

Political processes in a Leninist state: the politics of rural development policy in contemporary Vietnam

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Abstract

This paper examines the formal political system in Vietnam. It argues that this remains Leninist and that this is confirmed by various indicators, including linguistic practices and procedures for the Party management of elections. It contends that what is commonly referred to as grass-roots communities refers instead to the base of the apparatus, and that statements about 'policy' usually refer to concretisations of Party intentions. 'State' and 'community', in formal practice, thus refer to Leninist implementation mechanisms. This has important negative implications for the viability of modern development ideas, such as the importance of empowered communities and the creation of policy by a state possessing primary political authority. Despite this, Vietnam's development performance has been good and donors have not seriously contested the Party's position. The paper then examines analyses of poverty in Vietnam, reporting views that further reductions in rural poverty require attention to institutions rather than increased resources, and so implying measures increasingly beyond the reach of the formal political system. It concludes by noting that Leninist political practices are contested within Vietnam, pointing to evidence that Vietnamese officials are concerned with the lack of central authority and its relationship to corruption, and how informal farmers' groups are creating alternatives to Party-dominated structures in the rural areas, often supported by local political leaders.