Uprisings in the Air? Forecasting Political Instability in Vietnam

By Long S. Le

As they watched the so-called Arab Spring sweeping through the Middle East last year, toppling governments in autocratic states once seen as immune from popular discontent, leaders in Asian countries with one-party political systems naturally asked, could it happen to us? Communist Party leaders in Vietnam were among them, and Long S. Le explores changes in the nation’s politics, economy and society that may well be nudging it toward a non-violent uprising that could usher in a new round of reform.

ACCORDING TO SOME REGIONAL observers, while there may not be an Asian narrative comparable to the Arab Spring, the success of uprisings in the Middle East does have direct implications for Southeast Asia, at least more so than many think.1

Indeed, there are reports that in Vietnam, party leaders “have conceded to foreign diplomats that they are worried about an Arab spring-type rising breaking out.”2 Others have noted that regarding the Vietnamese media’s depiction of the Arab Spring, the government response has grown more conservative over time, “demonstrating a growing concern within the regime to manage any metaphorical association that could affect [its] image.”3 This implies that the Vietnamese government could reconfigure the spirit of the Arab Spring either by attempting to meet the citizens’ pressing needs — for example, by pushing further for the criminalization of corruption — or it could internally justify a continuing crackdown on human rights.

Interestingly, a forecasting model of non-violent uprisings for 2011 by political scientist Jay Ulfelder had Vietnam ranked fifth among the top 40 countries where a non-violent rebellion would most likely occur at some point in the year;4 six other Asian countries were also on this list, with China taking the top spot by a wide margin, North Korea coming in 8th, Burma 16th, Thailand 19th, Laos 24th and Malaysia 39th. Here, a non-violent rebellion is defined as a purposeful, sustained mass event or large protest activity directed at central authority. Ulfelder’s forecasting model uses a structural approach by selecting particular time-series cross-sectional information. Other things being equal, the model finds that non-violent rebellions are more likely to occur “in countries

with the least democratic institutions; in countries with more expansive civil liberties; in countries with higher literacy rates; when more uprisings are already occurring in regional neighbors; in the post-Cold War period; in countries that belong to the WTO; in countries that have signed the 1st Optional Protocol of the ICCPR (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights); and when economic growth is slower.”

Although 10 of the 15 countries that saw onsets of popular uprisings in 2011 were among the top 40 countries in Ulfelder’s model, the onsets did not occur in any of the seven Asian countries noted above. For critics, such as the managing editor of Foreign Policy, “looking at rows of numbers is a lousy, or at least insufficient, way to predict an uprising” — and only slightly better than chance. In response, Ulfelder countered that countries like China have hundreds of scattered protests, riots, and strikes annually that may not qualify as non-violent rebellions but “would seem to support the view that the potential for social unrest is substantial.”

HIGH POTENTIAL AND HIGH RISKS

On the one hand, it is not surprising that Vietnam would rank highly on forecasting models for possible non-violent uprisings. That is, Vietnam currently has variables that are highly associated with non-violent rebellions, including the inability of government to control corruption as well as lack of accountability in governance (i.e. lack of an independent media or court system); fundamental weaknesses in a country’s economy and financial system (i.e. consistently high inflation rates and currency rates, price instability, and cumbersome bureaucracy); and government inefficiencies that cause adverse developments (i.e. reliance on poorly run and wasteful state-owned enterprises and contested land seizures by local authorities).

On the other hand, Vietnam lacks other important variables correlated with non-violent rebellions, such as stagnant economic growth, fiscal retrenchment or austerity, and “partial autocracies” where factions can compete publicly. For example, Vietnam’s state capitalism has enabled the country to recover with resilience from the world financial and economic crisis. And while macroeconomic stability is increasingly being sacrificed, consensus was reached at last year’s 7th Party Congress to continue policies to achieve average annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth of 7-8 percent over the next decade, and to continue the program to equitize state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Moreover, Vietnam’s one-party system strongly prohibits protests and strikes that ultimately challenge its authority. However, it does allow for particular demonstrations and public debates to take place as a way to sustain and generate state legitimacy, where the party leadership can respond to public demands through articulated laws, rules and procedures. In fact, such practices in Vietnam have become a routine feature of “everyday politics.”

Still, Vietnam has other variables associated with non-violent rebellions that, although on the surface seem contradictory or need further explanation, are quite telling. These include being a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), and generally being in favor of free trade and foreign investment. Importantly, when such variables are understood as forces of change, they can be used to build theories or test an existing fully specified theory on popular uprising.

Since 1986, Vietnam’s policy of “reform socialism” has moved the country toward liberalization. The state-owned sector has decentralized and the role of the private sector has enlarged, while the fundamental attributes of Vietnam’s socialist system have remained in place. Those attributes include the Vietnam Communist Party’s monopoly as the only political force leading this rapidly developing society, and the centralized bureaucracy’s role as the principle co-ordinator managing the socialist-oriented market economy. Arguably, it is Vietnam’s marriage of communism and capitalism that has created (or re-created) a “dual” society: where “superior” and “inferior” conditions coexist and where both high potential and high risks characterize the country’s development process.

When forecasting models are theoretically designed, they can be efficient and effective in determining whether Vietnam’s inferior conditions will become chronic or whether and when they will cause an “L-curve” economic stagnation. If the above takes place, “structural breaks” in society could emerge, such as have not been seen in Vietnam since the 1975-1986 period, which ushered in Vietnam’s embrace of “reform socialism.” To be sure, recent analyses, such as that done by the Vietnam Center for Economic and Policy Research, show that the current economic paradigm in Vietnam has in recent years accumulated sources of macroeconomic instability, precisely because of “the economy’s decreasing ability to adapt to new conditions created during the process of international economic integration.”

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that some analysts during the 1997-1999 Asian financial crisis argued that unless the party leadership liberalized the country’s financial and monetary system, Vietnam’s transitional economy could come to a halt. Some argued that financial liberalization was not possible unless it was accompanied by political liberalization. Nevertheless, despite the absence of political liberalization (amid the continuation of financial and economic reform), Vietnam became one of the world’s fastest growing economies from 2000-2008.

NON-VIOLENT UPRISINGS SPARKED BY ‘TURNING POINTS’?

Aside from “structural breaks,” there are also “turning points” in Vietnam that might bring...
about political change in the near future. Here, a key turning point has been the development of a political civil society. That civil society goes beyond Vietnam’s non-governmental organizations, which are largely extensions of the state, to include popular associations and community-based organizations that focus almost exclusively on developmental politics. As observed by academic Carl Thayer, the activities of labor rights, land rights, human rights, pro-democracy and religious freedom groups, which were once relatively compartmentalized from each other, are now beginning to cross-fertilize despite state repression.

By some accounts, the increased networking among these politically active civil society groups is attributed to the inability of the one-party state to address specific public demands. The risk of political instability or social unrest comes from the fact that criticism of the regime’s policies in one specific area can quickly spill over into criticism of policies in another area, and so on, in a spiraling cycle of discontent. Coupled with this is the fact that the once apolitical younger generation “see[s] the pluralism in the cultural and political thinking ...[and] is standing there, looking around, and seeing a lot of options to choose from.” Nonetheless, the case of Cu Huy Ha Vu illustrates that within the central committee, there is a coalition that probably supports reform and the development of responsible government based on the rule of law, and who may even consider some form of political pluralism. Indeed, recent Vietnamese elections have ushered in a new generation of young leaders with fresh ideas. While few expect Vietnam to move towards a pluralistic political system any time soon, “a revision of the constitution is on the cards.”

His criticism of the prime minister’s policies had an unprecedented range of support within and across political civil society groups and party-controlled mass organizations.

It is also likely that government institutions could co-opt the burning issues of a “turning point” moment. To be sure, the ability of the government to co-opt does require consensus or incentives within the Vietnam Communist Party’s central committee to develop a new model of governance and/or economic growth. As in the case of economic reforms in 1986, this happens only when there is, in fact, a “structural break.”

By implication, for the first time in the post-reform period, a singular event could possibly spark the onset of non-violent rebellion in Vietnam.

Nonetheless, given the omnipresence of the Vietnamese Communist Party’s vertical and horizontal power in society, any singular event must have, at least implicitly, some support from various sub-groups or a key coalition within the party system. For example, what enabled legal activist Cu Huy Ha Vu, who had filed two lawsuits against Vietnamese Premier Nguyen Tan Dung, to gain widespread attention and support before his seven-year jail sentence in April 2011 was that he was the son of a very prominent revolutionary figure who also was a companion of Ho Chi Minh.