The Internet and the grassroots foundation of civil society in Indochina

Quan-Hoang Vuong

It is widely believed that the social contract, credited to Magna Carta of England in the 13th century and subsequent thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, is the major factor that has empowered the concept of civil society in the world, starting from the West. This perspective paper suggests that although that still holds to a large extent, the case of Indochina shows a diametrical, and unnatural, difference as civic engagement in social matters of deep influence was born out of the state’s necessity to tolerate diverging voices, either by controlling, empowering or engaging, in order to cope with social conflicts. This observation gives rise to the need for further studies on the nature of the information-power nexus in the age of big data and social networks.

Keywords: Political economy, the Internet, civil society, social networks.
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Quan-Hoang Vuong

Centre Emile Bernheim, Université Libre de Bruxelles
ULB CP 114/03 - av F.D. Roosevelt, 50, Brussels B-1050, Belgium
Email: qvuong@ulb.ac.be

Abstract:

It is widely believed that the social contract, credited to Magna Carta of England in the 13th century and subsequent thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, is the major factor that has empowered the concept of civil society in the world, starting from the West. This perspective paper suggests that although that still holds to a large extent, the case of Indochina shows a diametrical, and unnatural, difference as civic engagement in social matters of deep influence was born out of the state’s necessity to tolerate diverging voices, either by controlling, empowering or engaging, in order to cope with social conflicts. This observation gives rise to the need for further studies on the nature of the information-power nexus in the age of big data and social networks.

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Introduction

Unlike in Western countries, where civil society have established their positions and spheres of influence within rules-based political systems and market economies, the peninsula of Indochina—comprised of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos has yet to develop a fully functional civil society (Vuong & Vuong, 2018). In Indochina, the presence of CSOs precedes the development of the Internet, which subsequently serves as an important platform for CSOs to take on their unique forms.

Observing the emergence of civil society and Internet-based public dissent in Indochina, where the role of the state remains dominant today, might enable us to understand better how loosely connected online community of civil society organization (CSO) may finally reach the level of influence coveted by both states and formally established political organizations.
The first grassroots foundation for civil society in Indochina was laid by French colonialism from as early as the 20th century, first in the form of small Francophone intellectual groups and later transforming into revolutionary movements that eventually gave birth to the three independent states—Vietnam in August 1945, Cambodia in December 1953, and Laos in December 1954. The decades-long wars in Indochina and the successful establishment of authoritarian regimes in the region afterward had extinguished any remnants of civil society and allowed only state-run mass organizations, such as Youth Union, Red Cross Society, Farmers Association, Veterans Association, etc.

Not until the wars ended in the late 1970s did civil society begin to take shape again, mainly marked by the entry of foreign organizations. Between 1954 and 1986 Laos allowed the operation of only three international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) under many restrictions, and only after 1986 did Laotian government opened the door for more INGOs to enter. Cambodia licensed the first humanitarian INGO in 1989 while local NGOs were permitted at a later time. Meanwhile, World Vision International was among a few INGOs operating in South Vietnam back in 1960, closed in 1975 and resumed in 1978 after the civil war ended. By 1978, up to 70 INGOs were registered to run in Vietnam due to their humanitarian purpose.

Given the authoritarian nature of Indochinese states, the emergence of a truly civil society, with widespread citizen activism and public engagement in policymaking, has not only been slow but is also heavily dependent on foreign assistance. The movement only took off when the three countries opened up in thirst for foreign direct investment and foreign trade, a process that drove them toward a market economy. Previously intolerant of non-state players taking part in governance matters such as labor, environment, gender equality, education, healthcare, and religion, along with the rise globalization in the 1990s, the authoritarian leadership in Indochina had gradually accepted the operation of more local CSOs, changing its approach from suppressing and controlling non-state players to engaging and in some cases empowering, as shown below.

The Internet and Civil Society in Indochina

Adding to the rising complexity is the popularity of the Internet and Internet-based social networks. Laws under authoritarian regimes in Indochina put great restrictions on how people can freely express themselves, organize public discussions and gatherings, or raise controversial concerns.

Internet-based technological innovations and constantly expanding networks have empowered the populace with rich information, insights, and most importantly, a desire to have their voice heard and their rights exercised. Social network sites such as Facebook, which has 34.8 million users in Vietnam, 4.1 million in Cambodia and 1.6 million in Laos, allow citizens to stay at home, maintain anonymity, and unite in online forums. The voices, though expressed virtually, have carried weight and have applied substantial pressure on the authorities. Perhaps online communities are places where the “power of the powerless”—using Vaclav Havel’s idea—is seen most and vividly, in many cases beyond the imagination of well-established scholars and accomplished politicians. That’s why in Indochina’s political
realm, online communities and civil society have been dealt with cautiously, even if CSOs or civil society movements may benefit the political mainstream ideas at times.

The Internet and Political Influence in Authoritarian Environments

In Laos, the disappearance of human rights activist Sombath Somphone in December 2012 set off a wave of national protests and activities calling for attention on rights protection from its own government as well as the international community. Many CSOs and individuals ever since Mr. Somphone’s unaccounted disappearance have used social media as their outlets to demand Laotian authorities to hear their case. Although the movement has barely yielded any success as yet in finding the whereabouts of Mr. Somphone, it has sparked off an unprecedented public awareness about human rights protection in Laos.

The growth of Internet-based CSOs take many shapes, and one striking example in Vietnam shows how even one individual can use social networks to wield enormous influence in philanthropy. Vietnamese reality-show host Phan Anh—known as ‘MC Phan Anh,’ who once served as host to Vietnamese Idol Show—succeeded in collecting more than $1 million in about a week to support flood victims in the central province of Ha Tinh in October 2016.

The mere fact that he managed the campaign almost single-handedly dealt a blow to the government-controlled hierarchical systems, presenting a potential cascade effect likely negative to the authority, exacerbated by the Confucian face-losing factor.

Governments Get In The Game

In the wake of the population going online more and exchanging ideas and information like no other time before, the governments of Indochina had to adapt to the new rule of the game slowly. After years of refusing to integrate social media into its public discourse, Laos’ government recently marked the first official Facebook account of a high-ranking official, its Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith. Since Mr. Sisoulith took office in April 2016, his Facebook page, which mostly covers government activities, has recorded over 108,800 followers (Sisoulith, 2017).

Similarly, Cambodia’s HunSen also runs an active Facebook account. He is sometimes famous for his selfie on his Facebook page. But the use of the Internet innovation has also enabled Cambodian nationalists, including influential officials, to reconstruct their own narratives regarding Cambodia’s long-standing border disputes with Vietnam. The on-going border campaigns—such as those led by Cambodia lawmakers Hong Sok Hour in 2015 and Um Sam An in 2016—have gained momentum on social media networks in Cambodia thanks to a rising anti-Vietnamese political rhetoric. Building on nationalist sentiment and inflicting seething resentment within Cambodian society about the Vietnamese threat, the opposition parties, including the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), pushed their government, which has long been pro-Vietnam, to review the borderland issues with the communist neighbor.

Empowering versus Controlling Civil Society

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The dilemma of empowering versus controlling civil society appears to have been difficult both in perception and in execution, especially when the Internet-based communities come into play in Indochina, with psychological and socio-cultural factors producing the precarious influence on society’s participants. The situation is associated with a common-sense perceptual rigidity that a civil society campaign’s ‘kratia’ is powered by ‘demo.’ So empowering is to the powerless crowd. In contrary, controlling is the vested right of the powerful select few (Vuong & Tran, 2009). This rigidity is perhaps the perfect setting for fermenting potential socio-cultural and political conflicts, and making the civil society conundrum in Indochina more acute, albeit in its rather primitive forms.

Vietnam also offers the case of an illegitimate, though highly influential, media campaign attacking traditional fish sauce launched by the non-governmental Vietnam Standards and Consumers Association (VINASTAS). The campaign put forth a falsified (unscientific) report about the content of arsenic in traditional Vietnamese fish sauce, a market that has been in place for many centuries and was under attack by industrial fish sauce makers. The report perplexed millions of families and put the fish sauce market under a moratorium for about a week, due largely to the societal confusion of information about arsenic and laymen’s tendency of accepting new information with little filtering, even if the information can be contradicting (Vuong et al., 2018).

Fortunately, thousands of capable scientists, business people, and knowledgeable consumers quickly gathered on social networks to exchange ideas and opinions. Thanks to the information sharing on Facebook, hundreds of thousands soon realized that the campaign stinks as the presence of organic arsenic in ocean fish is completely different from that of inorganic arsenic. This fact, in turn, pushed the government and its agencies to respond right away and ended the media fight—the report was quickly nullified, and the trustworthiness of the traditional food returned.

Clearly, in this fish sauce scandal, the political system and the crowd have shared interests in learning the truth that can decide the fate of the long-standing fish sauce industry, and thus hundreds of thousands of fishermen and producers and restaurants, etc. The swift move by the Vietnamese government, in this case, has less to deal with either empowering or controlling, but more with ‘engaging’ in a process first triggered by Facebook communities, representing a shifting modality of the political economy (Vuong, 2014). And this seems to be a more efficient escape from the empowering vs. controlling dilemma, offering useful lessons for both Cambodia and Laos in the future, when and where the complexity grows to the extent that needs it.

The first concept of the social contract was credited to Magna Carta of England in the 13th century and was later developed by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and other Western thinkers. Civil society, thus, grew in the West almost as an inevitable consequence of the pluralist social structures. Civil society is not considered an alienated element but is naturally integrated within the Western democracy. By contrast, in the case of Indochina, as we have examined, civic engagement was born out of the state’s necessity to tolerate diverging voices, either by controlling, empowering or engaging, in order to cope with social conflicts.
The case studies here offer another perspective for looking at the development of CSOs in other authoritarian regimes like China and Russia. And as the age of big data, artificial intelligence, together with the rising power of the Internet-based global social networks (Nguyen & Vuong, 2016), the need for further studies and deeper understanding of the information-power nexus will prove to be not just imperative but indispensable.

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