A new way to explain policy reform in Vietnam by developing a model of policy change

Abstract

The Renovation Process - Đổi Mới in Vietnam since 1986 has posed a puzzling policy question: why have some policy areas experienced radical changes while others have experienced only limited and incremental changes? This policy puzzle provided the focus for this paper in which a model of major policy change is developed to provide a new way of explaining the policy reforms in Vietnam over the past two decades. The proposed policy model identifies stressor and leadership predisposition to reform of the policy elites as necessary conditions for a radical policy change while the change in policy image and consensus on the political priority within the political regime provide sufficient conditions for such radical change to occur. Owning to the unique regime characteristics of Vietnam, the model strongly emphasizes the autonomous role of the policy elites within the political regime and the consensus-based policy making approach in Vietnam during its transitional period of time.

Key words: policy process theory, policy change model, Vietnam politics, Doi Moi, regime characteristic.

Introduction

In 1986, the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam adopted a Renovation

Policy, called "Đổi Mới" even though the country still retains a single-party and a centralized

political system with the "unquestionable" leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party.

Following the light of the Sixth Congress, over the past two decades, the Vietnamese Communist

Party and government have made radical policy changes including changes in liberalizing

international trade and investment and in creating a level playing field for enterprises of all

economic sectors. In contrast to the radical policy changes in the above areas, other policy areas

such as state-owned enterprise management and land use and management, autonomy for higher

education institutions have witnessed the opposite results with only incremental changes.

This policy phenomenon in the transitional period of Vietnam pose a major question: Why did

radical changes seemingly occur more quickly and more completely in some policy areas but

changes have occurred so slowly and incompletely in others?

Related to this question, over the past two decades, an increasing number of studies have been

conducted to provide descriptive inferences into different policy areas during the transitional

period of Vietnam. For example, in the area of higher education in general and institutional

autonomy for university and college in particular, the research conducted by Hayden & Lam

(2007), Le (2008), Tran (2009), Pham (2010), Ho & Berg (2010), Harvard Kennedy School of

Government (2008 & 2010), have provide an overall picture of the policy landscape and

recommendation for policy changes. In the area of state-owned enterprise management, the

research of Martin Painter (2003 & 2005), Melanie Beresford (2008), Vu Khuong (2009), The

Vietnam Consultative Group Meeting (2011), The Economic Subcommittee of the Vietnamese

National Assembly (2012), Nguyen Dinh Cung (2013), and others have pointed to the

weaknesses and challenges of the state economic sectors and the imperatives to reform along with recommended solutions for comprehensive policy changes in this area. In the fields of trade liberalization and economic reform, a rich body of literature including the research of Kokko (1998), Dixon (2000, 2003), Le (2002), Abrami, (2003), Muller (2005), Meyer et al (2005), Chu & Dickie (2006), Athukarola (2006), Nguyen & Haughton (2002), Pham (2011), Vo & Nguyen (2009), Economic Sub-committee of the National Assembly of Vietnam (2012) has described various economic reform pressures and how the Vietnamese Community Party and government have responded to such pressures with economic policy changes. Besides these bodies of literature, a number of researches have used the approaches and theories of political science to study policy reforms in Vietnam including the research of McCormick, (1998), Dinh (2000), Nguyen (2000), Pierre (2000), Abuza, (2001), Painter (2003), Fritzen, (2000, 2002), Luong (2006), London (2009), and Vu (2010).

Despite the surge of interest in studying the policy process and policy change in Vietnam, there continues to be a lack of research that employs policy process theories and policy change models to explain policy phenomenon in Vietnam. Most of the policy studies in Vietnam have focused on descriptive inquiries in specific policy areas instead of trying to develop a more systematic descriptive model that might be used to explain and predict policy outcomes in different policy areas. In fact, policy process theories and policy change models have been broadly used to explain policy change process and outcome in many countries including US, Western European countries, China, South Koreas, etc. To close this gap in the literature, this paper aims at developing a model of major policy change in Vietnam that can bring in the insights into the policy process and decision-making mechanism within the political regime of Vietnam. The

model aims at seeking out the most important factors and how they interact with each other that can induce or prohibit radical policy change in the context of Vietnam.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The next section will review several bodies of literature in order to provide the basic concepts and suggested potential causal mechanism of major policy change in Vietnam. Then, a conceptual framework for a major policy change model for Vietnam is identified with key policy variables and a descriptive model of major policy change is developed in section three & four. Section five is devoted to discussion on the implication of the newly developed policy model for a better understanding of the policy change process in Vietnam. Finally, the future studies are suggested in order to validate the proposed policy model in this paper.

Literature review

The literature review is to identifying key policy change factors and plausible causal mechanisms of major policy change which are useful for the development of a conceptual framework for a major policy change model for Vietnam. In the first part, some selected theories and models that have been developed and applied to explain policy process and outcome in the U.S. political contexts are examined. The review helps produce a table of important policy factors and their relevance in explaining major policy changes. The second part will review several policy studies that have applied the reviewed policy process theories to non-American policy contexts in European and Asian countries in order to identify the policy factors that are critical for major policy change in the non-U.S. contexts but are not emphasized in the theories and models created and applied in the U.S.

The third part of the literature review examines the "Policy-elite" model which was created by Grindle and Thomas (1991) from the evidence of policy reforms in 12 developing countries. It

provides an alternative perspective and explanation to the public policy process and reforms in developing countries based on their corresponding regime characteristics. The last part of this section examines the regime characteristics of Vietnam that are critical for a better understanding of actual policy-making context in Vietnam. Taken together, these bodies of literature help refine the key concepts and suggest causal mechanism of major policy change which is employed to propose a model of major policy change for Vietnam. Due to the limited space in this paper, only a summary of each literature review is presented.

Policy process theories and models of policy change in the U.S context

Perhaps the most dominant view of policy change in the United States is that change occurs incrementally because institutional arrangements surrounding a policy domain are characterized by stability and continuity. Scholars in the field of policy process study have used different concepts to describe this phenomenon such as "Policy Monopoly" (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993), "Policy Subsystem" (Sabatier, 1988), "Policy Network" (Marsh & Rhodes, 1992; Blanco et al., 2011), or "Policy Regime" (Wilson, 2000). For instance, in an explanation for policy equilibrium, Baumgartner & Jones (1993) pointed out that the specialized and parallel formal structure of government gives the policy actors the monopoly privileges and powers to resist unfavorable policy change to the status quo. Nonetheless, over the past two decades, a large and expanding body of literature has questioned this perspective by providing compelling theoretical arguments together with empirical evidence for dramatic policy changes (Lowry, 2008). This body of major policy change literature can be organized around the following policy process theories:

1. Punctuated-equilibrium (Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones, 1993),

2. Advocacy coalition (Paul Sabatier, 1988 & 1993),

3.   Multiple-streams (John Kingdon, 1984 & 1995),

Based on the conceptual frameworks laid out by these theories, policy researchers have

developed some policy change models to specify key change factors and the causal flows of the

policy change process in the political context of liberal democracy. Among these models are the

models of Policy-regime (Wilson, 2000) and Focusing-event (Birkland, 2006). The policy

theories and models differ from each other by emphasizing different key concepts or factors of

change and articulating different relationships among the concepts in explaining the policy

change process and outcome. Although the authors of the above theories and models use

different terms for the same policy concepts, they can be grouped by meaning as the following

clusters:

1. Stressor (Regime Model - RM) – focusing event (Focusing-event Model -
    FEM) – external shock (Advocacy Coalition Theory - AC) – perturbation
    (Punctuated-Equilibrium Theory - PE) – national mood (Multiple-Streams
    Model - MS)

2. Policy monopoly (PE) – policy subsystem (AC) – policy regime (RM)

3. Pluralist political system (all)

4. Advocacy group or coalition (AC, PE, RM, FEM)

5. Policy entrepreneur (PE) – policy advocate (RM) – policy broker (AC) –
    policy leader (MS)

6. Interest conflict (PE, MS, RM)

7. Policy image (PE) – policy paradigm (RM) – policy core belief (AC) –
    policy stream (MS) – policy-oriented learning (FEM)

Table 1 below demonstrates how important and relevant are the different policy factors/concepts in explaining major policy change according to each reviewed theory or model.

Table 1: Policy theories/models and factors associated with major policy change

Theory Policy factor	Multiple-streams	Policy Regime	Advocacy coalition	Punctuated-equilibrium	Focusing event models
Stressor	Medium	High	High	High	High
Policy monopoly	Not applicable	High	High	High	Not applicable
Pluralist political system	High	High	High	High	High
Advocacy group/coalition	Not applicable	High	High	High	High
Policy entrepreneur/broker	High	High	High	High	High
Interest conflict	Not applicable	Medium	Not applicable	High	Not applicable
Policy image/belief/ paradigm	Not applicable	High	High	High	High

Notes: High: employed directly to explain major policy change

Medium: to some extent is referred to explain major policy change

Not applicable: is not mentioned by or related to

Some of the policy concepts and causal arguments employed by these theories and models may be applicable across countries and policy systems and may be useful for the development of a conceptual framework for a major policy change model in Vietnam. The reviewed policy change theories and models, however, may have limitations because they were created for and applied to the U.S policy contexts. For that reason, it is necessary to examine the application of these theories and models in the non-U.S. policy settings to see how they work.

The applicability of U.S policy process theories in the non-U.S. policy contexts

Over the past decade, an increasing number of policy studies have applied the theories of the policy process created by the U.S scholars to explain policy phenomenon in European, Asian, and African countries (Olsson, 2009; Nohrstedt, 2009; Walgrave and Varone, 2008; Parsons and Fidler, 2005; Ridde, 2009; Zhu, 2008, etc.). The three theories: Advocacy-coalition, Punctuated-equilibrium, and Multiple-streams are the most popular ones that have been empirically tested in the non-U.S. policy contexts.

Overall, the researchers in their case studies affirmed the usefulness of both the concepts and logical flows employed by the U.S policy process theories in explaining policy process and change in other political systems in European or Asian countries. However, the findings of these researchers suggest that the theories of the policy process created in the U.S need to be revised to enable them to have more explanatory power in other countries.

In particular, other explanatory factors overlooked by the U.S theories need to be added or the relative importance of varying causal factors needs to be reexamined according to different policy contexts. For instance, the policy process theories in the U.S tend to emphasize the role of policy entrepreneurs and group mobilization in multiple policy venues as the key causal factors of major policy change, while the findings of the case studies indicate the critical role of policy elites and activists inside the governments. Another main difference is that policy theorists in the U.S are more concerned with advocacy groups and professional associations that bring in their seemingly neutral and technical beliefs and learning to policy deliberation, while non-U.S. studies emphasize the importance and the central role of political judgments or party predisposition in bringing about major policy change. In the political systems with highly centralized political party roles, in contrast to the decentralized role of political parties in the

U.S, the established political will and power of the ruling regimes can dominate policy-oriented learning and beliefs and thus direct the final outcomes of the policy process.

The critics of the theories of policy processes developed in the U.S when applying to other policy contexts suggest two important points regarding the development of a policy change model for Vietnam. First, it is useful and plausible to employ some of the key and universal concepts used by the widely known policy process theories for the development of a major policy change model for Vietnam. Some concepts that seem to apply across different political systems include: policy subsystem/monopoly, stressors/focusing event, policy image/belief, political acceptability. Second, despite the transnational characteristics of the policy process, researches have suggested the importance of building in the unique features of a given regime's context to explain policy change process. For this reason, the next section will review the policy-elite model as an alternative explanation of policy change in the actual context of developing countries.

Policy-elite model: an alternative explanation of radical policy change in developing countries

The research of Grindle and Thomas (1991) provided a way to close the gap in the policy study literature in general and the policy change model in particular by advancing their policy-elite model based on series of case studies looking at policy reforms in 12 different developing countries. The model takes the middle view between the society-centered and state-centered approaches to policy choice. The authors argue that specific policy choices are significantly shaped by policy elites who bring in their own perceptions, commitments, and resources. But, on the other hand, policy elites are influenced by the external social conditions of the developing countries. Hence, the elite model of policy choice begins with two sets of variables. One set focuses on the background characteristics of policy elites, while the other emphasizes the

institutional constraints as well as opportunities created by the broader policy context of developing countries (Grindle & Thomas, 1991).

Specifically, the characteristics of the policy elites influencing their policy preferences are considered an internal set of variables that include personal attributes, ideological predispositions, professional expertise, and experiences on similar policy situations, position and power resources, and political and institutional commitments. The second set of factors emphasizes the external environment surrounding a policy system in developing countries, including societal pressures and interests, historical and international contexts, and the bureaucratic capacity.

The key assumption of this model is that the policy process in developing countries is characterized by a high level of state autonomy, fear of economic and political vulnerability, and a weak civil society (Grindle and Thomas, 1991). These important institutional characteristics allow for the critical role of policy elites in developing countries where elites can proactively define policy problems, formulate appropriate solutions and adopt policy choice through their own perceptions and evaluations. This, in turn, affects how policy and institutional change is initiated, decided and implemented in developing countries. However, through the evidence collected in the their case studies, Grindle and Thomas (1991) argued that it is not that the policy elites in developing countries just abuse their powers or are strongly influenced by interest groups. Instead, they are able to make their owned choices based on their own calculation to adopt appropriate policy for their countries.

This model in two critical ways sheds lights on the explanation of the policy context of Vietnam in which the policy change process occur. First, it describes accurately the policy contexts in developing countries in which the policy elites and public administrators have much more

autonomy in the policy process compared to their counterparts in industrialized countries and liberal democracies. Policy makers in developing and transitional countries emerge as the central actors in the politics of policy reform because developing countries actually have the conditions of uncertainty of information, poverty, pervasive state influence in the economy, and centralization of decision making (Grindle and Thomas, 1991).

The concept of "ideological predisposition" used by the authors is especially useful for a better understanding of the policy process and policy choice in Vietnam. It refers to the ideological biases or commitments that influence policy leaders' perceptions of what problems are and how they should be responded to on the face of stressors (Alder, 1987 cited in Grindle and Thomas, 1991). In the case of Vietnam, it implies the ideological commitments to a Socialist state that the communist regime relies on to build its legitimacy. This commitment serves as a filter for the policy elites when they evaluate policy problems, which in turn determine how they select problems to act on and corresponding solutions. External stressors may occur and stimulate policy change but policy elites must take into account their ideological commitments and core values of the regime before any major policy change proposal is advanced to the agenda setting stage.

A second value of the policy elite model is that it helps capture the feature of a relatively closed and centralized political system and policy process led by the Vietnamese Communist Party. The model emphasizes the central role of internal deliberation and interaction among policy elites within the ruling regime rather than policy coalitions, interest groups or networks, as is the case with pluralist political systems. These inside policy elites are not necessarily isolated from pressures from interest groups, international organizations or the public, but often the reality of

underdevelopment society and the absence of a strong civil society tend to increase the weight of their power and preferences and vested policy-making autonomy.

The elite model, however, is limited in explaining the policy process and its outcome in several ways. First, the model lists a number of both internal and external factors that can affect the policy choices of policy elites in developing countries. But the model is not useful in identifying and ordering the importance of multiple causal factors associated with major policy change. Thus, it does not meet the standard of a good model that can differentiate critical factors from those that are non-critical (Dunn, 2008). The second limitation of the model is its lack of capacity to explain how these multiple factors interact with each other to induce policy changes. It is also unable to specify different paths of change with the presence of different causal factors that can produce different kinds of policy outcomes.

To summarize, the studies on the application of U.S policy process theories to non-U.S. policy system along with the review of the policy-elite model have suggested the need to revise the existing U.S theories and models of the policy process for more accurate explanation of policy phenomenon in Vietnam due to the divergence in the policy context. This is not surprising when one recognizes that the policy contexts are the product of "the intellectual, historical, social and practical conditions in which the subsystem is embedded, consisting of both structural conditions, such as mostly socio-economic factors, and institutionalized rules, norms, ideas and mutual expectations" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, cited in Olsson, 2009). Therefore, it is important to understand the unique regime characteristics of Vietnam and their implications for a better understanding of the policy context in Vietnam.

Vietnam regime characteristics: implications for policy context

This section reviews the main regime characteristics as the determinants for the policy context in Vietnam with two bottom line objectives. First, it is to justify the relative importance of the policy change factors identified in the literature reviews in the previous sections corresponding to the Vietnamese context. Second, it seeks for a better understanding of the key gate keeping mechanisms that both facilitate and obstruct major policy change in Vietnam.

To identify the regime characteristics of Vietnam I am referring to the framework presented by Tim Conway (2004) in his analysis of the Vietnamese political system. This framework includes the institutional structure of the central authority, the relationship between local and central governments, and the formal policy making process. Besides these components, I will add the relationships between the state and society to the framework.

Institutional structure of the central authority

The political system of Vietnam is structured into parallel hierarchies: party organization system and state apparatus. Formally, the central state authority of Vietnam is organized into three separate entities: the legislature (National Assembly), the Presidency, and the executive branch (Central Government). In reality, however, the state system is organized around an absolute leadership role of the CPV because all the top leaders of the state entities are also the top leaders of the ruling party. Furthermore, the Party committee system exists at every level of the bureaucracy, from the central government to ministerial, provincial, city, district and commune authorities to direct the operation of the state agencies. At the same time, the Party's authority is reinforced through the hierarchies of the Party-affiliated mass organizations (e.g. Women's Union, Youth Union, Farmers' Association), clustered under the umbrella of the Fatherland Front.

The operation of both Party and state systems in Vietnam is guided by the principle of "democratic-centralism" which is articulated in the Charter of the Party. The essence of this principle is that policy initiative may be open for discussion and deliberation within the Party, state apparatus and even within the society. However, the final decision is supposed to be made by the highest level of the Party and once it is made all public agencies and officials must obey and implement such decision.

Within this political structure, the most important and radical policy change proposal of the country must be deliberated, reviewed and decided within the Politburo and the Party Central Committee of CPV before being passed to the National Assembly and central government for legalization or further discussion. Over the years, there have been more pressures to increase the policy-making autonomy for the National Assembly even when some 90% of the NA members are also the members of the CPV. However, the Party, comprising around 3.6 million members out of a total population of 90 million, is by far the most important force in the Vietnamese political arena when the legislature, the military and the bureaucracy are effectively subordinate to its guidance (Conway, 2004).

The relationships between central and local authorities

In Vietnam, the formal authority system operates at four levels including a central level and three local levels: province/central city, district, and commune. There are two main different perspectives regarding the relationship between central and local authorities in Vietnam. First, some argue that the relationship is a "top down" process of strict command and control from the central government agencies down to local authorities (Conway, 2004; Hayton, 2010). Under the norms and practices of "democratic-centralism", the central authorities demand (and normally obtains) a monopoly of the formal processes of political mobilization, political representation

and decision making across the country. In addition, there is a predisposition towards a technocratic and central model of policy making in which a large number of national research institutes and experts are supposed to undertake policy analysis and provide advice in order to assist the central authority with the policy making process for the whole country. To a great extent, this structure reflects the Soviet model of government.

The alternative view of the relationship between the central and local authorities is that although the overall socio-economic policies and plans are designed by the central public agencies, a significant degree of autonomy is extended to local administration with regard to implementation (Fritzen, 2000; Painter, 2003). The political system has become significantly less hierarchical through the process of Đổi Mới in which the relationships between the central and lower levels in the formulation and implementation of policy have been radically transformed. Government by decree leaves room for local interpretation and implementation, enabling necessary refinement and correction that make central decisions more responsive to local situations (Painter, 2003).

To some extent, both of the above views are true. However, in the view of the author of this paper, the role of the central government is still dominant, especially in the stages of national policy agenda setting, formulation and adoption. There has been relatively more autonomy than in the past for local governments especially in regard to policy implementation. However, national laws and regulations are mainly initiated and adopted by the central government with the leading role of its policy agencies and elites. Depending on the nature of the policy issue, the central government may be more willing than it has been in the past to delegate authority to local governments. But if the policy puts at risk the political principles and priorities of the CPV, the

Party Central Committee and the central government will exercise its power to impose the direction and control the outcomes of the policy process.

The policy-making structure and process

At the national level, the National Party Congress (NPC) of the Vietnamese Communist Party (CPV) convenes every five years to examine and approve broad political, economic, and social, strategies for the whole country. Party's resolutions and strategies are then translated into the National Socio-economic Development Plans, which are in turn concretized by a number of annual and sectorial plans and policies created by line ministries for all socio-economic areas and by provincial authorities for the development plans of the provinces. The Party Central Committee (PCC) also organizes annual meetings (at least twice a year) to deliberate and decide emerging issues and major policy change proposals submitted by the National Assembly or the central government. Based on the orientations and decisions from the PCC, these state entities will then direct the policy process and policy outcomes based to align with Party's will.

Another feature of the policy process in Vietnam is the existence of a dual party-state model of decision-making in Vietnam. That means there are two parallel policy-making systems: one within the Party and the other within the state. When a policy change proposal is initiated, formulated, reviewed and adopted, it will be examined by both systems. This dual party-state policy-making process implies two kinds of "policy filters", especially for those policies that do not have a high level of internal consensus or when there may be far-reaching external consequences. Generally, the state agencies are more concerned about and responsible for the technical feasibility of a policy alternative with regard to financial allocation and resource adequacy, effective policy tools, cost and benefit calculations, implementation feasibility, etc. The Party's organizations are more concerned about and charged with the political acceptability

involving the Party's core political values and priorities such as political stability, the absolute leadership of the Party over the state and society, the legitimacy of the mainstream ideology, or social equality, etc.

The relationship between the state and society

To understand the relationship between the state and society in Vietnam, the following paragraphs will describe the election system, the role of civil society, the legitimacy of the CPV as a sole political party and the political culture of Vietnam. These factors are also examined to see how they affect the policy process.

In the first place, Vietnam has two separate election systems: one for the Party, and the other for the State, including the National Assembly (NA) and People Council's elections at provincial and district levels. Both of these election systems are conducted very five years without election campaign among the candidates. Theoretically, in the state election system, everyone can be self-nominated as the member of the NA, regardless of social class, religion, ethnics, or political ideology (Constitution of Vietnam, 2013). However, in practice, the final candidates are selected from the so-called "compromising" meetings organized by the Fatherland Front, an organization that operates under the auspices of the CPV. This mechanism of nomination and selection of the legislative members gives little chance for the participation of independent policy actors or social groups in the political process.

On paper, in the Party election system, the party leaders at each level are selected directly by the vote of the members of Party's committees at the same level. However, in reality, they are usually nominated by the predecessor leaders and approved by the higher level of the Party's organizations, which, to a great extent, ensures an alignment of views and loyalty among the various party and government levels and between the predecessors and successors. After being

elected at both central and local agencies, more than 3,000 representatives of around 3.6 million party members nationwide gather at the National Party Congress to select the top leaders of the Party who are also the leaders of the Central Party Committee, National Assembly, Presidency, and central government. Again, in theory, members of the Party Central Committee and the Politburo are elected by all of the participants of the Party Congress. However, in reality, they are nominated and selected by the powerful core Party's top leaders behind closed doors and rarely there is more than one candidate running for a position.

The election practice in Vietnam has several important implications for the policy process. First, the successor party leaders at all levels are nominated and chosen by the predecessor leaders. Therefore, they tend to be loyal to the policies and strategies of their predecessor. This practice makes the policy preferences within the Party and government consistent and stable over time. Second, through the "compromising" conferences that are held at all levels to select the candidates, the CPV manages to control the candidacy of the future leaders in the Party, National Assembly and central government. A recent practice of leader nomination is the so-called "tentative nomination - quy hoạch cán bộ", which regulates that the future leaders must be identified and nominated as the "tentative leader". Over time the tentative leader must be able to approve his/her capacity and political competence before being selected as the leader. Thus, most of the representatives running all levels of government are under the supervision and scrutiny of the Party's personnel committees. This mechanism prevents the deviation to maintain and consolidate the leadership of the ruling regime overtime.

Regarding the civil society, civil organizations are still weak in Vietnam, largely as a result of deliberate control efforts by the CPV and its government. Civil society refers to the capacity of individuals and groups to organize, speak, write, teach and act without the state's instigation and

manipulation (Kerkvliet, 2001). While Vietnam has various social associations such as Farmer, Women, Youth Unions and a large number of professional and social associations, they operate under the auspices of the Fatherland Front, which in turn is supervised and oriented by the CPV (Vu, 2012). Therefore, these organizations do not meet the criteria of civil society. Non-government organizations are allowed to be established but need to get the approval from and register with the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Although the Vietnamese Constitution declares the right of press freedom, all the mass media agencies fall under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism and the Party's National Committee on Propaganda and Education (Hayton, 2010). The Prime Minister's Degree No 97 (2006) has been publically criticized because it is considered to restrain social deliberation and curtail open society (Vu, 2012). As a result, Vietnam NGOs and other signs of civil society have only recently begun to emerge (Kerkvliet, 2001). Despite the fact that Vietnam has become a much more open society over the past two decades, tight political restrictions make it very difficult for the formation of any social organization or interest group that can influence the policy process.

Despite a weak civil society in Vietnam, the ruling regime enjoys a high level of legitimacy. The victories in the wars against foreign enemies in the 20st century and the success of the national unification have given the CPV and its government a great deal of legitimacy. This historical legacy is reinforced by significant socio-economic achievements of the Đổi Mới Program, bringing about great improvement in the living standards over the past two decades. In addition, the Vietnamese government has been very proactive in international relations in order to stimulate the trade in and out of Vietnam and therefore making it easy for people to access goods and services at an affordable price (Kerkvliet, 1995). With higher income, more public service options and increased access to basic commodities compared to the period before Đổi Mới, the

majority of the people are relatively satisfied with the Đổi Mới process initiated and led by the CPV. To a great extent, the CPV enjoys somewhat greater legitimacy and security than its Chinese counterpart (McCormick, 1998).

Nonetheless, the legitimacy of the CPV as the leader of the whole society is challenged by current social, economic and political problems, including severe corruption, economic slowdown, increasing income inequities, traffic congestion, the failures of state-owned enterprises and the increasing inflation rate over the past few years (Le Doan Ket, 2013). In terms of international relations, the regime is also facing critics who want Vietnam to resolve its territorial disputes with China over some important islands. The challenges to the leadership of the CPV are, on the one hand, the major driving forces for policy reforms but, on the other hand, put the Party at risk if major policy changes fail. This paradox strongly influences the process of major policy change that will be articulated in the next parts of this paper.

Conclusion on the characteristics of the policy-making structure and process in Vietnam

The above review of the regime characteristics of Vietnam has identified some unique features of the policy context in Vietnam which are important for the development of a major policy change model for Vietnam.

First, the state relies on being relatively insulated from external political or social forces that help the regime largely contain contradictions within the circles of the party-state system (Painter, 2003). Factors like Party centralization and government control, the constraints on freedom of express and association, and the influence of Confucianism on Vietnamese culture result in a civic culture that is weak in terms of promoting self-help and organization outside the public sphere. Citizens have little opportunity to establish their own organizations in order to speak and act publicly on important policy issues (Kerkvliet, 2001; Hayton, 2010; Vu, 2012). This civic

culture, along with the limited capacities of the local governments, tends to make the policy process more state-led and centralized in Vietnam event when compared to the other developing or transitional countries in the world. While a policy reform may be the result of the pressures from the society or international organizations, it is normally initiated and advocated by state actors instead of advocacy coalitions as in developed and pluralist political systems.

This phenomenon does not mean that the regime ignores the pressures from the public or social groups. Instead, drafts of laws, or even the Constitutions have been publicly posted on Internet for comments and inputs from the people and the whole society. However, the regime tends to filter information and feedback flows and selectively accepts ideas from outside the public sphere based on its own judgments. At the central level, a number of consulting agencies and research institutes have been created and maintained to provide advice and facilitate information channels to the policy elites of the regime. This view is congruent with evidence of the study on policy reforms in 12 developing countries conducted by Grindle and Thomas (1991) whose conclusion is that the closed policy-making system and the weak and unorganized civil society in developing countries limit the participation of social actors in the decision making process and leave higher autonomy for the state actors in the policy process.

Second, in the policy-making process of Vietnam, the independence of the legislators and policy makers is very limited due to the personnel system used for the advancement and promotion in both party and state systems. Most of the legislators and bureaucratic leaders are members of the CPV and their political interests are strongly linked to their obedience with Party's ideology and priorities. The "democratic-centralism" principle does not allow legislators and policy elites to deviate greatly from the mainstream ideology and political preferences of the Party. This reality

makes the role of policy champions or entrepreneurs in Vietnam very limited, even though this role is emphasized in most of the policy change theories and practices in the U.S.

Third, the decision-making mechanism in Vietnam places emphasis on collective leadership and consensus (Abonyi, 2005). This mechanism is maintained as the result of the Socialist legacy, which highly values "collective mastery" and "consensus-based" approaches. Most of the important decisions or policies are made by collective committees comprised of the leaders and experts of concerned agencies to minimize interest conflict and personal responsibility. This mechanism allows for a number of the elites in the Party, National Assembly and central government to compromise the political preferences with each other as well as for politicians to keep face of each other. With this political mechanism of collective mastery, even the top leaders of the Party and government are not in the position to sustainably impose or arbitrate a major policy change without a broad-based consensus within the regime (Conway, 2004). Owning to this decision making model, the initiation and adoption of major policy and institutional reform usually requires sustained, time-consuming, and nationally-led efforts (Painter, 2003).

Conceptual framework for major policy change model of Vietnam

The literature review in the previous section has identified key elements of the conceptual framework from which a model of major policy change in Vietnam can be developed. Table 1 above has identified seven (7) critical factors accounting for major policy changes found in the U.S-centered policy process theories and models. Based on three additional reviews on (1) the studies of the applicability of U.S. policy process theories in non-US policy systems, (2) the policy-elite model applied to policy reforms in developing countries, and (3) the regime characteristics of Vietnam, two other critical factors determining major policy change in Vietnam are added: regime's leadership predisposition to reform and Party's consensus on political

priority at a certain point of time. Table 2 below summarizes all of the nine (9) critical change factors and shows how each of the factors is relevant for explaining major policy change in Vietnam. Notably, long with regime's leadership predisposition to reform and Party's consensus on political priority, two out of the seven policy factors in Table 1 (stressors and change in policy image) are employed to explain major policy change in the Vietnamese policy context.

Table 1: The relevance of the policy factors to major policy change in Vietnam

Relevance of factor Policy factor	High	Medium	Low	Not applicable
Stressor/crisis	X			
Pluralist political system				X
Advocacy groups			X	
Policy entrepreneur/champion			X	
Interest conflict and mobilization		X		
Change in policy core belief/image/paradigm	X			
Policy-oriented learning		X		
Leadership predisposition to reform	X			
Consensus on political priority	X			

Notes: *High: must be present for major policy change*

   Medium: to some extent necessary for major policy change

   Low: rarely happen or does not have much influence on the policy process

   Not applicable: does not exist in the Vietnamese context

Critical policy change factors

In Table 2, four policy factors are identified as important and relevant to explain major policy change in Vietnam: stressor, leadership predisposition to reform, change in policy image, and consensus on political priority. The following paragraphs will define in detail these different causal factors, which will serve as the variables in the to-be-developed policy change model for Vietnam.

Stressor

Similar to other policy context in other political systems, stressors are also treated as independent variables of radical policy change in Vietnam. They are defined broadly as critical contextual factors that make major policy changes more likely to happen. Scholars have used different names to label this concept: stressor (Wilson, 2000), focusing event (Birkland, 2006), external shock (Sabatier, 1988), perturbation (Jones and Baumgartner, 1995), and politics stream (Kingdon, 1995). Stressors to a policy subsystem in Vietnam may include: natural and human disasters, economic crises, structural changes in socio-economic conditions, critical changes in other policy areas, national mood, or international pressures. These factors may be either quantitative or symbolist. Stressor makes the elites fear that adverse consequences may occur if the stressor is not addressed. Thus, they provide opportunities for policy reviewing and learning within the policy regime that can change policy makers' perception of the problems, how they rank values or priorities, and how decisive they are in pushing for major policy change. New knowledge, new risks and changes arising from stressors can lead to innovative policy change initiatives, and provide an environment to trigger a major policy change.

Regime's leadership predisposition to reform

The concept of leadership predisposition is defined as a psychological readiness and willingness of the policy elites to consider and advance a policy change initiative. It refers to the cognitive response of the policy elites to the stressor, which is achieved only after they take into account the ideological commitments and political risks. Concretely, the predisposition demonstrates the intention to reform a given policy area which is resulted from how the policy elites perceive and articulate particular policy problems, how they assess the proposed change alternatives, and how they weight political and technical factors in dealing with policy problems. Leadership

predisposition to policy reform can be influenced by ideological loyalties, political commitments and institutional constraints. In the case of Vietnam, the ideological commitments and political commitments can be guided by the principles of "Party's absolute leadership over state and society", "democratic-centralism", "social equality", and "state of the mass", etc.

A good example illustrating the concept of leadership predisposition to change is Bruce Gilley's (2008) research that contrasted the outcomes of the democratization process in China and Taiwan. Although Taiwan's 1986 successful transition and China's failed 1989 transition both occurred in times of positive socio-economic situations they were greatly different. Gilley attributed the failure of democratization in China to a missing element – the predisposition to major political change of the then Chinese political leaders. They did not perceive that their regime was facing a legitimacy crisis. In contrast, the predisposition of Taiwan's top leaders to the liberalization of the regime is the most critical factor for understanding of political reform in Taiwan. Accordingly, according to Gilley (2008), the democratic transition in Taiwan is subjective rather than objective. That suggests: in the face of stressors, how the ruling regime and its elites are supportive of reform is critical to radical policy changes, especially in centralized and state-led political system like Vietnam or China.

Policy image

The concept of "policy image" borrowed from the Punctuated-equilibrium theory which is defined as how policy is understood and discussed. Policy images are resulted from a mixture of empirical information and emotive appeals (…..in Sabatier, 1999). In the Advocacy-coalition framework, Sabatier (1988) used a similar concept called "policy core belief" which represents the perceptions concerning value priorities, the seriousness of the policy problems, the principle causes of the problems and the strategies to realize core belief. In a similar way, Wilson (2000) in

his Policy-regime model employed the concept of "policy paradigm" that embodies ways of seeing, discussing and defining problems, and then shaping policy solutions.

In the context of Vietnam, the concept of "policy image" refers to the way in which the policy elites interpret given policy problems; identify the causal relationships between these problems with the existing policies or the absence of a policy; and rationalize the solutions resolving the problems. Policy image also reflects the assumptions and beliefs in the best way to realize the political priorities of the ruling regime in the transitional process. In the context of Vietnam, the policy image is strongly influenced by the legacy of a Socialist state inherited from the Soviet model of government that Vietnam had been adopting for decades before Đổi Mới.

Party's consensus on political priority

The concept of political priority refers to the values or principles embraced by the Vietnamese regime, which resemble the concept of deep core belief defined by Sabatier (1988). Accordingly, the deep core belief represents basic ontological and normative assumption in the nature of the society, the relationship between the government and the society, the meaning of individual rights and social equality, etc. Such beliefs are very difficult to change in stable and mature democracies so that some of the policy change theories developed in and applied to Western and industrialized countries do not include this kind of belief to explain policy change process and outcome. This assumption on core belief, however, is not totally true in the case of a developing and transitional country like Vietnam.

Indeed, since Vietnam has gradually integrated into the world community, the core beliefs articulated by the ruling regime are being challenged by those of the Western democracies such as pluralism, freedom of press and association, govern by consent, check and balance, etc. The Vietnamese regime maintains its leadership legitimacy based on its ability to keep its core

political values or beliefs dominant over the alternative ones from Western and developed societies. For example, the CPV has continued to place primacy on maintaining the democratic-centralism mechanism over a pluralist system; ensuring social equality instead of promoting a full-fledged free market economy; maintaining social stability over promoting individual freedom and protecting state-led control over the policy process rather than a society-led approach.

Accordingly, any major policy change alternative in Vietnam is basically assessed against two core values or principles: political stability and the absolute leadership role of the CPV over the state system and the society. Since these principles are abstract that can be interpreted in a broad sense, Party's leaders have to refer to some intermediate or subsidiary political priorities when reviewing a major policy change proposal. For example, the Party can refer to social equality for harmonization, economic development for higher living standard, social welfare for the mass, state-led industrialization, etc., when examining innovative policy change alternatives. At a given of time, the Party will consider among these tenets to which the first political priority is given. This mechanism plays a role as a "political filter" which is critical to the study of radical policy change in Vietnam. If a given innovative policy change alternative is congruent with the political priority at the time, there is a great chance for it to be adopted. This political priority is in turn consensus-based and determined within the Central Party Committee and the Politburo through annual Party's plenary meetings.

Proposing an integrative model of major policy change for Vietnam

In this section, a major policy change model for Vietnam is proposed as a way to simplify and systemize the politics of policy reforms in Vietnam by using the language of policy study instead of political theory. It is based on the conceptual framework based developed from the literature

review and the author's own professional experiences as a public official working for a central policy agency in Vietnam (the Ministry of Education and Training). The model employs four policy factors/variables: stressor, elites 'predisposition to reform, policy image, and congruence with the political priority of the regime. It adopts the interactive stages and causal mechanism of the policy change process articulated in the Policy-regime model created by Carter Wilson (2000) and is illuminated by the Focusing-event model proposed by Thomas Birkland (2006). In addition, the model takes into account the important policy contextual factors in developing countries, which are emphasized in the comparative government research by Grindle and Thomas (1991). Finally, it integrates the regime characteristics of Vietnam as a transitional and single-party country, which are implied in the "Technical-infeasibility" model on China policy process by Zhu (2008).

The figure in the following page illustrates the integrative model, which explains how a major/innovative policy change is adopted in the policy context of Vietnam during its transitional period. The model is then described in detail.

Figure 1. Proposed model of major policy change in Vietnam
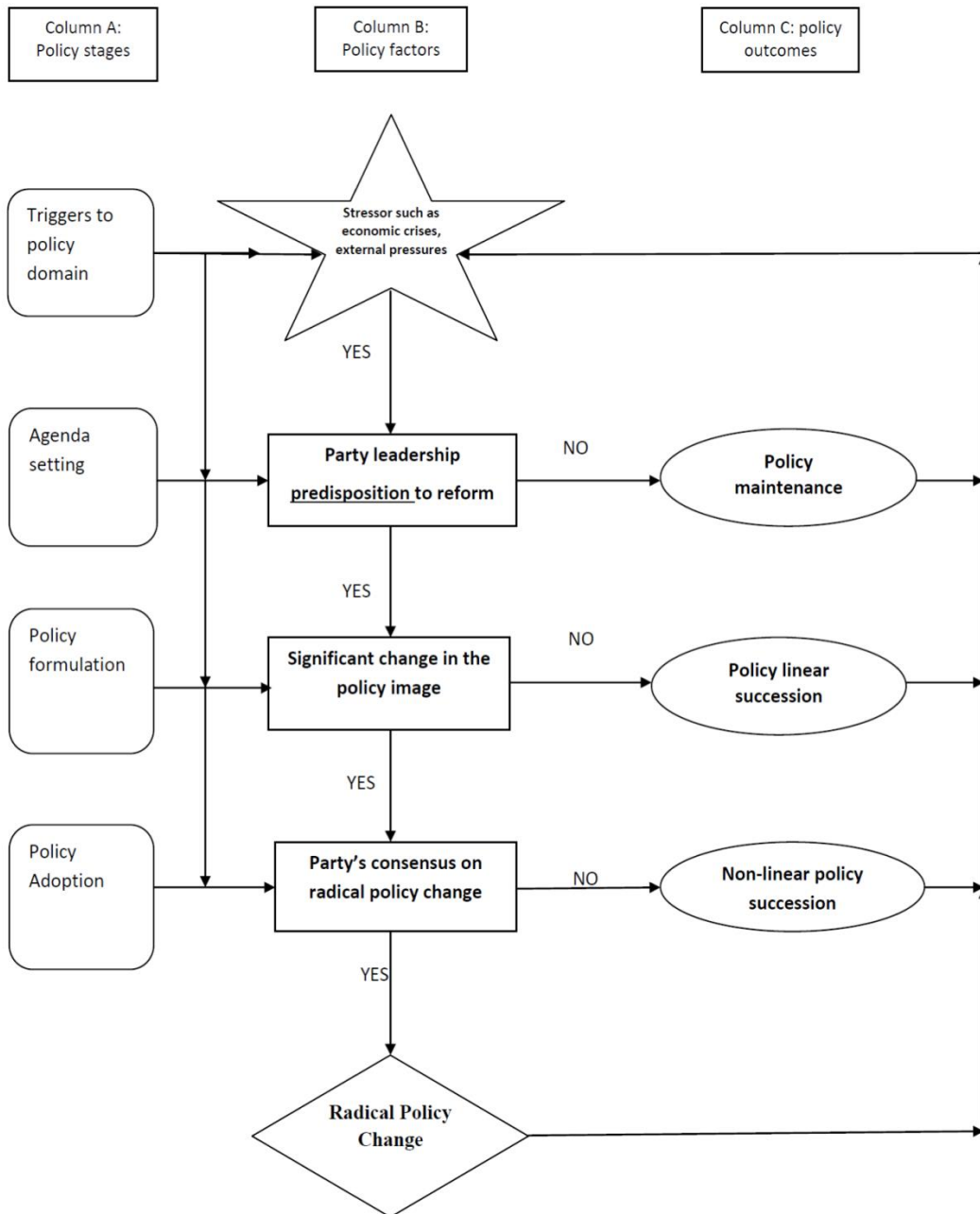
The model of major policy change for Vietnam in Figure 1 has three main components illustrated

by Column A, B, and C. Column A represents different stages of the major policy change

process. Column B explains how the policy process proceeds with the presence or absence of

different causal factors at different stages of the process. Column C illustrates different types of

possible outcomes of the policy change process depending on the existence or absence of the

relevant causal policy factors/variables at different stages. The four types of change: policy

maintenance, policy linear succession, policy non-linear succession, and radical/innovative

policy change are borrowed from the categorization of policy change introduced by Hogwood

and Peters (1982).

This model, however, only focuses on radical policy change that has many names: second-order

change, root change, revolutionary change, transformational and paradigm change, major

change, and innovative change (Roberts and Nancy, 1996). Basically, radical or significant

change is characterized by a discontinuity of the old policy system and a jump to a new one, and

thus represents a qualitative rather than quantitative change in the way the system works.

Hogwood and Peters (1982) differentiated between policy innovation and policy succession by

arguing that compared to policy succession, policy innovation needs to overcome a much greater

barrier of legitimacy; to address the conflicting interests between the new and old policy regime

within the policy subsystem; and to develop new organizational structure for implementation.

To begin with, the policy model starts with the variable of stressor in the first policy stage of the

policy process. Following other popular policy process theories and models, the proposed policy

model applied to the context of Vietnam also emphasizes the role of stressors that can challenge

the policy status quo and the existing dominant policy image, paving the way for major policy

change. Stressors, however, just play a role as a necessary catalyst for any major policy changes and makes changes more likely to happen only.

Indeed, stressors can increase policy elites and makers' attention to policy problems or failures and encourage policy-oriented learning but they do not automatically bring about policy changes. To increase the likelihood of major policy change, a stressor must be perceived as a real challenge or crisis requiring policy reform. At this agenda setting stage, the predisposition to reform of the policy elites in the regime (Prime Minister, ministers, vice ministers, senior policy makers in central public agencies) will be the main criteria or filter in determining whether the government responds to the stressors or not. The leadership predisposition of policy elites is important in every policy system but it is especially significant in the case of Vietnam due to the state-led and centralized nature of a single-party political system and a high level of autonomy vested in the policy elites.

In the face of stressors to change, the policy elites will defer to their ideological commitments, political priorities and institutional constraints to make their judgments. If the policy elites do not consider a stressor as a serious issue, even in the case of great pressures from international institutions and the public, they will use their authority and resources to diminish it or encourage resistance. As a result, nothing will happen, that will produce a policy maintenance outcome. If the stressor is considered a serious challenge to the socio-economic development strategies or the legitimacy of the regime, the policy elites in the executive branch will propose the policy response to the Party Central Committee. Party's guiding resolutions and orientations are then produced to advance policy initiatives into the agendas of the National Assembly or central government for further policy deliberation and studies.

At the next stage, internal policy deliberation will involve representatives of various responsible and concerned bureaucratic agencies. Policy feedback, new information, and policy-oriented learning will be shared and included in the deliberation to produce different policy change alternatives. These alternatives are normally filtered by the criteria of "technical feasibility" representing cost-effective calculation, the requirements and conditions for successful policy implementation (i.e., budget, organizational capacity, etc.), and the best way to realize contemporary political priorities through the policy change. This stage takes place mostly within state entities of the national government or committees of the National Assembly.

Although over the past two decades, the role of National Assembly members and committees has been enhanced, basically bureaucratic agencies and its elites still play a more important role in terms of information possession, technicalities, and functionality. Here, the Party committees of these agencies do not have direct influence on the policy process and outcomes but they produce guidelines and direction to select the policy change alternatives that will be submitted to the higher level of the Party. At this policy formation stage, if no innovative policy image is produced and articulated, the policy outcome will only result in a policy linear succession. But if there is a significant change in the policy image at this stage, there will be a chance for innovative policy change alternative to be formulated and then advanced to the adoption stage. The significant change in policy image in turn depends on how the policy elites calculate between the need to maintain the legacies of a Socialist state and the demand for a given policy change.

To be officially adopted, the innovative policy change proposal characterized by new policy image must be adopted by the policy elites within the central government along with agreement from the National Assembly and then submitted to the Party Central Committee for final

approval. At this stage of adoption, the role of Party leadership with the consultation of policy elites in the executive organizations and the legislature is vital. Within the Central Party Committee and the Politburo, the collective and consensus-based decision-making model will be employed to review and adopt radical policy change proposal at the annually plenary meetings. This stage of the process may take a lot of time, even years, to produce a solution that can integrate most of the political preferences of key actors of the regime leadership. No one in this process can dominate the policy outcomes without the consensus of the top political leaders in the Politburo and a broad-based agreement within the Party Central Committee.

If a radical policy change proposal is interpreted not to violate the guiding core values of the ruling regime (Party's absolute leadership over the state and society and political stability) while congruent with its contemporary political priorities, it will more likely produce a consensus within the Party. However, factions within the regime may interpret the proposal differently, which can cause a lack of consensus. In the case that the innovative policy change proposal does not meet the test of this filtering process, it may be delayed or a policy non-linear succession outcome may result in a reactive manner. If it can meet both congruence and consensus criteria, a radical policy change will be adopted by the Party Central Committee and be officially promulgated as laws, policy or international treaties by the National Assembly or the central government afterward.

To summarize, the necessary conditions for a radical/innovative policy change at the national level of Vietnam are the stressor and the predisposition to reform of the policy elites. These are the preconditions for a radical policy change initiative to be advanced into the official agenda of the National Assembly and government in an effort to respond to given policy problems. The sufficient conditions for an innovative policy change alternative to be formulated and then

adopted are the significant change in the policy image of the policy elites n related policy domain and its congruence with the contemporary political priorities of the regime. The significant policy image change helps create innovative policy change proposal while the congruence of the policy change proposal with the Party's contemporary political priorities at a certain point of time ensure a consensus on the radical policy change within the Party and government. For a radical policy change to be adopted, all four policy factors identified in the policy model need to be present during the policy change process.

Discussion

The proposed policy model for Vietnam is an effort to bring in a better understanding of major policy change process and politics of reforms in Vietnam during Đổi Mới which are often "mysterious" or "unexplainable" to both inside and outside observers. It seeks to uncover how and why a major policy reform initiative in Vietnam can be adopted or inhibited by the policy elites under both internal and external pressures in the transitional period of time. Instead of using traditional political theories those related to power struggle, democratization, or revolution domains, the model employs the languages of policy study to explain the politics of perform and policy change outcomes in Vietnam. Following are some implications withdrawn from the proposed policy model for policy change analysis in Vietnam.

First, following other policy process theories and policy change models, the model emphasized the role of stressor as a necessary condition for a radical policy change proposal to be advanced into the agenda setting stage. However, the regime's leadership predisposition to reform needs to be added for such proposals to be deliberated within the entities of the National Assembly and government. This argument helps explain why in some policy domains, despite strong stressors

from the public and international organizations but without the endorsement of the policy elites, no radical policy proposal is considered and advanced into the official agenda of the government. Second, the concept of "leadership predisposition" is new in the literature even though scholars have made reference to the importance of such a concept for example, ideological predisposition by Thomas and Grindle (1991) or subjective perception by Gilley (2010). The concept of leadership disposition to reform is very helpful in explaining the policy change process in developing countries, especially in single-party and state-led political system. In this system, due to a weak civil society, more power and legitimacy in agenda setting is vested in the hand of policy elites compared to their counterparts in developed and democratic countries. The concept of leadership predisposition helps to explain why international donors and agencies working with Vietnam sometimes feel disappointed in what they perceive to be arbitrary decision and the lack of democratic participation in the policy process and decision making practice in Vietnam even though the Vietnamese government has been open to external ideas and different views. Being open to new and different ideas may not result in any predisposition to change. Leaders may think that a change is a good idea and will endorse it in general but not adopt it in particular because the timing is wrong or that it will undermine other values that have higher priority. Third, the model affirms the importance of significant policy image change for any policy reform during the transitional period of Vietnam, which is translated into Vietnamese as "thay doi tu duy". In theory, the policy image of policy elites can be changed by the influences of stressors, by policy learning from feedback or additional information and policy consultation with international organizations. However, a powerful central ideology of socialism mentioned in the previous sections as the legacies of a Socialist state may prevent any change from occurring. For instance, the need to maintain and control a large state-owned economic sector is seen as central

to the prevailing socialist ideology and is too powerful that can refute any innovative policy change proposal in this policy domain. While political leaders recognized the problems of low efficiency and corruption arising from state-ownership, they have opted to make marginal improvements rather than fundamentally restructure the relationship between state and the economy.

Fourth, this model introduces the concept of regime's political priority, which serves as the filter for political acceptability of any radical policy change proposal in the case of Vietnam. Political priority reflects how the policy elites justify the best way to maintain and foster the core values or principles of the ruling regime: party leadership and political stability. In a certain period of time, the regime's leaders may identify different priorities that they believe can help maintain the core principles. The implication of this notion to the policy change process in Vietnam is that it can define and narrow the meaning of other policy change factors like stressor, leadership predisposition, and policy image to change, etc. That means political acceptability is more important than technical feasibility in examining a radical policy change initiative. That explains why in many case, in the face of strong internal and external pressures to reform, political acceptability plays a gatekeeping role over the policy reform process.

Finally, the reliance on collective-based decision making system and the requirement of two kinds of "filer" (technical feasibility and political acceptability) for any radical policy that are integrated in the proposed policy change model help explain why radical policy change in Vietnam is very time-consuming. In the first place, even though the reforms are state-led, there is a democratic and deliberative mechanism within the Party Central Committee and agencies in the state system. This "internal democracy" has helped the CPV to access different points of view and allowed free debate on its policies and strategies. The outcome of the recent 6th Plenum

in October 2012 demonstrated that even the Politburo was not able to make final decisions without the consensus of the Party Central Committee. Second, by referring to the two kinds of "filer" (technical feasibility and political acceptability), the proposed policy model is capable of explaining the characteristics of policy reforms in Vietnam described by other scholars as gradualist or dual party-state approach.

Although the policy model proposed in the paper is grounded in the literature review on policy process theories and models and on the regime characteristics of Vietnam, it needs to be validated to justify its usefulness and relevance in explaining the policy change process and outcomes during Đổi Mới in Vietnam. For the purposes of validation, the policy case studies are recommended to be conducted and examined in the way that helps to verify these propositions.

1. The stressors and Party's leadership predisposition to reform are the preconditions for a radical policy change initiative to be advanced into the agendas of the government and National Assembly.

2. Significant changes in the policy image of the regime elites are necessary for the formulation of innovative policy change alternative.

3. For a radical change to be adopted there must be a consensus on the contemporary political priorities within the regime that support the proposed innovative policy change.

4. Political judgments based on the core political values or on consensus on the contemporary political priority of the ruling regime can predominate over the criteria of technical feasibility to produce or inhibit radical policy change in Vietnam.

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