

REFORMING THE VIETNAMESE POLITICAL SYSTEM: PRACTICES AND PROBLEMS

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Abstract. In the quest for socio-political resonance with its dynamic socio-economic landscape, Vietnam presents a unique case study of political innovation within a one-party system. This article delineates three critical dimensions of Vietnam's political evolution: the historical underpinnings, contemporary reform practices, and the challenges encountered in modernization efforts. The first section, "Overview of the historical context of political reform in Vietnam", traces the trajectory of political structures from the colonial era through to the socialist governance and economic pivot initiated by the Doi Moi reforms. The second section, "Current Practices in Vietnamese Political Reform," provides an empirical scrutiny of the recent initiatives undertaken to improve governance. It dissects the incremental nature of these reforms, ranging from anti-corruption crusades to efforts in enhancing administrative efficiency and increasing government transparency. The third key section, "Challenges Faced in Modernizing Vietnam's Political Structure," critically examines the spectrum of obstacles impeding political modernization. This includes the friction between maintaining party control and adapting governance models to suit a burgeoning market economy and a more informed citizenry. It also highlights the intricate balance Vietnam seeks to achieve between reform and stability in a rapidly evolving global context. Together, these dimensions paint a comprehensive picture of the complexities inherent in innovating Vietnam's political system. The article synthesizes insights on practices and problematics, outlining both the strides made and the formidable journey ahead in Vietnam's ongoing pursuit of political modernization.

Keywords: political reforms, Vietnamese governance, Doi Moi policy, Political innovation, One-party system, Administrative modernization, Political stability, Socio-economic development

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Научная статья

РЕФОРМИРОВАНИЕ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ СИСТЕМЫ ВЬЕТНАМА: ПРАКТИКА И ПРОБЛЕМЫ

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Аннотация. В поисках социально-политического резонанса со своим динамичным социально-экономическим ландшафтом Вьетнам представляет собой уникальный пример политических инноваций в рамках однопартийной системы. В данной статье представляются три важнейших аспекта политической эволюции Вьетнама: исторические предпосылки, современная практика реформ, а также проблемы, возникающие в ходе модернизации. В первом разделе — «Обзор исторического контекста политических реформ во Вьетнаме» — прослеживается траектория развития политических структур от колониальной эпохи до социалистического правления и экономического поворота, инициированного реформами Дой Мой. Во втором разделе — «Современная практика политических реформ во Вьетнаме» — дается эмпирический анализ последних инициатив, направленных на улучшение управления, рассматривается постепенный характер этих реформ, начиная с борьбы с коррупцией и заканчивая усилиями по повышению административной эффективности и прозрачности работы правительства. В третьем, ключевом, разделе — «Проблемы, стоящие на пути модернизации политической структуры Вьетнама» — рассматривается спектр препятствий, мешающих политической модернизации (противоречия между сохранением партийного контроля и адаптацией моделей управления в соответствии с развивающейся рыночной экономикой и более информированными гражданами), подчеркивается сложный баланс, которого Вьетнам пытается достичь между реформами и стабильностью в быстро меняющемся глобальном контексте. В совокупности эти аспекты дают полное представление о сложностях, присутствующих инновациям в политической системе Вьетнама.

Ключевые слова: политические реформы, управление Вьетнамом, политика Дой Мой, политические инновации, однопартийная система, административная модернизация, политическая стабильность, социально-экономическое развитие

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Introduction

Political systems worldwide are perpetually evolving entities, reflective of societal needs, global influences, and internal power dynamics [1]. In the context of Vietnam, a nation with a distinct historical trajectory and socio-political landscape, reform in the political system is of particular interest given the country's rapid and continued development. This scientific article seeks to explore the current practices and entrenched challenges that characterize efforts to innovate Vietnam's political structures. The term 'political system reform' can be interpreted in various dimensions; for this article, it refers to the development and implementation of new policies, processes, and institutions that aim to enhance governance, democratic participation, accountability, and the rule of law within the political framework of Vietnam. Such innovations extend beyond mere technological advancements and encompass the full spectrum of political reform — from administrative adjustments to deeper constitutional changes.

Understanding the Vietnamese political system's progression requires a multifaceted approach that considers historical events, current reforms, and future prospects within the domestic and international context. This article will delineate the practices and challenges of innovating in an environment that has traditionally been defined by its one-party system while assessing the impact such changes have on Vietnamese society. By evaluating the successes and setbacks of these political innovations, we aim to glean insights that could shape the future trajectory of Vietnam's political evolution.

Overview of the historical context of political reform in Vietnam

The historical context of political system reform in Vietnam is deeply entwined with its struggle for autonomy, colonial legacy, wars of the 20th century, and shifts in governance post-reunification.

The foundations of Vietnam's current political system were laid during its revolutionary struggle against French colonial rule, culminating in the revolutionary victory in August 1945 [2]. Following the Geneva Accords in 1954, Vietnam was temporarily divided, with disparate political systems developing in the North and South until reunification in 1975 [3]. The North established a Marxist-Leninist government, which later extended to the entire country after the Vietnam War, solidifying a one-party system under the Communist Party of Vietnam.

Political system reform during the early years of the socialist republic focused on centralizing governance, collectivizing agriculture, and nationalizing industries. However, this approach led to economic hardships, which necessitated a move towards significant reform [4]. The Doi Moi policy, introduced in the mid-1980s, marked a monumental shift from a planned economy to a “socialist-oriented market economy”. While this transition primarily impacted economic structures, it also initiated gradual political reforms, including administrative decentralization and enhanced local governance.

Despite the economic liberalization, political system reform in the formal sense has remained relatively cautious, with the CPV maintaining a firm grip on the political apparatus. However, internal debates within the party and amongst the populace have illustrated a tension between maintaining stability and adapting to a rapidly changing society [5]. More recently, Vietnam has witnessed modest political innovation, such as efforts to upgrade legal frameworks, combat corruption. The entry into the World Trade Organization in 2007 and participation in other international agreements have encouraged the government to implement regulatory reforms to comply with global standards.

To understand the intricacies of reforming within the Vietnamese political system, must appreciate its historical resistance to external domination, the ideological foundations laid by Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Party, and the pragmatic shifts that have occurred as a result of economic pressures and the desire for international integration. This historical backdrop sets the stage for a nuanced exploration of contemporary political reforms and the enduring challenges that lie ahead.

The practice of reforming the political system in modern Vietnam

In recent years, Vietnam has embarked on a number of initiatives aimed at political innovation and reform. These initiatives range from anti-corruption measures to strides in electoral practices and efforts towards administrative decentralization.

Anti-Corruption Measures. Vietnam has taken notable steps to bolster its fight against corruption, a move seen as a critical component of its broader political reforms. The cornerstone of these efforts lies in the legal framework established to curb corrupt practices. This includes the passage of stringent laws that both define corruption explicitly and set out serious penalties for those implicated in such acts [6]. The improvement of the legal system has partly shown the determination of the Vietnamese government to push corruption out of the political system. Positive results have been seen in practice. In the period from 2016 to 2021, Vietnam has disciplined 2,209 officials and party members involved in corruption. This included 113 central-level officials, both incumbent and retired. Notably among them were 3 Politburo members and 1 former Politburo member; 7 Central Committee members and 16 former Central Committee members; 1 minister and 4 former ministers; 22 deputy ministers and former deputy ministers; 12 party secretaries and former party secretaries of provincial Party Committees; 15 chairpersons and former chairpersons of provincial and city People's Committees; and 26 general-rank officers in the military and police forces [7].

Vietnam has pursued institutional reforms aimed at strengthening the mechanisms used to detect and prosecute corruption. The establishment of specialized anti-corruption agencies, with dedicated resources and personnel to investigate corruption cases, has underscored the government's commitment to

uprooting corrupt practices. These bodies are often endowed with significant investigative powers, signaling a significant step in the direction of holding individuals, regardless of their position or status, accountable for corrupt actions [8]. Since the 13th Party Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, with the demonstration of strong determination in the anti-corruption campaign, the activities of these specialized agencies have increasingly attracted the attention of public opinion, both domestic and international. High-profile campaigns have been launched to target corruption throughout different levels of government, demonstrating the government's readiness to confront corruption head-on. Notably, these campaigns have not shied away from implicating high-ranking officials, and several have resulted in the prosecution and subsequent conviction of individuals who would have once been considered untouchable. In the anti-corruption campaign, the "Viet A mega-corruption case" was exposed at the end of 2021, serving as a typical example of systemic corruption in Vietnam. Officials were alleged to have accepted bribes from Viet A, a company supplying COVID-19 test kits, to inflate the product prices in the market. This caused public outrage when anti-corruption agencies discovered several high-ranking officials within the state apparatus involved, including the Minister of Health and the former Minister of Science and Technology. Through the investigation process, more implicated officials were identified, including department heads, deputies, and leaders from 24 provinces and cities nationwide. This case resulted in damages of over 400 billion Vietnamese dong to the state budget [9]. Faced with these incidents, in January 2023, the President Nguyen Xuan Phuc decided to resign, taking political responsibility for the misconduct of several officials under his leadership [10].

Preventive measures have also been a focal point of Vietnam's anti-corruption strategy. The introduction of systems such as mandatory asset declarations for public officials, strict rules to prevent conflicts of interest, and more transparent public procurement processes are all designed to reduce opportunities for corruption to take root [11]. Simultaneously, acknowledging the importance of international standards in the fight against corruption, Vietnam has actively engaged with international bodies and has sought to align its domestic anti-corruption strategies with global best practices [12]. By being a participant in international anti-corruption conventions, Vietnam has committed to a level of transparency and accountability that stands to benefit both its internal governance and international relations.

Public engagement is critical to the success of anti-corruption measures. Vietnam has seen significant involvement from the media and civil society organizations in monitoring and actively reporting on corruption. The case of Pham Nhat Vu is a typical example of the power of this participation. In 2019, Pham Nhat Vu admitted to bribing officials with millions of dollars to secure a deal in which his company, AVG, was acquired by the state-owned telecom giant Mobifone [13]. The media played a crucial role

in bringing this case to light, with investigative journalists reporting on the irregularities and potential losses to the state budget, which sparked public outrage and led to wider investigations. This reporting led to the arrest and prosecution of several high-ranking officials, including a former minister and his deputy, showcasing the impact of media involvement in unveiling corruption in Vietnam [14]. Efforts to educate the public about corruption, along with mechanisms to enable citizens to participate in reporting corruption, underscore an inclusive approach that recognizes the role of societal vigilance in deterring corruption.

Electoral Reforms. The trajectory of political innovation in Vietnam can also be traced through recent initiatives in electoral reforms. While the Vietnamese political structure has traditionally been centralized, there have been discussions and moves towards modifying electoral processes to enhance transparency and to improve representation. These reforms aim not only to optimize the administrative functioning of elections but also to foster a sense of inclusion and participation among the populace.

One of the key aspects of these reforms has been the focus on the election law and on the mechanics of the voting process itself. Efforts have been made to streamline candidate nomination procedures and to safeguard the voting process, with the goal of creating a more level playing field for all political contenders [15 ; 16]. The government has shown an interest in reevaluating how candidates are vetted and presented, with an eye towards ensuring that elections are competitive and fair, reflective of public will.

Moreover, considerable discourse around the electoral reform has revolved around the idea of increasing voter participation and representation. Initiatives to encourage voter turnout, such as public education campaigns about the significance of voting and improved accessibility of polling stations, are fundamental components of these reforms [16]. The intent is to ensure all segments of society have equal opportunity to exercise their voting rights, thereby enhancing the democratic legitimacy of elected officials.

Another facet of the electoral reform discussion in Vietnam includes exploring methods to prevent electoral fraud and to maintain the integrity of the election process. There has been increased awareness of the importance of having robust mechanisms to deter and address incidents of voter manipulation or vote-counting irregularities [17]. The government's willingness to engage with these concerns is indicative of a broader commitment to reinforcing public confidence in the electoral system.

Despite the complexity of these reforms and the challenges therein, the consensus is that electoral reform is a necessary step towards the sustainability of Vietnam's political system [16]. The progress in this area, albeit gradual, points towards a conscious effort to align with international practices and respond to the aspirations of the Vietnamese people for greater representation and accountability in the political process.

Electoral reforms are still in the developmental stage within the Vietnamese context, and so the full impact of these changes remains to be seen. Nonetheless, these reforms represent a recognition on the part of Vietnamese leadership that evolving the electoral system is integral to the nation's political, social, and economic development. The proposed changes not only stand to benefit the democratic process but are also expected to strengthen the governance and the rule of law within the country.

Decentralization Efforts. Decentralization efforts in Vietnam have become a pivotal aspect of the nation's political reforms as the government seeks to distribute authority more evenly across various levels of administration. The push towards decentralization is driven by a recognition that a centralization of power can lead to inefficiencies and a lack of responsiveness to local needs. By devolving powers to local governments, the intention is to empower regional and communal entities to make decisions that are more attuned to the distinct characteristics and requirements of their constituents.

The initiatives to decentralize are multifaceted, encompassing various sectors including governance, economic planning, and public service delivery. The reformation of local governance structures has been a major part of the decentralization strategy, involving the redistribution of administrative responsibilities and fiscal resources [18]. This structural shift aims to provide local governments with increased autonomy to manage their affairs, particularly in areas such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure development. It allows for a tailored approach to policy-making and service provision that accounts for local diversity and complexity.

Moreover, the decentralization process in Vietnam is not solely about administrative restructuring, but it also encompasses measures to enhance local capacities and governance. Training programs for local officials, institutional development initiatives, and improved public financial management are part of the efforts to build a competent and accountable local governance system [19]. The objective is not just to transfer power, but also to ensure that local institutions have the requisite skills, knowledge, and resources to discharge their expanded duties effectively.

Economic decentralization initiatives have also been launched, allowing local governments to retain a greater share of revenues and to have more say in economic development strategies [20]. This is believed to stimulate local economic growth by enabling more context-specific economic policies and investment decisions. The heightened financial independence is anticipated to encourage innovation and competitiveness among provinces, thus driving national economic development.

These decentralization endeavors are, however, not without their challenges. Ensuring consistency in the quality of governance across different regions, balancing regional autonomy with national unity, and managing the transition of responsibilities to prevent gaps in public service are ongoing concerns. Vietnam's commitment to decentralization reflects a

strategic approach to governance that prioritizes local empowerment alongside the maintenance of overall national cohesion.

The progress of decentralization is an assuring sign of Vietnam's strides towards enhancing democratic governance and societal development. With a gradual yet determined rollout, the government is undertaking a delicate balance between granting local autonomy and retaining the necessary central oversight to maintain the nation's unity and direction. The success of these efforts would be indicative of a maturing political system capable of embracing complexity and diversity in decision-making.

The impetus behind the sweeping political reforms in Vietnam is multi-dimensional, with several internal and external factors playing a crucial role. At the helm of these reforms is the Vietnamese leadership, which has taken a proactive stance in initiating changes to address both domestic challenges and international expectations. Vietnamese leadership has increasingly acknowledged that the integrity and sustainability of the political system hinge on the government's ability to mitigate corruption, ensure fair electoral processes, and implement effective decentralization [19]. The leadership's approach is largely characterized by a recognition of the need for a modern, responsive governance system that can support robust economic growth and maintain social stability. This awareness has catalyzed an array of political reforms, aiming to transform Vietnam into a more transparent, accountable, and democratic society.

Civil society in Vietnam is another vital force driving political reform. Though operating within a constrained space, civil society organizations, activists, and the media have become more vocal and influential in demanding accountability, transparency, and inclusive governance [21]. By drawing attention to issues such as corruption, electoral fairness, and the distribution of power, these groups are putting consistent pressure on the government to enact meaningful reform. Additionally, the rising middle class and a younger, more connected population are increasingly engaged in public dialogue, using digital platforms to mobilize support for political change.

International pressures also exert a significant influence on Vietnam's political reform efforts. Globalization and the deepening of international trade relationships necessitate adherence to a set of standards that demand greater political openness and regulatory compliance. Foreign investment and economic partnerships are often contingent upon a country's political climate, pushing Vietnam to reform its political practices to attract and maintain international business ties. Moreover, commitments made through participation in international agreements and organizations further obligate Vietnam to pursue political reforms that align with global norms.

Vietnam stands at a crossroads where its leadership's vision, civil society's advocacy, and the pressures of international relations converge to shape its political landscape. These forces combine to create a dynamic environment for the enactment of reforms. The interplay between these drivers illuminates the

complexity of Vietnam's political evolution and underscores the multifaceted approach required to implement lasting change. As these reforms are propelled forward, they reveal the country's ambition to redefine its governance and position itself as a progressive player on both the regional and world stage.

Challenges faced in modernizing Vietnam's political structure

In modernizing Vietnam's political structure, a range of challenges and barriers are encountered that affect the pace and extent of political innovation. Key challenge is the influence of entrenched interests within the political ecosystem. Individuals or factions that have benefited from the current system may resist reforms that threaten their power or economic benefits. This resistance can manifest in various forms, including bureaucratic inertia, where the slow-moving administrative mechanisms become obstacles to the swift enactment of reforms. Bureaucratic red tape and resistance from within the government can delay, dilute, or outright prevent meaningful political changes. Institutional inertia is reinforced by a bureaucracy that is sometimes resistant to reform, especially when it affects longstanding practices and power dynamics [22]. The cumulative effect of institutional inertia means that while there might be an understanding of the need for reform, the pace of change is often slow, and the implementation can be half-hearted or symbolic without effectively addressing the underlying problems.

Furthermore, Vietnam's political culture and the norms of its one-party system can pose significant impediments to political innovation. Vietnam's political culture is deeply intertwined with the norms established by its long-standing one-party system under the Communist Party of Vietnam. The dominance of a single party has been a feature of Vietnam's governance, shaping not only the mechanisms of government and policy-making but also the expectations and behaviors of its citizens regarding politics [23]. *Firstly*, the one-party system's foundation rests on ideological homogeneity and a centralized approach to decision-making. This often leads to a top-down enforcement of policies and a consequent lack of encouragement for bottom-up, grassroots political innovation. The centralized mindset can discourage local initiative, reduce incentives for creative problem-solving, and maintain a status quo that resists reform. *Secondly*, within the one-party system, the CPV is intrinsically linked to the state apparatus, blurring the lines between party and government functions. This overlap creates challenges in establishing clear accountability mechanisms. *Furthermore*, political culture in a one-party system is often characterized by a lack of open political contestation. Without electoral competition, there is less pressure on the ruling party to innovate and improve governance to meet the changing needs and demands of the populace [23]. In systems with robust political competition, parties are driven to innovate and reform to gain electoral support; such incentives are inherently limited in a one-party context. *Finally*, the one-party

system can lead to a conflation of national and party interests, with the ruling party viewing its policies as synonymous with the country's well-being [24]. This conflation can obstruct reforms that may benefit the nation but could potentially reduce the ruling party's control. When a political party identifies itself so closely with the nation's identity and success, it might resist any changes that could be seen as a weakening of its own position, preferring instead to maintain a firm grip on power.

Vietnam's efforts to innovate politically are further complicated by a general wariness of rapid changes which could potentially destabilize the existing social order or cause unrest. This wariness is not unfounded, as rapid changes can unsettle established norms, traditions, and expectations that have long guided the behavior of individuals and institutions. However, this emphasis on stability can foster a risk-averse mentality among both leaders and citizens, making the prospect of implementing untested political reforms less appealing. Incrementalism, which characterizes Vietnam's approach to reform, reflects a desire to avoid the upheaval that dramatic political changes could bring [25]. By making gradual adjustments, Vietnamese leadership aims to maintain control over the pace and direction of change, thereby reducing the risk of unintended consequences, such as social unrest or challenges to the party's authority [26]. While this methodical strategy allows for the testing and refinement of reforms, it also means that transformative changes may be slowed. This incremental approach can struggle to keep up with the rapidly evolving demands of Vietnamese society, which is becoming increasingly complex economically, socially, and technologically. As Vietnam opens up more to the global market and its citizens gain more access to information, expectations for effective governance rise, placing additional pressure on the political system to adapt and reform at a pace that matches these new societal dynamics. The preference for slow change is further compounded by the challenge of addressing systemic issues without disrupting the mechanisms of governance that hold the one-party state together. The leadership must balance the need to preserve the core elements of the party's rule with the necessity for modernization and responsiveness to public demands. This balance is delicate, it requires a steady hand to ensure that the underpinnings of the existing system are not weakened to the point of creating a vacuum that could lead to instability.

The interplay between economic reforms and political change is a delicate balancing act. The Vietnamese government must navigate between maintaining economic growth — which has been a significant source of legitimacy — and implementing political changes, which could unsettle the economic environment if not handled carefully. Economic growth has been a pivotal source of legitimacy for the Vietnamese government. Decades of robust economic expansion have raised living standards, reduced poverty rates, and enhanced Vietnam's standing in the international community [27]. Success in the eco-

conomic realm often acts as a validating factor for the government's policies and can shore up support even in the absence of more pluralistic political reforms. However, sustaining this economic growth often necessitates continued reforms that can push against the boundaries of the existing political framework. For instance, as Vietnam integrates further into the global economy, it may encounter pressure to adopt international standards of governance and transparency, to protect property rights more stringently, and to allow for a more open market environment where both domestic and foreign enterprises can compete fairly. Such economic reforms may in turn demand a rethinking of certain political controls that could be seen as inhibiting economic dynamism. The introduction of market forces and private enterprise can also create new social dynamics and interest groups that might eventually seek political representation or influence. As these economic stakeholders become more prominent, their interests could clash with the traditional state-led model, potentially fuelling calls for political liberalization.

Furthermore, economic reforms, especially those that dismantle protectionist policies or disrupt traditional industries, can have short-term destabilizing effects on certain segments of the population. Workers who are displaced by market liberalization or whose skills become obsolete may experience economic hardship, leading to social dissatisfaction and the amplification of calls for political change. This can place the government in a difficult position of managing the immediate social fallout from economic restructuring while planning for long-term prosperity. The government must therefore tread carefully to ensure that political changes do not introduce unpredictability or undermine investor confidence, which could detract from the economic achievements that have bolstered the state's legitimacy. Investor sentiment is particularly sensitive to signals of political instability or drastic policy shifts, so even well-intentioned political changes must be communicated and implemented in a manner that reassures both domestic and international economic actors [28]. In avoiding the destabilization of the economic environment, the Vietnamese government tends to favor incremental political reforms that are aligned with its economic objectives. To a certain extent, this strategy allows the government to test the waters of political reform without committing to sweeping changes that might prove to be economically disadvantageous. The challenge, however, is in ensuring that political reforms are not so superficial or delayed that they fail to keep pace with the evolving economic landscape. As given this interplay, the Vietnamese government's strategy has typically involved introducing economic reforms that enhance efficiency and growth while making calibrated adjustments to the political domain that do not significantly alter the overall power structure. The tightrope that the government walks involves enacting reforms sufficient to stimulate eco-

conomic advancement and respond to societal pressures, yet limited enough to maintain the stability of the political order that underpins its authority.

In summary, the challenges faced by Vietnam in modernizing its political structure are deeply rooted in its current political system, culture, and institutions. These challenges are interrelated and contribute to a political environment where modernization is a complex and delicate process. The interconnected nature of the one-party system, limits on political expression, inertia, and resistance to change creates a difficult terrain for reformers. Overcoming these hurdles requires a nuanced approach that balances the maintenance of political stability with the need for progressive transformation in the governance structure. Only through careful navigation of these issues can Vietnam move towards a more modern and democratic political system.

Conclusion

The exploration of political reform in Vietnam, as delineated in this article, encapsulates a transformative journey marked by cautious yet strategic reforms within a one-party system. In examining the current practices of political reform, this article identified a series of incremental changes aimed at enhancing administrative efficiency, promoting anti-corruption efforts, and gradually aligning with international norms of governance.

However, these advancements must be viewed through the prism of the challenges that persist in modernizing Vietnam's political structure. The entrenched party apparatus, resistance to change within bureaucratic ranks, and the balancing act between economic liberalization and political control remain formidable obstacles. These barriers are compounded by the rapidly evolving demands of a population that is increasingly connected and informed, thereby elevating expectations for transparency, accountability, and participation within the political process.

The path to reforming Vietnam's political system is neither linear nor without contention. It involves a sustained commitment to reform that supports the burgeoning socio-economic landscape while navigating the complexities of an established political ideology and practice. As Vietnam continues to develop and interface with the global community, the discourse around its political reforms and the response to societal pressures will undoubtedly have significant implications for future governance, social harmony, and economic prosperity.

Ultimately, Vietnam's experience provides critical insights into the delicate process of political innovation within a context that is balancing the dual objectives of maintaining stability and embracing necessary change. The lessons derived from Vietnam's journey can offer valuable perspectives to policymakers, scholars, and other nations grappling with similar challenges in political modernization.

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