

**“Không dẫm lên cỏ” – “Do not step on the grass”**  
**Assessing state-society relations in urban Vietnam**

**Abstract**

Recent research on the transformation of public space in Hanoi has dealt with the expansion of private activities onto public space. While the focus of research was initially on the usage of public spaces like sidewalks for economic purposes, it then shifted towards its usage for private leisure and social activities.<sup>1</sup> The occupancy of public spaces like Ba Dinh Square, a place of high national symbolic value, for sports and meeting friends can be considered a first step of Hanoi's citizens challenging the official sphere. Yet, can this already be regarded as an indicator for the emergence of a public sphere in Hanoi? How can this transformation process be viewed against the background of the discussion on the correlation between public spaces and public spheres as a sociological/political category? This essay seeks to approach this question applying Eisenstadt and Schluchter's (2001: 10) concept of the public sphere. The public sphere comprehended as a sphere culturally and institutionally differentiated from the official and the private sphere, where the common good is at the center of attention. Analysing an incidence of the citizens' exploitation of public space to articulate their interests in October 2007 in Hanoi, the area of conflict between good governance and self-empowerment in Vietnam shall be elaborated upon.

**“Không dẫm lên cỏ” – “Do not step on the grass”**

Wandering through the streets of Ha Noi one can find this sign all around public parks or historical monuments. People visiting Ba Dinh Square always walk carefully on the lines of concrete, retaining their toddlers from stepping on one of the 168 grass squares in front of the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum.

As this sign indicates, access to public space in Hanoi is restricted by a variety of rules. These are manifested in the urban landscape through numerous prohibition signs, security men, police forces and physical barriers.

Interestingly, not all rules are equally paid attention to by Hanoi's citizens. While the imperative not to step on the grass is taken pretty seriously by the public, other regulations like the usage of the sidewalk for pedestrians only, seem to be neglected. Instead, most Hanoians use it as parking space for motorbikes or as space for petty trade.

To maintain order in the city, the People's Committee of Hanoi passed Decree No. 227/2006/QĐ-UB in 2006 which is to organise the pavement order on district and quarter level. This includes orders such as reserving the sidewalk from 8 am until 5 pm for foot passengers only. One year after implementing the new rules, the situation still has not changed a bit. That is why, at the beginning of October 2007, the Police-newspaper “An Ninh Thủ Đô” started issueing a series on the violation of this decree. Motivated by this campaign, many readers sent letters requesting the local authorities to enforce order on the sidewalks. The call for a civilized and modern Hanoi (“một Hà Nội văn minh, hiện đại”)<sup>2</sup> was strongly expressed. Actions followed quickly: the police is now regularly patrolling the areas in which most violations occur, notably the Ancient Quarter, Truc Bach Lake and various street markets. Especially to petty traders, this means a constant threat to their income opportunities. If the police caught them selling on the streets, they would immediately confiscate their whole stall, leaving them with nothing.

Bearing these “cleaning” actions of the last weeks in mind, I was very surprised when I found around 40 people hanging around on the grass in a public park at the Southern bank of Westlake at noon on Saturday, the 20<sup>th</sup> of October. Packed with their belongings, foods and drinks, middle-aged men and women were sitting and lying on bamboo mats in the shade. With laundry hanging at the balustrade towards the lake to dry, it had an atmosphere of a camp, rather than a park. Their outer appearance, like people from rural areas, as well as their big piles of luggage, indicated that they must have travelled a long way to Hanoi. At about 10 pm the same day, the crowd had retrenched from this park to a small park on a nearby traffic island, where they set up a night camp. Blue plastic mats were spread all over

<sup>1</sup> s. for economic purposes Waibel (2002), while for social activities Thomas (2002).

<sup>2</sup> An Ninh Thủ Đô, No. 2149, 11.10.2007: 5.

the grass, people lying on them in rows, covered up with blankets. Close by on the street, the mobile police force would control motorbike drivers as part of the traffic law enforcement campaign, not caring about the 40 people violating the orders not to step on the grass and to sleep in the park. The very next evening at around the same time, they were no longer there. No clue was left, that the day before so many people had stayed there. At 5 pm on Sunday, they were standing at the street, waiting for buses with the blue number plates of government vehicles, to pick them up. Police men were supervising the ejection process. Two old men standing in line, when asked what they had come to Hanoi for, said they had come all the way from Ho Chi Minh City to visit Uncle Ho. Monday's newspapers did not write a single line on this event.

Reconsidering this incidence from an urban sociological perspective, it provides information about two important issues in current urban research. On the one hand, about the area of conflict between good governance and self-empowerment in Vietnam. On the other hand, about the discussion of a correlation between public spaces and public spheres in urban areas.

If we take a closer look at the location of the two parks, we will find that they were both situated at Mai Xuan Thuong Street. It is a very small street connecting Ba Dinh Square and West Lake, an area rich of urban symbolism, and even more importantly, the address of a government agency that handles citizens' petitions. People from all over the country come here to hand in complaints about cases of corruption by local authorities, lack of compensation payments, bad working conditions etc.. David Koh (2006:17) describes that misconduct by officials occurs at the local level especially. According to him, the local administrative system in Vietnam is characterised by incompetence, corruption, lack of checks and balances, lack of supervision and control by upper level authorities. To counter these actions, active civic involvement is indispensable.

Ranked at place 123 of 179 countries in the Corruption Perception Index 2007<sup>3</sup>, the Vietnamese government is eager to fight corruption. That is why in 2006 an anti-corruption law was passed and the government inspectorate for anti-corruption established. In terms of good governance, the state has undertaken a lot of measures for awareness building regarding corruption. The latest measure is the plan to implement a trial project to teach anti-corruption to government officials and students starting in 2008.<sup>4</sup> However, after one year in office the Vice ministry department chief Bùi Ngọc Lam had to acknowledge that so far, the inspectorate's work did not meet the set targets. While only few reports came from the government agencies themselves, most cases of corruption were revealed by public opinion or information organs.<sup>5</sup> This is a first indicator of citizens making use of their newly gained rights. But, as the official way of handing in petitions often does not yield fruits – according to estimates of the Supreme People's Court only 1% of the corruption cases are brought to trial (Frehner, Winklbauer 2003: 14) – the citizens have to organise themselves to make their voice heard.

Therefore, the gathering of the group in the park can be considered a strategy of self-empowerment. The space in front of the government's office at Mai Xuan Thuong Street is not the only one being occasionally occupied by the public. On the sidewalk in front of the anti-corruption inspectorate, people assemble and wait for the guards to let them in as well. It is important to note here, that the police is present in all these cases, but never resorts to violence. In conclusion, a negotiation process between citizens and the state carried out on public space can be observed. The national government on the one hand, formally giving more rights to the people.<sup>6</sup> And the citizens on the other hand, making further claims where laws are not implemented correctly.

"State agencies do not completely control policy-making and implementation. People can ignore the state's rules on some matters. They can also go beyond official channels to make their views and concerns known." (Kerkvliet 2001: 269)

<sup>3</sup> [www.transparency.de/Tabellarisches-Ranking.1084.0.html](http://www.transparency.de/Tabellarisches-Ranking.1084.0.html) (last looked up 7/11/2007).

<sup>4</sup> [www.thanhniennews.com/society/?catid=3&newsid=33184](http://www.thanhniennews.com/society/?catid=3&newsid=33184) (last looked up 7/11/2007).

<sup>5</sup> An Ninh Thủ Đô, No. 2156, 19.10.2007: 6.

<sup>6</sup> The grass roots democracy decree No. 79/2003/ND-CP passed by the government in 2003 is also an attempt to gain more people's participation in communal affairs.

In that way, public space provides an arena for the emergence of a public sphere. The public sphere is here to be understood in Eisenstadt and Schluchter's terms (2001: 10), as a sphere lying in between the official and the private sphere. It is here, where the common good is taken care of by people from the private sphere, not the official sphere. In addition to that, Wittrock (2002: 22) regards the public sphere, as one of mediation between subjects and rulers, citizens and government. Thus, parks and sidewalks in front of government buildings, occupied by the public to debate on the proper course of politics, are transformed into the physical location of the public sphere.

Trying to find an answer to the question whether this is a new kind of public sphere emerging, it should be useful to take a look at the history of public spaces in Hanoi.

To begin with, voicing opinions in the street is not a new phenomenon in Vietnam. During the August Revolution in 1945, Hanoi was crowded with people walking along the streets, waving the red flag with the yellow five-point-star (Trung Tuong Nguyen Quyet 1980: 164). But ever since Hanoi has become seat of government of the socialist state, the definition of the urban landscape in general, and of public space in particular, is dominated by the state. According to Lefebvre (1990: 119), states tend to represent themselves in the city via emptiness. In Hanoi, Ba Dinh Square, characterised by its vast outline, poses an adequate example of this expression of the state's power. Housing the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum in the West and the National Assembly in the East, it is an important symbol of nation-building. It was here that Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Vietnamese independence on September the second, 1945. With the capacity to accommodate up to 100,000 people, its initial function was to mobilise the masses. At this point, celebrations on occasions such as National Independence Day take place, catering the collective memory of the nation.

However, in recent years these events appeal to less and less citizens. On the one hand this change might be due to what Thomas (2002: 1614) calls "a huge semantic shift" of the crowd. That is to say, that the public is more attracted by commercial and cultural activities like SEA-Games and music concerts than by national celebrations. On the other hand, recent events have indicated a tendency of the state to withdraw itself from the public, creating an official sphere separated from the public sphere. For instance, the festivities on the eve of the liberation day of Hanoi in 1954, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October took place on public space, more precisely on Ba Dinh Square, but the square was so well sealed off with guards and fences, that it was not accessible to the public. People who come to Ba Dinh Square regularly to do sports, were surprised to find themselves excluded from participation.

In that way, public space has become the space of negotiation between state and citizens in the city. Recent developments around Ba Dinh Square and other state memorials indicate this struggle. They are increasingly claimed by Hanoi's residents for social activities such as sports and meeting friends. Thomas (2002: 1621) already regards this occupancy of public spaces for non-political activities as a contestation of the state-defined landscape and therefore a first step in the development of a public sphere. However, following Habermas (1987: 194), leisure activities are to be regarded apolitical. The satisfaction of these needs can be performed in public. But it is yet to constitute a public sphere. Or again, referring to Wittrock, the focus of attention of the public sphere is the common good and not mere private interests.

Therefore, I would like to suggest that while the state instrumentalises public space for self-representation, most of the citizens redefine public space unknowingly, in the form of leisure activities. This transformation is accepted by the state, as long as basic rules are being followed.

Against this background, the setting up of a camp in a public park right next to Ba Dinh Square on the weekend of the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> October, adds a new dimension to the discussion on the correlation between public spaces and public spheres in Hanoi. Here, public space was strategically used to make public opinion be heard and seen. This instrumentalisation of public space corresponds to Arendt's (1958: 200) understanding of the public realm being "the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men". In conclusion, it is possible to observe, that new public spheres are emerging in Hanoi that provide an arena for the formation of new collective identities. These new public spheres then give way to new

forms of political and cultural order to arise (Wittrock 2001: 23). As a final remark, I would like to suggest that it is not so much an urban public sphere, formed on the basis of a locality, rather than citizens from all over the country that articulate their interests on public space.

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