnamese soldiers were killed and another 30,000 wounded during the ten-year long military engagement in Cambodia. See Carlyle A. Thayer, The Vietnam People’s Army under Doi Moi (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1994), p. 10.


Nguyen Vu Tung, "Vietnam's New Concept of Security in the Context of Doi Moi", in Comprehensive Security in Asia: Views from Asia and the West on a Changing Security Environment, edited by Kurt Radtke and Raymond Feddema (Boston: Brill, 2000), p. 420. Vietnamese communist idealogists believe that "peaceful evolution" is a strategy used by some Western countries to gradually undermine and transform the CPV system through increasing external interactions, the introduction of private ownership, free market practices, human rights and liberal democracy into the country.


Two most notable incidents of social unrest in Vietnam over the last two decades happened in Thai Binh Province in 1997–98 and the Central Highlands in 2004. In the former case, peasants staged mass protests against the local government over issues such as compulsory labour, arbitrary fees and taxes, corruption, abuse of power and land seizures. Meanwhile, in the latter case, a number of local people rioted mainly to protest the loss of their land to migrants from other provinces. Both incidents, however, happened at a local scale and did not have nationwide ramifications. The unrest was also caused mainly by people's discontent with corrupt local officials and their policies rather than the central government, its policies or the CPV itself. For more information on the Thai Binh case, see Zachary Abuza, Renovating Politics, op. cit., pp. 83–88; and Carlyle A. Thayer, "Political Legitimacy in Vietnam", op. cit., pp. 435–36. For the Central Highlands case, see Vietnamnet, "Vi sao xay ra lon xon mot so noi o Tay Nguyen" [Why is there disorder in some localities in the Central Highlands?], 17 April 2004, <http://vnn.vietnamnet.vn/chinhtrti/doinoi/2004/04/59639/>.

See, for example, Carlyle A. Thayer and Ramses Amer, Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).


Hoang Anh Tuan, "Why Hasn't Vietnam Gained ASEAN Membership?", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 15, no. 3 (1993): 283.


By the end of 2010, the total registered capital of 12,463 FDI projects was $194.572 billion, of which $51.465 billion was from ASEAN countries. See General Statistics Office, *Statistical Yearbook of Vietnam 2010*, op. cit., pp. 163–64.


"Không nên quay lưng với khuất-mails người" [Mass public protests should not be ignored], *Vietnamnet*, 23 August 2011.


“Hanoi Orders End to Spontaneous Demonstrations, Parades”, *Vietnam Plus*, 18 August 2011, <http://en.vietnamplus.vn/Home/Hanoi-orders-end-to-spontaneous-demonstrations-parades/20118/20348.vnplus>. Although there were eleven demonstrations in total, the eleventh one on 21 August 2011 took place after the ban was issued and could therefore be seen as illegal.


