Ed Malesky

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"Gerrymandering Vietnam Style: The Political Motivations Behind the Creation of New Provinces in Vietnam"

Friday, February 24, 2006
12:00 p.m.
Mershon Center
Room 120

Edmund Malesky's dissertation work, on the impact of foreign direct investment on local-central government relations in Vietnam, won the best dissertation award in comparative politics. As he explained, over the past decade, Vietnam has created an unusually high number of new provinces while simultaneously experiencing greater liberalization. According to Malesky, the dramatic growth of provinces results from the reformist strategy to further liberalization as well as various benefits to be had among elites through gerrymandering.

Malesky explained that scholars have offered a number of alternative explanations to account for the creation of new regions and regional governments, but self-interested actions of political actors have played the main role in this process. He explained that some Vietnamese provinces have been divided into two or even three parts and in some cases, national unit cities have been created by separating the metropolis from its hinterland, but this was not done to enhance governing capacity. Though it is easier for a governor to control a smaller area, the consolidation of the state was not a concern in Vietnam, said Malesky. Maintaining a regional ideological balance was not the case either as northern provinces that formed the core of the Communist government favored over the South. The newly created provinces do not correspond to old French administrative divisions, either.

In terms of provincial-central relations, the creation of new provinces may be seen as both strengthening or weakening provincial governments vis-à-vis the central leadership. In fact, the most notable divide in Vietnam today is between reformist and conservative leaders within the Vietnamese central government over the role of the state sector in economic development. Therefore, Malesky argued, it is much more useful to think of province creation as a manifestation of gerrymandering to affect this debate. By splitting provinces, reformers have in fact improved their political strength because new provincial seats helped enhance their voting strength at Central Committee meetings. By splitting private sector dominated provinces from SOE-dominated ones, reformist political elites have not only benefited themselves in terms of personal gains, but have also strengthened their political position in a country that is in the midst of a major transition towards greater liberalization.

How were the reformers able to accomplish this when it is all too evident to the conservatives that gerrymandering along these lines tends to strengthen the reformist position and propel economic liberalization? According to Malesky, reformists have been able to gain the consent of conservatives by enticing them with other perks that result from the creation of a new province, such as money for infrastructure and construction projects. These provide a highly valuable source of kickbacks and personal wealth for a higher number of central government leaders.
Malesky argued that the more officials that come from one province, the greater the likelihood that it will be split in order to create new provinces to benefit those leaders. He pointed to the fact that separations of provinces have coincided with major debates in Vietnam over the role of state-owned enterprises. He added, while the size of state GDP output continues to be relatively high, the number of non-state owned enterprise dominated provinces has increased dramatically. Borders of new provinces often look awkward precisely because gerrymandering seeks to carve out state-dominated centers and create more opportunities for pork for private-sector leaders.

Ed Malesky’s research focuses on the political economy of economic transition. His dissertation examined the impact of foreign direct investment on local-central relations in transition states, with a special concentration on Vietnam. He is particularly interested in the notion of how de facto decentralization results from increased provincial bargaining power before formal decentralization by national governments. Malesky has also devoted considerable time to understanding the impact of foreign direct investment on domestic government institutions and political cleavages.

Malesky’s current projects include the construction of a provincial economic governance index for Vietnam’s 64 provinces. Using business survey data, he is working to rank provinces on their transparency, transaction costs, attitude toward private sector reform, and innovative approaches to economic development. Along the way, he has put tremendous emphasis on improving the methodology with which scholars approach business survey data. Malesky is also working closely with a colleague at Duke on a book project exploring the underlying causes of economic reform choices across Eastern Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union.


Malesky joined the Graduate School of International Relations and Pacific Studies at the University of California, San Diego in 2005. Before joining IR/PS, he was an Academy Scholar at the Harvard Weatherhead Center of International Affairs. He has been a consultant for The Asian Foundation, US-AID’s Vietnam National Competitiveness Initiative, the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program, and a student monitor of factories producing Nike apparel.

He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Duke University in 2004.