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## OPPOSITION REPERTOIRES UNDER AUTHORITARIAN RULE: VIETNAM'S 2016 SELF-NOMINATION MOVEMENT

### Abstract

Civil society actors collectively organized online and offline to nominate themselves and oppose the Vietnamese Communist Party in the 2016 legislative election. The level of opposition coordination among these independent self-nominees exceeded and qualitatively differed from previous atomized attempts in the 2011 election. External shifts in the political opportunity structure offer only a partial explanation for the increased coordination among independent candidates in Vietnam's 2016 self-nomination movement. In this article, I theorize that it is the combination of both opportunity structure and overlapping linkages across spheres of social contention and civil society, all accumulated from a prior history of protests and activism, that provide the conditions for the emergence of independent self-nominees and opposition coordination in single-party-elections. In Vietnam, a cumulative process of participation in social contention and civil society organizations during 2011 to 2016 allowed actors to develop linkages that strengthened their repertoires of contention and resonant frames of collective action. These linkages, combined with favorable political opportunities, effectively facilitated greater mobilization and coordination among independent self-nominees in the 2016 election.

### Keywords

single-party election, opposition, social movement, civil society, Vietnam

### INTRODUCTION

When a group of activists nominated themselves for the 2016 election for the Vietnamese National Assembly (NA), some media outlets likened it to a “democratic experiment” (Petty 2016; Nguyen 2016a). Others termed it a “self-nomination movement” (*phong trao tu ung cu*) (Nguyen 2016b; Xuan 2016; Vo 2016c). Yet, self-nomination has been permitted since 1992, and civil society actors have nominated themselves in past elections. The number of independent self-nominees elected has remained disproportionately low compared to party-backed candidates. In these regards, the 2016 legislative election was simply business as usual.

Civil society actors in the 2016 self-nomination movement, however, demonstrated a higher level of opposition coordination and collective mobilization. Through active public engagement online and offline, independent self-nominees organized and inscribed their contention in a discourse of rights that oriented and connected them in

clearly identifiable ways. Given that very few candidates would pass the party's vetting procedures, their immediate aim was not to win the election. Instead, their contestation carried certain performative dimensions that aimed to demonstrate a model example of a free and competitive election, to educate the public on their rights to political participation, and to expose the calibrated limitations of Vietnam's electoral system.

Under what conditions do civil society actors collectively mobilize and contest autocrats in single-party elections? What explains the increased opposition coordination among independent self-nominees in Vietnam's 2016 legislative election? Social movement theories highlight the importance of structural shifts in political opportunities to account for "the ebb and flow of movement activity" (McAdam 1999, 41). An explanation using this framework points to several notable changes in the political environment around the time of the election in early 2016: the change in party leadership preceded by elite infighting, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's fall from power, and the government's preoccupation with Vietnam's reputation and qualification for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). These allowed civil society actors a favorable window of opportunity to operate and coordinate. However, a focus solely on these external factors misses other crucial elements. Political opportunity structure only partly explains when collective mobilization and opposition coordination are more likely to occur. It does not explain why some groups mobilize while others do not, even when favorable political openings arise, or provide any predictions on what types of group will coordinate and how.

In this article, I argue that overlapping linkages across various spheres of social contention through a shared history of protests and civil society engagement are equally significant for the emergence of independent self-nominees and opposition coordination in single-party elections. These allow individuals to develop repertoires of contention and resonant collective action frames, which position them to exploit openings in the political opportunity structure. In Vietnam, aside from changes in the political environment, the emergence of Vietnam's 2016 self-nomination movement can be traced back to sustained engagement by independent candidates in prior protests and civil society activism in non-electoral spheres between 2011 and 2016. Individuals then drew on these experiences to extend the cycle of contention from other sites of resistance to the electoral arena when favorable changes in the opportunity structure occurred in 2016. It is thus the interplay of both external shifts in the political environmental, and a cumulative process of social contention and civil society development, which affect a group's internal organizational strength, that determine whether and when opposition coordination is more likely to transpire. In this aspect, electoral opposition also does not occur in isolation from other spheres of social mobilization, and vice versa.

In the following sections, I first offer a granular account of the emergence of the 2016 self-nomination movement, and how their organized opposition differed from past elections. Next, I consider possible explanations from the existing literature and foreground my theoretical argument. I then analyze the interplay of both external and internal factors that provided the conditions for the increased coordination and mobilization of civil society actors in the 2016 self-nomination movement. The last section concludes by summarizing the thrust of the argument.

Analysis in this article draws on personal interviews with self-nominated, independent candidates in the 2016 election, data from Facebook fan pages of the self-nomination

movement, published government statements, and media reports on the 2016 legislative election. The article does not examine the actual impact of the self-nomination movement. Whether the movement significantly improved the reach of its message or the public profiles of individual candidates is an important question that requires further exploration, but it is beyond the scope of this article.

#### SELF-NOMINATION IN VIETNAM'S 2016 LEGISLATIVE ELECTION

When civil society actors nominated themselves for election to challenge the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) in the past, they did so in relatively sporadic, atomized opposition attempts. By contrast, a diverse group of activists and dissidents who entered themselves as independent candidates in the 2016 legislative election demonstrated evident collective mobilization and coordination online and offline. They publicly aligned and distinguished themselves as entirely distinct from other party-backed candidates and self-nominees. With deliberate intent, they adopted similar tactics in a concerted online campaign to undercut the dominant discourse of the communist regime, and to educate voters on the limitations of the Vietnamese electoral system. In these particular aspects, the level of coordination among civil society actors in the 2016 self-nomination movement exceeded and qualitatively differed from past elections.

Although the group has been widely referred to as a “self-nomination movement” (*phong trao tu ung cu*) (Nguyen 2016b; Xuan 2016; Vo 2016c), it is important to qualify this by recognizing that the group falls short of the definitional criteria of an actual social movement. A social movement, according to Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2015, 11), is “a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organization, networks, tradition, and solidarities that sustain these activities.” While there is evidence of greater organization, networks, and coordination, the extent to which the group formed a cohesive collective identity or consciousness is questionable. The nascent elements of the 2016 self-nomination movement more closely resemble “a complex form of social interaction” depicted by Tilly (1993, 5) as “a loosely choreographed dance, a fund-raising pancake breakfast, a quilting bee, a street-corner debate, a jam session with changing players, a pickup basketball game, or a city-wide festival.”

The electoral process in Vietnam is circumscribed by extensive vetting procedures. Although scholars have described these procedures in detail elsewhere (Koh 2006, 117–128; Koh 2012b, 367–369; Salomon 2007; Malesky and Schuler 2009), it is worthwhile to underline several important points. During the nomination process, candidates can be put forward by the central party, government, and military organizations, or by agencies at the local level. In addition to these centrally and locally nominated candidates, others can also nominate themselves for election. Self-nominees can be either VCP members or independents without any party affiliation.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I specifically focus on the group of independent self-nominees who publicly identified themselves with the 2016 self-nomination movement.

To appear on the ballot, all candidates must pass three rounds of consultative conferences headed by the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF). It is between the second and the third rounds that party henchmen let their axes fall. In the second round, a preliminary list of nominees is released to local election boards to collect public opinion at local

constituency meetings. Constituents from the nominees' registered residence are selectively invited to attend these meetings to evaluate and provide input based on the levels of their confidence in the nominees. Further cuts to the preliminary candidate list are made, then finalized after the third round.

In the 2016 election, there were 162 self-nominees out of 1,012 applications received by the local election boards nationwide (Quang Minh 2016). These included both party candidates and independent candidates. Out of these, 154 self-nominees were passed to the second round. After the second consultative conference and the third round, only 11 self-nominees appeared on the final ballot, who were either party members or independent entrepreneurs (Vo 2016a). In the end, only two self-nominees, Nguyen Anh Tri and Pham Quang Dung, won seats as part-time delegates in the 14th NA. Both were members of the VCP.

The 2016 self-nomination movement emerged at first as a response to the rallying call by prominent civil society activist Nguyen Quang A for individuals to nominate themselves and contest party-backed candidates for the 14th NA. On February 5, 2016, Quang A (2016a) announced his bid for candidacy in a public Facebook status titled, "Let's Stand for Election to Make an Abstract Right Gradually Become an Actual Right and to Help Mr. Trong Demonstrate 'Democracy is by That Much.'" The title punned on Nguyen Phu Trong's statement when he was re-elected as Party General Secretary in January 2016 that the Party Congress could not be any more democratic than it already was (Nguyen and Viet Dung 2016). "Standing for election will make the people see what 'democracy is by that much' [sic] in our country is like, create pressures to have meaningful change in the future, [and] help raise people's knowledge and awareness," Quang A (Nguyen 2016a) wrote. In the interest of advancing this goal, he called on everyone to nominate themselves and to encourage others who were eligible to enter themselves for election. As an independent candidate shared, "One time I read Nguyen Quang A's Facebook page. He was the first one to nominate himself. His call to action was very persuasive ... I thought I should also become a candidate. So, I participated. A very strong driving factor [for my decision to self-nominate in the election] was Nguyen Quang A's Facebook call."<sup>2</sup>

An evident plan of action was then laid out. First, Quang A noted the importance of carrying out the task in accordance with existing laws and regulations, in spite of their shortcomings, in a public and transparent manner (Nguyen 2016a). Second, he proposed that independent candidates immediately form a volunteer group to help one another, to monitor the consultative conferences, election, and vote counting, and to file petitions on issues related to the nomination and election process (Nguyen 2016a). A closed group of volunteers and an informal secretariat was later formed on Facebook to assist independent candidates with the required paperwork as well as the group's overall organization and coordination (Nguyen 2016c). Three public Facebook fan pages were created, all within a few days after Quang A's call to action. As one candidate described, "There was a group who organized [to increase] the publicity of these self-nominees on social media, not for other traditional nominees, from announcing their self-nominations to how they campaigned, how they declared their personal finances, and so forth. Only candidates belonging to this group had [public] platforms on what they would do if they entered the National Assembly. Therefore, it was easy for people to know [who they were]."<sup>3</sup>

A list of over 30 self-nominated, independent candidates was published on the movement's main Facebook page titled "Campaign for the Nominations for 2016 NA Delegates" (Van Dong Ung Cu Dai Bieu Quoc Hoi 2016b).<sup>4</sup> On this forum, candidates openly aligned themselves under the group's slogan of rightful and lawful contention, "My rights, I exercise" (*quyen ta, ta cu lam*). As one independent candidate asserted, "[2016] was the first year independent candidates linked up together, and everyone knows each other and shares the same goal. We have the right to nominate ourselves for candidacy, so why not? It is our right; we should exercise it."<sup>5</sup> In a post titled "Eight Key Points of Notice in the 2016 Nomination," Quang A (Nguyen 2016b) specifically stressed the importance of carrying out the self-nomination procedures, campaigning, and supporting independent candidates in accordance with existing election laws. Regarding campaigning activities, the post instructed, "[B]y any means, and in any forms that the existing law does not forbid (Article 68 of Election Law)" (Nguyen 2016b). Rather than boycotting the election, it further advised that, "all volunteers and people should motivate electorates to exercise [their right to vote] according to law and discover (recorded with evidence particularly by videos) any violation of the law in election" (Nguyen 2016b). In summary, "this is a round where activists have made use of [*tan dung*] an opportunity, that is, the NA election," stated another independent self-nominee. "This happened over two whole months. There was evident intent [*chu dich*], and more than twenty people concertedly agreed on the aim, even the steps of action; it was not sporadic or spontaneous [*tu phat*]."<sup>6</sup>

Their vocal dissent and political activism earned them the label of "troublemakers," if not outright "dissidents," by the regime. Concentrated in but not limited to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, they came from wide-ranging backgrounds, including bloggers, freelance journalists, independent researchers, entrepreneurs, lawyers, teachers, a comedian, a pop singer, entertainers, and a taxi driver. Nguyen Tuong Thuy, for example, is a prominent blogger and democracy activist who leads the Independent Journalist Association. Vo An Don was a human rights lawyer who represented blogger Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh, also known as "Mother Mushroom" (*me nam*), against charges of "propagandizing" against the state. Quang A and Nguyen Dinh Ha were both detained by public security on multiple occasions.

All but one candidate from the self-nomination movement were eliminated after the second consultative conference in the 2016 election. Tran Dang Tuan, philanthropist, journalist, and former Vice-General Director of Vietnam National Television, was the only independent self-nominee who passed the second round with 100 percent of the votes at his constituency meeting. Nonetheless, he was eliminated after further vetting by the VFF in the third round (Vo 2016b). None of the candidates from the self-nomination movement appeared on the final ballot.

In the 2011 election, dissidents and activists who nominated themselves had done so on an individual basis in atomized attempts. Human rights lawyer Vo An Don, for instance, was an independent self-nominee in 2011, who did not appear on the final ballot despite receiving 100 percent of the confidence votes from his constituents. Unlike those in 2016, he did not link up with other civil society actors through a common platform or a concerted message to voters that would associate himself as part of a broader collective opposition effort. In 2011, there was neither a collective campaign to publicize and elevate the position of independent, self-nominees on social

**FIGURE 1 Public Interest in Self-Nominated Candidates, 2011–2016**

Source: Google Trends.

Note: The Google Trends score gives a relative index of interests over time. The values do not represent the absolute number of searches.

media, nor a coordinated attempt to promulgate a frame of collective action that widely rallied or mobilized others to nominate themselves. Google trends of the search term “self-nomination for the NA” (*tu ung cu dai bieu quoc hoi*) during the period from January 1, 2011 to December 31, 2016 offer a proxy measure that illustrates the higher level of public attention received by self-nominated candidates in the 2016 election as a result in comparison with 2011 (see Figure 1). While the 2011 election was described as having “few self-nominees” (*it nguoi tu ung cu*),<sup>7</sup> self-nomination in the 2016 election was widely described by Vietnamese news outlets as well as various party and state agencies as a “bustling trend”<sup>8</sup> and “movement” (*phong trao*) (e.g. Nguyen 2016b; Xuan 2016; Vo 2016c). This also reflected the difference in public perception and visibility of self-nominees in the two elections. In these particular aspects, civil society actors in the 2016 self-nomination movement demonstrated a level of collective coordination and mobilization that surpassed and qualitatively differed from the 2011 election.

#### OPPOSITION LEARNING AND OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE

There is extensive literature on why autocrats have strong incentives to hold elections. First, elections function as a mode of legitimation for autocrats at home and abroad (Thayer 2010; Bui 2018). “The dream [for authoritarian regimes],” as Andreas Schedler (2002, 37) puts it, is “to reap the fruits of electoral legitimacy without running the risks of democratic uncertainty.” Second, elections provide a means for autocrats to collect various types of information (Malesky and Schuler 2011). Third, autocrats employ elections to manage elite opposition by enhancing the credibility of autocrats’ commitments to power-sharing (Magaloni 2008; Boix and Svobik 2013), signaling regime strength (Magaloni 2006), and co-opting opposition groups (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Gandhi 2008; Blaydes 2011; Lust-Okar 2006). Lastly, elections also function as

“controlled institutionalized channels” for managing social unrest (Gandhi 2008, 181), and releasing social pressures (Brownlee 2007, 8).

Whether and how opposition candidates in turn coordinate to challenge autocrats has been largely studied in multiparty autocracies (e.g. Howard and Roessler 2006; Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Arriola 2012; Gandhi and Reuter 2013), but is relatively marginal in studies of single-party systems. Within the election literature, Gandhi and Reuter (2013, 148) find that the presence of a durable and institutionalized major opposition party increases the likelihood of opposition coalitions by offering credible cooperative gains. In single-party systems where party membership is a primary determinant of candidacy, opposition candidates are expected to compete as notables rather than to coordinate among themselves (Malesky and Schuler 2011, 505). From this perspective, the increased level of coordination by independent candidates in Vietnam’s 2016 self-nomination movement is puzzling.

It may be argued that strengthened mobilization and coordination among opposition candidates in single-party systems could result from a learning process engendered by regular, national elections. Staffan Lindberg (2006, 2009) describes elections as having a “self-reinforcing power” that socializes individuals to behave in accordance with democratic rules. As Lindberg (2006, 73) states, “[S]uccessive electoral cycles allow actors to gain experience and become habituated to electoral institutions, probably in terms of both learning and adaptation.”

Although I do not dismiss the possibility of opposition learning altogether, I contest that opposition learning does not merely derive from procedural elections as Lindberg supposes. Rather, as I seek to underscore in my analysis of the emergence of the 2016 self-nomination movement, opposition learning also accumulates from individual engagement in other non-electoral spheres of social contention. The self-nomination movement in the 2016 election included a large number of candidates who had never put themselves up for elections before, like taxi driver Phan Van Bach, freelance journalist Nguyen Dinh Ha, retired state employee Dang Bich Phuong, and Nguyen Quang A. These independent self-nominees instead shared common linkages through their participation in nationalist protests, environmental demonstrations, and civil society advocacy for democratization between 2011 and 2016. In this manner, it is not the electoral sphere per se, but also the linkages across social movements and civil society that matter for the emergence and strengthened organization of independent self-nominated candidates.

Looking beyond the election literature, social movement theories alternatively underscore changes in political opportunities to explain the emergence of political mobilization and organization (Lipsky 1970; Tilly 1978; McAdam 1999; Kitschelt 1986). When the political opportunity structure is conceivably “open,” social contention and mobilization are more likely to transpire (Eisinger 1973). Political opportunities have been generally defined in terms of (a) the relative openness of the political system; (b) the stability of elite configuration; (c) the availability of elite allies; and (d) state capacity for repression (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). As Sidney Tarrow (1994, 160) sums up, “When institutional access opens, rifts appear within elites, allies become available, and state capacity for repression declines, challengers see opportunities to advance their claims.”

Despite the merit of this explanation, I propose that political opportunity structure is necessary and significant, but it may not be sufficient. The concept has been criticized

for being “in danger of becoming a sponge that soaks up every aspect of the social movement environment” (Gamson and Meyer 1996, 275). In focusing on exogenous factors, it neglects the importance of agency and other elements internal to a social movement (Goodwin and Jasper 2003). More specifically, the political opportunity framework has difficulties predicting which or what types of groups will form and why some groups mobilize while others do not, even when political opportunities arise.

On the one hand, a closed opportunity structure inhibited Bloc 8406’s attempt to organize into an opposition party, and to contest against party-backed candidates in 2007. Bloc 8406, an identifiable pro-democracy movement formed in 2006, was heavily suppressed, with many of its leaders arrested in the run up to the 2007 election (Thayer 2009; Kerkvliet 2019; Abuza 2001). In fact, then General Secretary Nong Duc Manh was reported stating at a meeting on March 21 before the 2007 election that, “[One] must not permit the game of democracy be nested in activities of the National Assembly.”<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, although there were immense political turmoil and crises in Vietnam during the years 2007 to 2011, and these created favorable political opportunities, independent self-nominees did not coordinate in the 2011 election. Government plans to mine bauxite in the Central Highland generated widespread opposition from within and outside the regime in late 2008 and 2009 (Morris-Jung 2015). During the 2008 financial crisis, Vinashin, the national shipbuilding company, nearly collapsed under the weight of more than \$4 billion in debt due to mismanaged investments (Bland 2012). The bailout of the shipping giant ultimately cost the Vietnamese government \$626 million. Prime Minister Dung was principally faulted in the Vinashin crisis, which fueled intense legislative debates and internal elite divisions in the fall of 2010, including the proposal for a first ever vote of no confidence in the Prime Minister (Malesky, Schuler, and Tran 2011). In the same period, the legislature and the government again clashed over the \$56 billion government proposal for a high-speed railway from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City (Steinglass 2010). Yet, as previously discussed, civil society actors did not organize to distinguish themselves from other party self-nominees and party-backed candidates in the 2011 election. While there were dissidents who nominated themselves, they did so in atomized attempts without the same degree of coordination and public attention that were observed in the 2016 election. A focus solely on opportunity structure thus could not fully account for the difference in the nature and the level of coordination between the two.

#### A POLITICAL PROCESS MODEL OF OPPOSITION COORDINATION

To fully account for the increased opposition coordination under authoritarian rule in Vietnam’s single-party elections, attention needs to be directed to how civil society actors were positioned to make use of favorable political opportunities to advance their claims in the 2016 election. McAdam (1999) presents a *political process model* that attributes significance to both external and internal factors. The model underscores that, “neither environmental factors nor factors internal to the movement are sufficient to account for the generation and development of social insurgency ... [Rather,] social movements are an ongoing product of the favorable interplay of both sets of factors” (McAdam 1999, 39–40).



Building on this perspective, I theorize that overlapping linkages among independent candidates from a history of sustained political participation in social protests and civil society, combined with a favorable opportunity structure, effectively increases greater opposition coordination in single-party elections. Specifically, through political engagement in intersecting spheres of social contention, individuals develop resonant collective action frames and repertoires of contention, which are constitutive of the “indigenous organizational strength” within a certain group (McAdam 1999, 43–44). Framing, as defined by McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996, 6), refers to “the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action.” Frames of collective action provide “interpretive schemata” for making sense of what is going on, focusing and directing public attention to constitute what is deemed relevant and irrelevant, like picture frames that “punctuate” and specify what is “in frame” and what is “out of frame” (Snow 2004, 384–385). As David Snow and Robert Benford (1988, 211) stress, “if a frame is empirically credible, experientially commensurable, and narratively resonant, the stronger the consensus mobilizations and the more fertile the soil for action mobilization.” To the extent that individuals have resonant frames of collective action and greater repertoires of contention, they are better positioned to exploit openings in the political opportunity structure and to strengthen their organization. In this manner, a broad and cumulative process of social contention and civil society development along with a favorable opportunity structure significantly facilitate the emergence of independent self-nominees and greater opposition coordination in single-party elections.

Rather than viewing opposition in the electoral arena as insulated from protests, social movements, and civil society engagement across other issue areas, I highlight the fact that the same individuals may traverse and operate within and across various sites of resistance. “All sorts of oppositional activity, both formal and informal, and targeted at political culture or state institutions,” as Meredith Weiss (2006, 51) suggests, are “linked elements of a larger syndrome.” Coterminous with this perspective is the central claim that opposition coordination in single-party elections, like a social movement, is not merely determined by a short-run course of events occurring in the immediate period preceding an election. The factors that contribute to increased opposition coordination are also grounded in long-range processes and historical contexts which operate over time. In short, as McAdam (1999, 41) writes, “the processes shaping insurgency are expected to be of a more *cumulative*, less dramatic nature” (emphasis added).

Analytically, I develop this theoretical argument by first providing an account of the emergent opportunities in the political environment during 2011 to 2016 in Vietnam. I then trace the activities of independent self-nominees over a period of heightened protest and civil society development between 2011 and 2016 in Vietnam. Through process-tracing, I identify and search for evidence of the linkages, and interactions or networks among the candidates online and offline. Modes of contentious interactions in overlapping issues by these individuals constitute a whole set of means for making claims that Tilly (1986) calls “repertoires of contention.” Their early modes of action reflected a nascent logic that would come into fruition in the collective action frame of the 2016 self-nomination movement. The 2016 self-nomination movement adopted a collective action frame that inscribed their opposition in a discourse of rights, and

attributed meaning to what would otherwise seem to be a pointless exercise, given the low expected electoral gain for independent self-nominees. In summary, the cluster of internal factors developed from overlapping linkages through a history of social contention and civil society engagement, combined with environmental shifts that expanded the political opportunities, provided the conditions for the emergence of independent self-nominees and their enhanced opposition coordination in Vietnam's 2016 election.

#### POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE AND REGIME RESPONSE

Fissures among the ruling political elites precipitated by economic turbulence produced great political uncertainties prior to the 2016 election. The Communist party-state was neck-deep in debt crises and corruption scandals. The economy was still grappling with the aftermath of the Vinashin scandal as was Prime Minister Dung. With the support of Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and President Truong Tan Sang, the Politburo reached a decision to subject Dung to party disciplinary measures for his mismanagement of the economy, but its decision was later overturned by the Central Committee of the VCP (Koh 2012a). Observers suggested that the Central Committee's overruling of the Politburo's decision was due to a coalition within the party legislature that remained loyal to the prime minister (Malesky 2014b). President Sang expressed his disgruntlement with the outcome in a televised speech and insisted that "Comrade X" was still at fault (Sang 2012). The saga continued after lawmaker Duong Trung Quoc asked Prime Minister Dung to resign at a televised legislative query in November 2012 (Quoc 2012). In June 2013, the National Assembly carried out an unprecedented confidence vote whereby delegates evaluated the performance of government officials by ranking their confidence in the officials from "highly confident" and "confident" to "low confident" (Malesky 2014a). A measure of polarization constructed by Malesky (2014a, 96–97) based on the confidence votes shows that delegates were strongly divided in their perception and support of the prime minister. Formerly considered to be a leading contender against Trong in the race for the party's General Secretary, Dung was instead forced into retirement at the 12th Party Congress in January 2016 (Abuza 2016). The fact that Dung was recently unseated while the new leadership under Trong had not yet consolidated its power could partly account for the perception among civil society and independent candidates that there was a relatively more open and favorable environment for initiating the self-nomination movement in the 2016 election.

There were other external factors that defined the political environment at the time. Specifically, the TPP trade agreement had just been signed in early 2016 after member countries finally reached an agreement in October 2015. The TPP was seen not only as the centerpiece of the US "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific region under the Obama administration but also as a hallmark for Vietnam's developmental path. As a country that could potentially benefit the most, it was Vietnam's priority to secure this trade agreement. At the same time, the agreement bound member countries to qualifying requirements that demanded rigorous domestic reforms to improve the countries' environmental and labor standards. This forced the Vietnamese government to re-examine its domestic conditions, including whether to allow for independent labor unions and how to strengthen the country's environmental protection. This also ushered in a momentous push for active engagement and input from civil society in governmental debates and discussions about

prospective reforms. It was amid these developments that opposition candidates located the opportunities to advance their claims by organizing and enlisting in the self-nomination movement.

These openings were reflected in the regime's contradictory messages as well as in its regulatory approach to managing the self-nomination movement. When the movement first arose in February 2016, it prompted the *People's Army Newspaper* to caution:

[S]ome people view [the election] as an 'opportunity' to distort the inherently good nature of our regime ... And some people 'call on' those 'democracy activists' online to 'self-nominate' ... Reality shows that all the things that they have disseminated online have only been intended to distort and smear our regime ... Therefore, it is necessary to be alert of tactics to impair, cause disorder, ... abuse democracy to mislead public opinion, impair this election (Vong 2016).

Although the newspaper article did not cite any specific names, it was evident that it was referring to the self-nomination movement. Two days after the application deadline for nominees for the 2016 election, news spread on mainstream outlets that a member on the Election Board had revealed, according to information from public security, that "a number of subversive organizations in and outside the country" supported and financed activities by self-nominees to mobilize voters (Hong Nhi 2016). Contradicting the previous messages, a few days after, Vu Trong Kim, General Secretary of the VFF, stated in an interview, "No one is allowed to create difficulties for self-nominees, that is against the law" (Phan 2016).

In the process, the regime monitored and harassed opposition candidates, but also restrained itself from taking a more robust and forceful approach to repressing the movement. On the one hand, individual candidates were harassed in various ways. Nguyen Quang A and Nguyen Dinh Ha were detained by public security on account of "public gathering" outside blogger Anh Ba Sam's trial. On another occasion, Quang A was arrested outside of his home as he was on his way to meet with President Obama during the latter's visit to Vietnam in June 2016. Human rights activist Hoang Dung reportedly encountered troubles at his constituency meeting when his supporters, including his wife, were barred from attending the meeting and were soiled with fermented shrimp paste by a group of thugs on motorbikes while they waited outside the entrance guarded by police. On the other hand, candidates were left to carry on with their campaigning activities, particularly on social media. Under Vietnam's Election Law, campaign activities can only be carried out when led by the VFF using mainstream media outlets subject to state restriction and control. Like David, who fashioned a weapon out of a slingshot and a stone to fight Goliath, independent candidates circumvented state restrictions by wielding social media platforms to bring their discursive frames to the fore. As one candidate explained, "Through social media, candidates could create their own personal media outlets to broadcast and circulate information on the election, candidates, their activities, as well as how the Communist Party treats self-nominees."<sup>10</sup> However, authorities did not decisively shut down the movement. When asked whether candidates could use social media to campaign, Nguyen Van Pha, Deputy President of the VFF, responded, "Currently there is no decision about campaigning online" (Minh Hoa 2016). This was symptomatic of the political environment that allowed space for independent self-nominees to operate and coordinate in the 2016 election.

## OVERLAPPING LINKAGES AND REPERTOIRES ACROSS SPHERES OF SOCIAL CONTENTION

Given the favorable shifts in the political opportunity structure, how did independent self-nominees emerge with existent networks and repertoires of contention? In this section, I illustrate how overlapping linkages with preceding protest and civil society activities during 2011 to 2016 were crucial for widening and extending the cycle of contention from other sites of resistance to the electoral arena when the opportunity arose in 2016. I broaden the time frame of analysis to include the span of contentious activities that shaped the development of the movement. Closer analyses of previous protests allow me to map and trace the various ways by which civil society actors who nominated themselves in the 2016 election were linked through prior episodes of contention across various spheres. These linkages are significant because they provide the contexts in which independent self-nominees later emerged. It is also from having participated in these intersecting spheres of contention that individuals became acquainted,

From 2011 to 2016, anti-China protests were recurring and increasingly widespread. In 2011, when China cut the cables of Vietnam's seismic survey ship *Binh Minh 2* and rammed a PetroVietnam survey ship in the South China Sea—otherwise known to Vietnam as the East Sea—people gathered for three consecutive months in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to protest China's assertive behavior. In Hanoi, protests and marches against China's violation of Vietnam's maritime sovereignty occurred in the vicinity of the Chinese embassy and Hoan Kiem Lake every Sunday from June to August. In one instance, there were nearly 300 protestors gathering in the capital. In Ho Chi Minh City, a reported number of 1,000 people also took to the streets. A second wave of patriotic protests occurred across the country in December 2012 in response to another incident in which the *Binh Minh 2* was again harassed by China. In May 2014, anti-China sentiment erupted again when China deployed the oil rig *Haiyang Shiyou 981* in waters inside the exclusive economic zone claimed by Vietnam. In Binh Duong province, up to 20,000 people demonstrated at one time, and public disorder mounted when a small group of protestors burned down some 15 Taiwanese factories that protestors mistakenly associated with China.

During the same period, societal unrest was also provoked by environmental causes. In March 2015, the local government of Hanoi implemented a city plan to replace 6,708 trees on 190 inner city routes as part of a landscape renovation project, and to make space for the construction of the Cat Linh-Ha Dong elevated high-speed railway. People were outraged as healthy, decades-old mahogany trees planted during the French colonial era were cut down and replaced with weak saplings. Cyber activism, such as that of the “6,700 People for 6,700 Trees” Facebook page, quickly mobilized mass support and organized collective action to protect the trees. Offline, this manifested in mass protests, tree hug assemblies, and other initiatives like tying yellow knots around the trees as a way of conveying the protestors' message, as well as legal appeals and symposiums organized by civil society organizations to collect experts' opinions on the case (Le et al. 2015).

Nearly a year later, the public was again stoked to anger by one of the worst environmental disasters in Vietnam. In April 2016, Formosa Ha Tinh Steel, a subsidiary of Taiwan's Formosa Plastics Group, discharged toxins that killed at least 70 tons of fish and sea life along more than 200km of Vietnam's central coastline. The toxic spill

also threatened the means of livelihoods of Vietnamese fishermen. The public was further enraged when Chu Xuan Pham, a local representative of Formosa, commented in a press conference that people must choose between “catching fish and shrimp and building a modern steel industry” (Paddock 2016). This sparked an instant wave of defiance in which the hashtag “#I choose fish” became viral on social media in Vietnam and overseas. Thousands of people protested in the following weeks in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and other parts of the country to demand justice and accountability.

The fact that many independent candidates had actively participated in and supported these protests is significant. Through active engagement at these sites of resistance, individuals developed shared networks and repertoires of contention. As Vincent Boudreau (2001, 165) notes, “protest movements are not discontinuous from other aspects or periods in people’s lives.” Indeed, an independent candidate from Hanoi first gained interest in politics out of concerns about Vietnam’s maritime disputes with China. This prompted her to join the anti-China protests in 2011, 2012, 2014, and other protests afterwards, where she met another participant, who also nominated himself for the 2016 election. Together, they both took part in the 6,700 trees movement and the anti-Formosa mass demonstrations in Hanoi. Both frequently visited each other’s homes, exchanged information, and discussed about their experience in the 2016 election.<sup>11</sup> A third candidate also met other independents from the 2016 self-nomination movement through his active participation in preceding protests:

Friends [in the 2016 self-nomination movement] are those whom I have actually already met in previous “street events” [*nhung cuoc xuong duong*] protesting and opposing unreasonable policies by the government ... The most recent protest that I participated in before I nominated myself for election was the “protect 6700 trees from being cut down in Hanoi” movement. After that was the Formosa protest on May 11th, so much so that even the Communist government broadcasted clips of the protest and announced my name on central television, “so and so is an anti-state faction, frequently leading mass protests.”<sup>12</sup>

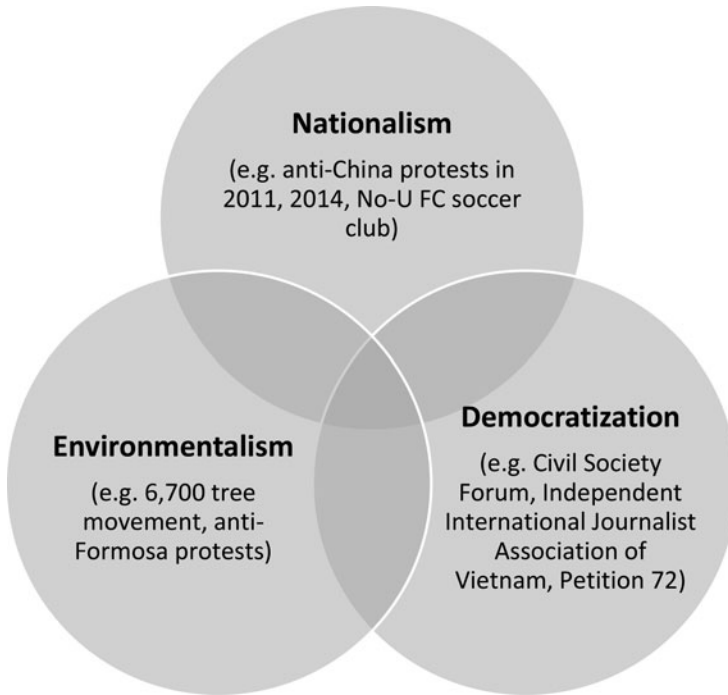
In these protests, social media offered a crucial instrument in facilitating network formation among protestors and widening the reach of the resistance. As the third candidate shared, “There are fan pages, like the Tree-Loving Clubs, 6,700 Tree ... There are bloggers and Facebookers with social credibility on social media. They called people to take to the streets, for the environment, to protect the green trees ... even stating the exact date, time, location, and goal for the street protests.”<sup>13</sup> In this manner, social media had become part of the toolkit in the repertoire of contention of independent candidates. But it was also through their offline interactions at and outside of the protests that these ties were reinforced and solidified. Although it was not at these protests per se that these individuals decided and strategized about the 2016 election, they provided the crucial context for them to connect both online and offline in the first place. After Nguyen Quang A’s call to action in 2016, a meeting was organized at one of the candidates’ home where these individuals then gathered to discuss about their self-nomination in the 2016 election.

Through these protests, certain individuals also established their credibility as key influencers to whom others looked up to for leadership in the 2016 self-nomination movement. Tran Dang Tuan, an independent self-nominee from Hanoi, was a prominent journalist and former Vice-General Director of Vietnam National Television who had an

instrumental role in shaping public opinion and social mobilization in the 6,700 tree movement itself. On March 16, 2015, he published a letter addressed to Nguyen The Thao, Chairman of the People's Committee of Hanoi, on his Facebook page, urging the government to "listen to the opinions of scientists and the people about the replacement of the trees," and to be transparent about which trees were to be cut down (Cong An 2015). The letter quickly gathered widespread support both online and offline. It instigated an immediate response from Phan Dang Long, Deputy Director of the Municipal Party Propaganda Committee, asserting that "to cut down trees, consulting the people was unnecessary" (Hong Nhi 2015). This response was viewed as "a gunshot fired directly at the people's heart" that provoked people to rise to action (Le et al. 2015). Figures like Tran Dang Tuan further lent their credibility and appeal to the self-nomination movement when they nominated themselves in the 2016 election.

Connective ties among independent self-nominees have also derived from their activism in other formal and informal civil society groups and associations. The period from 2011 to 2016 falls under a phase that Benedict Kerkvliet (2015, 362) refers to as "the expansion of public political criticism." During this period, Kerkvliet (2015, 363) describes, "public political life in Vietnam was teeming with bloggers, websites, petitioners, networks, and organizations criticizing major public policies, key institutions of the state, or the entire form of government." Along with a few other individuals, Quang A himself founded the Civil Society Forum in September 2013 with the goal of "transforming peacefully" the country's political system through vibrant and critical public debates (Kerkvliet 2019, 110). During the revision of Vietnam's Constitution in 2013, a group of civil societal actors, experts, and former officials put forth bold proposals for political reforms, calling for a multi-party system and constitutional review in their own draft version of the Constitution known as Petition 72 (Bui 2016). The name appearing first on this petition is Quang A. Independent self-nominee Nguyen Xuan Dien, a researcher at Han Nom Research Institute, otherwise known by his blog's name "Têu," also signed Petition 72. Quang A and Dien were both frequent participants in anti-China protests, as were independent candidate Nguyen Dinh Ha and others. All three were also members and supporters of the No-U FC soccer club, which opposed China's mapping of the U-shaped nine-dash line in assertion of its claim to maritime territories in the South China Sea. In another example of the overlapping linkages among the various groups and individuals, independent candidates Bui Minh Quoc, Nguyen Tuong Thuy, and Nguyen Van Thanh were all members of the Independent International Journalist Association of Vietnam, first formed in July 2014 to advocate for freedom of the press and protection of journalists in Vietnam (Kerkvliet 2015, 379).

Interviews and process-tracing show that there were evident overlapping linkages among independent candidates in the 2016 self-nomination movement that were formed through their sustained engagement in waves of prior protests and civil society activism on other issue areas beyond the electoral sphere. As Figure 2 illustrates, nationalist contention against China, social mobilization for environmental causes, and advocacy for democratization intersected. The likelihood that an individual would emerge as an independent self-nominated candidate and coordinate with other independent self-nominees is highest among those who are involved in all three spheres in Vietnam. As an independent candidate affirmed after the election, "In [the 2016 self-nomination movement], there were many people who participated, but those people

**FIGURE 2** Overlapping Spheres of Social Contention

remain actively engaged in other activities ... Those same individuals will still connect with each other and remain active in other issue areas.”<sup>14</sup> In this manner, the emergence of the self-nomination movement should not be viewed as an insular phenomenon. Rather, it was shaped by the broader process of social resistance and long-range civil society development during 2011 to 2016 in Vietnam.

#### FRAMING STRATEGIES AND DISCURSIVE CAMPAIGN ONLINE

Drawing on prior protests and civil society engagement, civil society actors in the 2016 self-nomination movement strategically adopted a rights-based collective action frame to underscore the legitimacy of their contention, and wielded social media as an instrument to mobilize proponents for their claims. The movement’s rallying message, “My rights, I exercise” (*quyen ta, tu cu lam*) ties its opposition activities to the idea that Vietnamese citizens are entitled to certain inherent rights recognized by the Constitution that do not need to await the VCP’s permission before they can be exercised. “There is a mentality among the Vietnamese people and government authorities that rights are those which must be granted and given by the Communist Party to the people,” a key influencer of the movement explained. “From 2011, 2012, 2013, within civil society networks of which I am a member, we have begun to clearly distinguish that for things which are our rights, we should go ahead and exercise them. Those rights on paper, we must

now turn them into rights practiced in reality that do not await on anyone's conferral."<sup>15</sup> In this manner, the framing and the nature of participation rallied by the movement were inherently contentious as it oriented individuals to challenge the authority of the regime.

The collective action frame adopted by the movement undoubtedly resonated with independent candidate Dang Bich Phuong. As she presented in her campaign video on the movement's fan page (Van Dong Ung Cu Dai Bieu Quoc Hoi 2016b), "I wanted to participate in the nomination for NA delegates to change people's way of thinking ... [people have been] used to being passive, thinking that it is 'the party nominates [and] the people elects' (*dang cu dan bau*) but do not think that they have the constitutional right to nominate themselves." On the movement's Facebook fan page (Van Dong Ung Cu Dai Bieu Quoc Hoi 2016b), a 3-minute video clip dated February 22, 2016 urged voters to "listen to what independent self-nominees for the 14th National Assembly have to say." Candidates appeared in the video, stressing the fact that this was the first time there were candidates who presented their platforms directly to the public prior to the actual election aired on mass media outlets. For instance, Nguyen Thuy Hanh promised that if she were elected, she would make the issue of national sovereignty the central focus of her tenure and reduce Vietnam's overdependence on China. Dang Bich Phuong vowed that she would change the Land Law if she were elected. Nguyen Tuong Thuy also expressed indignation over unfair oppression of victims of land expropriation and highlighted the imperative of strengthening legislative mechanisms for monitoring and improving the performance of executive agencies. Such public campaigning activities and collective coordination among independent candidates were unprecedented in Vietnam's legislative elections.

In the authoritative discourse projected by the VCP, Vietnam's elections were characterized by increased competition, openness, transparency, and electoral integrity. "Our institution is open," said Vice President and General Secretary of the VFF Vu Trong Kim in an interview with the party's mouthpiece *Sai Gon Giai Phong*. "We encourage proactiveness, innovation. Do not think that there is such [a] thing as sitting where you are placed (*dat dau ngoi do*) ... There is no barrier for those who nominate themselves" (Phan 2016). Drawing from the same official script, the *People's Army Newspaper* ("Dieu gi phia sau trao luu 'o at tu ung cu'?" 2016) assertively claimed, "[I]n recent years, the number of people exercising their right to nomination, nominating themselves for the NA has increased day by day. This reality has discarded some opinions on social media and international news that NA election in Vietnam is only a 'self-directed' playground of the Party, with no door for independent candidates."

In relation to campaigning efforts online, the self-nomination movement sought to directly contest this very narrative from the regime by publicly documenting the experience of independent self-nominees as they navigated through the complex vetting procedures. Specifically, it produced a counter-discourse which sought to expose institutionalized means of electoral engineering by the VCP and advocated for a more competitive, transparent, and equal playing field for opposition candidates in Vietnam's elections. A video clip on the group's Facebook page (Van Dong Ung Cu Dai Bieu Quoc Hoi 2016a), for example, showed independent self-nominee Nguyen Dinh Ha encountering great difficulties acquiring the background verification needed to file his self-nomination application with the local People's Committee in Hanoi on March 12, 2016. Describing the incident as a "comedic drama," the clip called attention to the



unresponsiveness of the local cadre to Ha's request as evidence of the local government's lack of "capacity and character." The post with the highest number of shares (714 shares) on the movement's Facebook fan page was a photo of a typed document by Vietnamese authorities instructing who the prospective winners for the NA and local People's Council should be one day in advance of the actual election. The caption of the photo said, "Electoral results! Results! Who says that these results are photoshopped by dissidents bla, blah, bla [sic]. Wait and see to verify! Ad[min of the Facebook page] posts this [photo] to provide some guidance so that everyone knows how to vote" (Van Dong Ung Cu Dai Bieu Quoc Hoi 2016c). In these frames, the electoral arena is a theatre of the party-state in which the plot has already been scripted and decided in advance.

In their publicized attempts to contest the parameters of the electoral game in Vietnam, candidates did not expect to win at the voting poll, given that independent self-nominees rarely made it to the ballot. Instead, they aimed to influence voters' views and attitudes through their electoral campaign as a channel of socializing the public over time. As one candidate noted, "In all these years, we have criticized that the Communist Party is like this or like that, but we did not have any proof or evidence. Why not test as a trial to show the world which aspects of the election are not fair and transparent?"<sup>16</sup> The group's conscious attempts at reorienting the public view of Vietnam's legislative election continued on social media platforms well after independent self-nominees were eliminated from the final ballot. The movement held a parallel election on Facebook, calling for people to cast votes for other self-nominees on the ballot and to compare the online results with those from the nationwide election to see an expected difference between the two.<sup>17</sup> A writing contest titled "Electoral Freedom and Equality" was also organized on Facebook, soliciting responses to the prompt: "What is electoral freedom and equality? How do you assess the election process in Vietnam?"<sup>18</sup> "The principal aim [of the movement] was to raise people's awareness, to help people understand what a proper election is, what a sham election is," another independent candidate shared. "It is that simple. There was nothing dreadfully big to it."<sup>19</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Given the various ways that autocrats employ elections, under what conditions are civil society actors more likely to collectively mobilize and coordinate to contest authoritarian rule in single-party elections? In this article, I theorize that a history of sustained political engagement in social protests and civil society, combined with a favorable opportunity structure, increases the possibility of greater opposition coordination in single-party elections. Overlapping linkages through protests and civil society activism allow individuals to develop networks, repertoires of contention, and collective action frames. The extent to which individuals develop and share these crucial elements determines whether and how they are positioned to make use of openings in the political opportunity structure, and to generate an organized opposition. In this manner, while opportunity structure is necessary, a broad and cumulative process of social contention and civil society development also significantly matters to the emergence of independent self-nominees and greater opposition coordination in single-party elections.

The article provides a granular account of opposition activities by a group of independent self-nominees in Vietnam's 2016 legislative election. The particular manners in

which these candidates collectively mobilized others to nominate themselves, and organized to publicize their opposition attempts online and offline, exceeded and qualitatively differed from sporadic and atomized attempts in past elections. Through active public engagement online and offline they inscribed their opposition in a rights-based discourse that oriented and connected them in clearly identifiable ways. Their immediate aim was not electoral victory, but to promote public awareness of the calibrated limitations of Vietnam's electoral system.

By studying the emergence of the 2016 self-nomination movement in Vietnam, I show how expanding political opportunities combined with a history of sustained contentious activity and civil society development produced the conditions for strengthened collective mobilization and opposition coordination in the single-party regime. Changes in party leadership, elite infighting, and government's preoccupation with Vietnam's reputation and qualification for the TPP created important shifts in the political environment in the run up to the 2016 election. Yet, it was through their participation and interactions in the series of protests occurring between 2011 and 2016, as well as active engagement with civil society across issue areas during this period that civil society actors formed repertoires of contention and resonant frames of collective action. In effect, this process extended the cycle of contention from other sites of resistance to the electoral arena and gave rise to the emergence of a diverse group of independent self-nominees, who were then able to exploit favorable openings in the political opportunity structure to operate and coordinate.

Lastly, although the article does not offer a conclusive analysis of the success of the movement, it is worthwhile to reflect on the implications it may have for future opposition. On the one hand, Google Trends illustrates that public interest in independent self-nomination was significantly higher in the 2016 election than in 2011. This suggests that the movement advanced its aim to raise public awareness and promulgate a broader discourse with emphasis on citizen democratic rights. In doing so, the movement established an open and public precedent for possible future opposition attempts and coordination, albeit contingent on regime responses and other external factors. Whether or not the movement would transpire to be a cohesive political party or organization, as in the case of the *dangwai* movement that later evolved into the Democratic Progressive Party in Taiwan, is not certain. Rather, it is still greatly contingent on future changes in political opportunities and regime responses to political opposition, as well as on the extent to which overlapping linkages among civil society actors across issue areas reach a "collective threshold" or critical mass (Pierson 2004, 83–87; Granovetter 1978).

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#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author reports none.

## NOTES

This article has benefited from the insightful comments from two anonymous reviewers and Stephan Haggard, editor of *Journal of East Asian Studies*. I also wish to thank Erik Martinez Kuhonta and Tuong Vu for their close readings of earlier drafts and their valuable advice. Stimulating discussions with Meredith Weiss and helpful feedback from Allen Hicken at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA) in Boston (August 2018) further motivated my revisions of earlier drafts. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge Anna Assogba, Klaus Hammering, and Cindy Truong for their support, and the individuals who have contributed to my greater understanding of Vietnam's elections.

1. There is a small group of party candidates who also self-nominate. This group is equally interesting, raising questions about why and how they remain “within” the party yet also compete against party-backed candidates nominated by central or local offices. These self-nominees, however, are not the focus of this article, as they did not participate in the 2016 self-nomination movement’s opposition attempt.

2. Interview with candidate VNHN02, September 6, 2016.

3. Interview with candidate VNHN04, August 12, 2018.

4. “*Van Dong Ung Cu Dai Bieu Quoc Hoi 2016*” [“Campaign for the Nomination of 2016 NA Delegates”] (FB page ID 1030627020334012) is the most active, with 14,246 fans, 437 posts from the date of its first post on February 9, 2016 to June 1, 2016, 11,720 comments and 11,783 shares. See the Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/daibieuQH/](http://www.facebook.com/daibieuQH/).

5. Interview with candidate VNHN01, September 5, 2016.

6. Interview with candidate VNHN04, August 12, 2018.

7. “It nguoi ung cu dai bieu Quoc hoi” [Few self-nominees for the National Assembly], *BBC News Vietnamese*. March 22, 2011, [www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam/2011/03/110322\\_na\\_candidates](http://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam/2011/03/110322_na_candidates). Accessed May 18, 2020.

8. “Dieu gi phia sau trao luu ‘o at tu ung cu’?” [What Is Behind the ‘Bustling Trend of Self-Nomination’?]. *People’s Army Newspaper*, March 8, 2016, [www.qdnd.vn/chong-dien-bien-hoa-binh/bai-2-dieu-gi-phia-sau-trao-luu-o-at-tu-ung-cu-468654](http://www.qdnd.vn/chong-dien-bien-hoa-binh/bai-2-dieu-gi-phia-sau-trao-luu-o-at-tu-ung-cu-468654). Accessed June 9, 2019.

9. “Ong Nong Duc Manh: khong de tro choi dan chu long vao sinh hoat Quoc hoi” [Nong Duc Manh: Must Not Permit the Game of Democracy be Nested in Activities of the National Assembly], *Radio Free Asia*. March 22, 2007, [www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in\\_depth/NongDucManh-DoNot\\_bring\\_democracy\\_game\\_into\\_Parliament-20070322.html](http://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in_depth/NongDucManh-DoNot_bring_democracy_game_into_Parliament-20070322.html). Accessed April 12, 2020.

10. Interview with candidate VNHN01, September 5, 2016.

11. Interview with candidate VNHN03, September 7, 2016.

12. Interview with candidate VNHN03, September 7, 2016.

13. Interview with candidate VNHN02, September 6, 2016.

14. Interview with candidate VNHN04, August 12, 2018.

15. Interview with candidate VNHN04, August 12, 2018.

16. Interview with candidate VNHN04, August 12, 2018.

17. Links for the online polls can be viewed for Hanoi at <http://poll.fm/510sd>, and for HCMC at <http://poll.fm/510tk>. A Facebook event page for the poll was also hosted at [www.facebook.com/events/1099284490093409/](http://www.facebook.com/events/1099284490093409/).

18. See, “Cuoc thi viet ve ‘bau cu tu do va cong bang’” [Writing Contest About ‘A Free and Equal Election’]. April 14, 2016, [www.facebook.com/events/1017024585017833/](http://www.facebook.com/events/1017024585017833/).

19. Interview with candidate VNHN04, 12 August 2018.

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