The political consequences of the LGBT Movement in Vietnam: understanding mobilization and impact in a non-democratic context

Context
This paper is one of two that aim to explore further the theoretical framework of my research, and consider preliminary findings from the initial fieldwork. In this paper I return to the ‘political opportunities’ literature to consider what social movement theory would hypothesise about how movements emerge and have political consequences in a non-democratic context. I then test these hypotheses against preliminary empirical evidence of mobilization and influence of the movement of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) people in Vietnam.

The second paper analyses the (limited) empirical literature on the current political and economic environment in Vietnam in order to gain insight into the political opportunities that are relevant for movements.

Introduction
Many years of social movement theory and empirical research have found that movements are more likely both to mobilize and to have influence in more democratic, open and favourable environments (Amenta et al., 2010; Kitschelt, 1986; Tilly, 1999). My research however indicates that movements have not only mobilized, but have been politically influential in the non-democratic, authoritarian country of Vietnam; a puzzle to mainstream social movement theory. This paper will consider this puzzle by firstly examining what the literature says about under what conditions movements mobilize and achieve political influence, in both democratic and non-democratic contexts.

In the second part of the paper I focus in on the issue of political opportunities, as articulated in the political mediation model of Amenta et al (Amenta and Young, 1999; Amenta, 2005; Amenta et al., 2005, 2002). I consider the political context of Vietnam, a ‘market economy with socialist characteristics’, to hypothesise whether mobilization or political influence for movements should be expected. I find that while Vietnam is under-democratised and repressive, the political mediation model indicates that there could be some opportunities for mobilization of social...
movements. The model hypothesises, however that movements in such a context would need to use highly assertive tactics to achieve their goals.

Finally I examine preliminary empirical evidence from a case study of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) movement in Vietnam, and their campaign for same sex marriage to be recognised. I find that this movement has not only mobilized, it has managed to achieve significant political influence in a very short period of time, without using very assertive tactics.¹ This case thus raises questions about how movements operate in a non-democratic context to gain political influence and achieve their goals.

**Defining the political consequences of movements**

Understanding and researching the consequences of social movement action, while traditionally somewhat neglected, has recently attracted a lot of research interest (for reviews of this literature see Amenta et al., 2010; Giugni, 1998). Much of this recent interest has focussed on the *political* impacts or consequences of movement action, in order to answer questions about the role of movements in achieving social change, or under which conditions movements might be more likely to achieve political consequences.

My research on social movements in Vietnam is also concerned with the political consequences of movements, rather than other possible consequences such as cultural impacts on movement members or impacts on society generally (Gurr 1980, Melucci 1996). My experience is that recently in Vietnam, various social movements have emerged and are engaging with the state to try to change or introduce policy that will provide benefits for particular groups in society; increased access to income, health, welfare, and education for people with disabilities, recognition of the rights of gay and lesbians, or health care and stigma reduction for people living with HIV. There is evidence that these movements are influential in the policy process and are achieving at least some of their goals (Patterson and Stephens, 2012; Wells-Dang, 2010)

¹ Note that this paper is based on very preliminary fieldwork conducted in Vietnam between August – December 2013. Additional interviews and data collection will be carried out later in 2014.
The focus of my research thus is to understand how these movements have achieved their political goals. In order to do so, I must first define what I mean by political consequences.

The social movements literature has also grappled with this issue of defining political consequences. William Gamson (1975) paved the way defining political outcomes of movements as firstly, the achievement of new advantages for the group and/or secondly, acceptance of the movement/group representatives into the political process. This dual approach has been broadly accepted by other scholars, however the understanding of both new advantages and movement acceptance has been further specified. For example, scholars of women’s movements have stressed the importance of structural transformation of inequalities as part of the new advantages claimed and sometimes achieved by women’s movements. In addition, they interpret ‘acceptance’ as inclusion and empowerment of women’s activists and representatives (Krizsan and Zentai, 2012; McBride and Mazur, 2010; McCammon et al., 2001; Stetson and Mazur, 1995; Weldon, 2002). As the movements I consider are concerned with excluded and marginalised groups; people with disabilities, people living with HIV and LGBT people, this concept of inclusion and empowerment seems more appropriate than ‘acceptance’.

The literature has traditionally operationalized Gamson’s first outcome of ‘new advantages’ as policy changes resulting from specific demands by the movement, for example introduction of civil rights legislation (see for example McAdam, 1986). Amenta and colleagues (Amenta and Young, 1999; Amenta et al., 2005, 2002) modify this, arguing that political influence can be understood as policy changes that result in changes in distribution of collective goods, both tangible and intangible, for a particular group. This interpretation seems appropriate for the particular movements of interest in Vietnam as they are concerned about both better access to tangible collective goods such as welfare and education, however are also fighting for official state recognition of collective identities (Melucci, 1996; Polletta and Jasper, 2001).

In terms of the ‘acceptance’ criteria, Amenta and colleagues (Amenta and Young, 1999; Amenta et al., 2005, 2002) echo women’s movement scholars focussing on ‘inclusion’ of challengers in the political process. Thus, for the movements under
consideration I will accept that the movements have had political influence if there is evidence of a policy change that results in increased collective benefits flowing to the particular group represented by the movement, as well as/or evidence of greater inclusion of movement activists in the decision making process of Vietnam.

**Under what conditions can movements have political influence?**

Consideration of this key question has been a major concern to scholars of social movements. Studies have primarily focussed on movements in Western liberal democracies that utilize protest tactics to achieve political changes such as increased environmental protection, rights for women, minorities etc. As such, the question of when movements are able to achieve their goals, and when they are less successful is a key concern.

This literature based on these studies has identified a number of relevant factors as affecting the ability of movements to have political influence. Firstly, it is generally agreed that mobilizing people and resources around an issue is a necessary but insufficient condition to achieve collective benefits for a particular group (Giugni, 1998; Giugni et al., 1999; McAdam et al., 1996; McCarthy and Zald, 2002, 1977). As mentioned above, favourable political contexts (political opportunities) also make influence more likely although not in a simple linear fashion (Kitschelt, 1986; Kriesi, 1996; Meyer and Minkoff, 2004). It seems that ‘very closed regimes repress social movements, that very open and responsive ones assimilate them, and that moderately repressive ones allow for their broad articulation but do not accede readily to their demands’ (Kitschelt, 1986, p. 62). Other factors that seem to be important are that the movement appropriately ‘frames’ the problem and proposes a solution (Benford and Snow, 2000; Cress and Snow, 2000). In addition, some scholars have found an important role for public opinion, finding that movements are more likely to be successful if public opinion is on their side, or if there is no strong public opinion about an issue (Burstein and Linton, 2002; Burstein, 2003, 1999).

Recently however, the approach has become more sophisticated through exploration of how these factors might interact and which are most important for successful influence. The consensus seems to be that in democratic polities, social movements do not have a direct effect on policy making or political actors, rather their effect is
mediated through either public opinion or political allies, or preferably both. The mediation approach proposes that movements’ mobilization and action as well as framing processes are necessary, but won’t be effective in gaining political influence without political and or bureaucratic actors who see it is in their interests to accede to movement’s demands. Complex interactions between movements and states, as well as structural environments and external elements such as public opinion all affect the ability of movements to have political consequences (Amenta et al., 2010; Burstein and Linton, 2002; Giugni and Passy, 1998; Giugni et al., 1999; Goldstone, 2004).

These mediation approaches focus on understanding specifically how political opportunities matter for movements. Given that even in states with open, favourable political environments movements are not always successful in gaining influence, it is necessary to understand the interactions between states and movements and which specific political opportunities movements facilitate movement influence. The hypothesis is that the influence of social movements is ‘mediated’ through a range of individuals within state political and bureaucratic institutions as well as through the pressure of public opinion (Amenta et al., 2005, 2002, 1992; Giugni and Passy, 1998; Piven and Cloward, 1979). ‘For a movement to be influential, state actors need to see it as potentially facilitating or disrupting their own goals – augmenting or cementing new electoral coalitions, gaining in public opinion, increasing the support for the missions of governmental bureaus.’ (Amenta et al., 2010, p. 298).

While Amenta mentions, but doesn’t emphasise, the importance of public opinion, other scholars have argued for a key role for public opinion in this mediation process. Movements, it is argued, are more likely to be successful when they can effectively frame an issue to increase public support, or alternatively when there is little public interest in an issue. The underlying reasoning is the same; political representatives are responsive to majority opinion so will be influenced by strong public opinion, or alternatively if there is no strong feeling they may be able to accede to a movement’s demands with little political risk (Burstein, 1999; Giugni, 2007; Olzak and Soule, 2009).
The approach theorises that it is not simply the presence of political allies that is important for movements, rather the political context, and that the two way interactions between states and movements will affect the strategies and tactics of the movements, their framing processes and thus their likelihood of success. For example as mentioned, highly repressive states may either quell movement mobilization, or on the other hand stimulate a backlash and increase mobilization action. In terms of political influence, movements which can adapt and shape their strategies in interaction with the state to address the specific political context are more likely to be successful (Amenta and Young, 1999; Amenta et al., 2010, 2005). The model also further specifies relevant factors of the political context, which will be discussed in more detail below. Figure 1 below depicts the political mediation model of movement outcomes.

Figure 1: The political mediation approach to political influence

Social movements → policy change
(framing, tactics, resources)

Public opinion → Political and bureaucratic context
(decentralization, decolonization, allies, etc)

(Adapted from Giugni and Passy, 1998, p.n.p.)

As mentioned, this literature on how movements influence political outcomes has been developed in democratic contexts and explicitly relies on a political system with electoral accountability. Elected representatives are responsive to movements because they are concerned about their re-election, their reputation, and their ability to deliver on agendas that are publicly popular. Thus while they may not be directly responsive to every social movement or interest group, they will respond if there is widespread support from the public, or if the issue can support achievement of their political agendas.

How then can this literature be translated to non-democratic contexts such as Vietnam in which this kind of electoral accountability is weak? What does the
literature have to say about under what conditions movements can have political influence in a non-democratic polity such as Vietnam?

**Political influence in non-democracies**

As mentioned, there is far less research on movement in non-democratic environments. Those studies that have been done also primarily focus on protest movements, and particularly on ‘revolutionary’ movements that aim to overthrow repressive governments and build democracy (see for example O’Brien, 2008; Osa, 2003a; Trejo, 2012). These studies have largely focused on the issue of mobilization in order to explain the puzzle of how movements emerge in repressive states (Almeida, 2003; O’Brien, 2008; Osa, 2003a; Shigetomi and Makino, 2009; Trejo, 2012). There are very few studies specifically related to political influence, however the factors affecting recruitment and mobilization are a reasonable place to start when considering what factors might affect political influence in non-democracies, since this is also where the literature on political influence in democracies emerged (Amenta et al., 2010).

As there are fewer studies, and less scholarly debate about non-democratic contexts, the factors identified as important for movement mobilization have mostly been considered in isolation, as a ‘laundry list’ of factors. There have been few comparative studies or studies that are able to consider the complex interactions between movements and states and thus develop a framework similar to political mediation. However, it seems that the factors influencing mobilization, and thus potentially also political influence, are similar to those in democracies, with some additional relevant issues complicating the picture.

The first factor seen as crucial for mobilization of movements in non-democratic contexts is the level of repression. As already discussed, repressive environments are hypothesised to either prevent or accelerate movement mobilization, a puzzle that wasn’t particularly helpful. More recent studies in such repressive environments

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2 Note that scholarship on Latin American movements is an exception, focussing primarily on movements that resist economic conditions, neoliberalism and global economic arrangements (see for example Stahler-Sholk et al., 2008). In fact, most of the scholarship in democratic countries has also focussed on movements that primarily use protest as a tactic. Possibly because protest events are easy to measure and study and protesters easy to identify and study.
however have found that it is not the overall level of repression that affects movement mobilization, but changes in repression (Osa, 2003b).

Secondly, and in common with democratic environments, is the issue of allies and opponents in the political elite. It seems that even in repressive environments, if movements are able to exploit divisions within elites and/or build alliances with decision makers they can mobilize the necessary people and resources (Osa and Corduneanu-Husi, 2003; Osa, 2003b). Osa (2003a, pp. 14–15) hypothesises that a divided elite which cannot agree on how to deal with protests may moderate repressive actions and enable elite movement allies to gain influence. Alternatively, if the elite is cohesive, repressive action by the state may increase, access to media close and political opportunities for influence will be severely restricted.

Framing of problems and solutions and in particular ensuring resonant frames to gain the sympathy of a wide range of people to join or at least support movements, is also an important factor in non-democratic contexts. Several studies in China have found that movements are far more likely to be successful if they can develop frames that resonate with local concerns or cultural understandings (Hurst, 2008; Xie, 2011; Zuo and Benford, 1995).

Thus far, the relevant factors are not dissimilar to those articulated in the political mediation model. The non-democratic environment however seems to require some additional factors to be taken into account. The study by Osa and Corduneau-Husi, one of the few comparative studies that aims to explain episodes of mobilization and non-mobilization, finds that access to media/informational flow is an important factor enabling the mobilization of movements. In authoritarian contexts, the state often controls access to media. This comparative study found that in situations where movement actors were able to access some domestic or international media or where there was an active underground media were more able to spread their message and thus mobilize participants (Osa and Corduneanu-Husi, 2003; see also Zuo and Benford, 1995). This factor is rarely mentioned in the literature from democratic countries, probably because media access is taken for granted in democracies. Media is however important for influencing public opinion, so it is
implied in studies which consider the importance of public opinion (Burstein and Linton, 2002; Burstein, 2003, 1999).

A factor that seems more important in the non-democratic context than the democratic is the presence of strong, active social networks. The role of social networks in mobilization has been recognised (Diani and McAdam, 2003; Diani, 2003, 1995; McAdam, 2003, 1986; Passy, 2003), however surprisingly little emphasis has been placed on the importance of networks for political influence in democratic contexts. In authoritarian environments, informal social networks are essential as public organising and mobilizing is highly restricted (Zuo and Benford, 1995). In such environments, networks can be the mobilizing structures that provide channels for circulation of information, as well as access to material resources (money, printing, meeting space, etc) and participants to build movements. In addition, the collective identities that form and strengthen movements and framing processes can only operate through dense networks. Osa and Corduneau-Husi (2003), also confirm that almost all their cases of successful mobilization involved dense social networks in conjunction with other factors. I hypothesise that social networks will not only play a role in mobilization in non-democratic polities, but will also be an important dimension affecting political influence.

Finally, it seems that in a non-democratic environment a unique influential factor is the role of the resources and discourses coming from international actors such as donors and international social movements (Johnson, 2009; Patterson and Stephens, 2012). International donors, non government organisations and social movements increasingly try to influence political processes in developing and transitional countries, both through conditional financial resources as well as through promotion of specific discourses. For example, international movements of LGBT people, people with disabilities and people living with HIV all exist and aim to promote the rights and benefits for these disadvantaged groups globally. Donors, such as the World Bank and EU also often stress the importance of inclusion of civil society actors in policy processes as part of the ‘good governance’ agenda (Howell and Pearce, 2001; Van Rooy, 1998). In addition, donor funding and programming priorities often import specific discourses such as ‘human rights’ or ‘gender mainstreaming. There is some evidence that this donor/NGO influence can affect the
mobilization of movements as well as their strategies and actions to influence the state (Johnson, 2009; Patterson and Stephens, 2012). Again, it seems reasonable to assume that the involvement of international actors will be relevant for both mobilization of movements, and their ability to achieve political influence.

Thus, the current thinking on mobilization and influence of movements in non-democratic environments is that even in repressive environments, movements can still mobilize and achieve influence if challengers have dense, effective social networks. In addition, access to media for information dissemination, the cohesiveness of elites and the ability of movements to take advantage of divisions or develop allies within the regime, as well as their ability to articulate frames that resonate with the public and oppose the counter-framing of the regime, seem to be significant factors influencing success.

As is clear from the discussion above, the issue of public opinion is rarely encountered in studies of movements in non-democratic states. This could be because measures of public opinion are difficult to find in many of these environments, however I hypothesise that the issue of public opinion is absent from the theory because it is less relevant in environments that don’t have representative democracy with electoral accountability mechanisms. In non-democratic polities, even those that hold elections, accountability through electoral competition is less relevant. In such an environment, policy is primarily made in an elite driven, top-down fashion, rather than in response to public preferences (Giugni and Passy, 1998). While public legitimacy is important to leaders and elites, public opinion is less relevant. This would seem to suggest that opportunities, alliances and divisions among the elite will be more relevant than public opinion, suggesting that the political mediation model as articulated by Amenta et al (Amenta and Young, 1999; Amenta et al., 2005, 2002) which de-emphasises the issue of public opinion may well be a useful framework to determine political influence in Vietnam.

This brief review of the relevant literature indicates that the political mediation model developed based on studies of movements in democratic polities seems broadly applicable for consideration of how movement achieve political influence in non-democratic contexts, if certain other factors are also taken into account. It seems that
this model would need to incorporate some consideration of social networks as well as how international influence interacts with states and movements. Given this broad applicability, I now consider some of the details of the political context in Vietnam, as it is specified in the political mediation framework.

Understanding political opportunities in Vietnam

As mentioned in the discussion of the political mediation model, significant effort has been put into specifying what exactly is meant by political context, what are the particular structural issues and actor interactions that might be relevant for movement consequences. Armenta (1999; Amenta et al., 2005), building on the work of earlier scholars such as Tarrow (1998a) has developed the most comprehensive approach arguing that the level of democratization, capacity for repression, structural components such as decentralization and state capacity (bureaucratic capacity) are the key relevant elements. In this section I use this list to consider the political opportunities that are relevant for movements in Vietnam.

Vietnam is a stable one party state that is transforming, but not necessarily transitioning to democracy (London, 2009a). In 1986 the Communist Party of Vietnam formally initiated a process of developing a ‘market-oriented socialist economy under state guidance’ (Beresford, 2008, p. 221) known as đổi mới (renewal) to become what Jonathan London refers to as a ‘market-Leninist’ system (2009a, 2009b). Vietnam remains a Leninist one-party system, but elections are held at every level of government, and at least in theory any citizen can stand for election. The economic system is increasingly open, however state owned enterprises and central planning remains a key feature (Abuza, 2001; Beresford, 2008).

The first issue considered in the political mediation specification of political context is the level of democratization since movements are more likely to be able to have influence in more open, democratised political environments (Giugni, 2004, 1998; McAdam et al., 1996; Tarrow, 1998b). Amenta and colleagues (Amenta and Caren, 2003; Amenta and Halfmann, 2000; Amenta and Young, 1999; Amenta, 2002; Amenta et al., 2010, 2005) have further specified this issue of democratization in order to facilitate more fine-grained studies of movement influence in different democratic countries (or regions of countries) at different times. They define
democratization as ‘the lowering of legal restrictions on institutional political participation for everyday people’ (Amenta and Young, 1999, p. 159). Thus, in a highly democratized polity there is wide choice of representatives and freedom of assembly and protest, which facilitates both the mobilization of challengers as well as making it easier for challengers such as social movements to achieve political influence through electoral processes.

In this conceptualization, Vietnam would qualify as a very under-democratized polity, or even a highly authoritarian regime. Elections are held, but in reality there is little meaningful choice. Candidates at any level must be approved by the Fatherland Front, a powerful organisation of the Communist Party, and genuine opposition candidates would never be approved. In addition, political assembly or discussion of political issues is highly proscribed and penalties can be extremely harsh (Gainsborough, 2004). Public protests are possible, but only to the extent the government agrees with their content and conduct; for example, initial public protests against Chinese activity in the South China Sea were permitted in order to make a point to China, but they were quickly closed down in order not to offend this important neighbour and ally (Associated Press, 2013; BBC News, 2013; Fforde, 2012). Based on the literature we would hypothesise that mobilization should be extremely difficult in such an environment, and successful political influence would likely require very aggressive tactics (Amenta et al., 2005; Fforde, 2012).

The second key element concerns the capacity and willingness of both political and bureaucratic actors to accede to a movement’s demands and to repress social movements. In terms of repression, clearly a government with the capacity and willingness to repress political discussion, protest or other political activity will make it more difficult for movements to both mobilize and achieve outcomes (Amenta et al., 2010, 2005; McAdam, 1986; Ortiz, 2013). Evidence from both democratic and non-democratic countries indicates that in repressive environments movements may mobilize but will need to utilise very assertive, or even violent, tactics to achieve their goals (Amenta et al., 2005; Osa and Corduneanu-Husi, 2003; Zuo and Benford, 1995) In the Vietnamese context, the state is both willing and capable of repressing challengers and regularly does so. In the past few years academics, activists and bloggers who have called for changes to the one party system, greater protection of
human rights or religious freedom have been arrested and charged with sentences of up to twelve years (Hayton, 2010; Hunt, 2013).

However, if movements can gain support from political or bureaucratic allies; individuals within the political and bureaucratic institutions that see the movement’s interests aligning with their political goals or bureaucratic missions, then they can be influential even in repressive environments (Amenta et al., 2005; Osa and Corduneanu-Husi, 2003; Osa, 2003b). This component requires detailed study of the specific divisions, factions and positions of the political and bureaucratic actors relevant to the specific issue of concern (such as marriage and family issues). While Vietnam is a one party socialist state, this doesn’t necessarily determine the attitude of all party members or bureaucrats to a particular policy issue. It is not possible to hypothesise in a general manner about this element, it will require detailed empirical study.

The capacity of the state, both bureaucratic and political institutions, also seems to affect movement influence. In order to achieve collective benefits for a particular group, bureaucratic implementation of political decisions is necessary (McAdam et al., 2003; Tarrow, 1998b). Amenta argues that in a situation of low bureaucratic capacity, the inability of bureaucrats to effectively distribute gains won politically will mean low return on investment of protest effort and discourage challengers from continuing their efforts long term (Amenta et al., 2005; see also Meyer and Minkoff, 2004). In Vietnam, the state bureaucracy has relatively high capacity (for a country of its level of development). The Leninist system also means that the government is tightly connected with the bureaucracy and can ensure implementation if the political will is there (Gainsborough, 2010; London, 2009b). Thus, in the Vietnamese context, challengers are likely to be encouraged to gain and maintain political influence to influence policy decisions and to influence implementation to ensure collective benefits.

The structural elements of political institutions can also affect the ability of challengers to achieve political influence. Traditionally, more decentralised systems with separation of powers have been considered to be more conducive to challengers as they provided more points for access and influence (Kitschelt, 1986;
Kriesi, 1996; Shi and Cai, 2006). However Amenta and Young (1999) find in a study of the Townsend movement that systems such as in the USA with separation between the executive, legislative and judiciary can also provide many points of veto rather than influence. In addition, these decentralised federal systems can encourage fragmented, single issue challengers rather than large, powerful movements that can effectively achieve collective benefits.

Vietnam initially appears to be a highly centralised, one party state however a closer examination indicates that in fact political and economic power is relatively decentralised and becoming more so. Processes of administrative and economic reform mean the Party state is actively decentralising both political and economic decision making. Provincial authorities are increasingly able to retain investment they attract, giving them greater political clout at the national level (Gainsborough, 2003; Painter, 2014, 2008, 2005a, 2005b; Schmitz et al., 2012). In addition, there are factions within the Party that struggle for influence and control, as well as new powerful private interests created as a result of liberalisation and new market opportunities (Gainsborough, 2010, 2007; Thayer, 2010; Vuving, 2010).

Thus, based on social movement theory, we would expect that in Vietnam movements face a mixed picture in terms of state capacity. On the one hand, the state is highly repressive, particularly of more assertive tactics such as protest, thus discouraging movement mobilization and activities. However, there may be opportunities for movement activists to take advantage of divisions among the political factions within the Party, or to align with other authorities such as Provincial People’s Committee leaders, or powerful business interests. In addition, the political and bureaucratic institutions are relatively capable of both making and implementing decisions, which should tend to encourage movement attempts to gain longer term influence in the political process, since the payoff in terms of collective benefits is likely to be quite high.

Based on this quick examination of the political context the modern day Socialist Republic of Vietnam seems less authoritarian than its name may imply, and it is perhaps not totally surprising that some social movements have mobilized. This also would suggest that in order to understand whether and how these movements have
achieved political influence, my research will need to conduct detailed examination of the relevant political structures and actors, and how movement activists exploit opportunities, allies and vested interests.

The overall under-democratic, repressive environment though remains a problem for challengers and movements who wish to change the distributional benefits within this system. According to the political mediation approach, the context and interactions between the state and challengers will affect the tactics and strategies that are likely to be successful. In closed, repressive environments, governments will be resistant to ‘less assertive’ tactics such as letter writing or public meetings. Challengers will need to use highly assertive tactics in order to achieve any kind of political influence. However, such tactics are also heavily repressed – a puzzle for the theory.

How then have movements in Vietnam managed to mobilize and achieve influence? To consider this question I now turn to examination of a recent movement; the movement of LGBT people, and their campaign for legalisation of same sex marriage.

The movement of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual Vietnamese
The LGBT movement in Vietnam has emerged and gained prominence in an incredibly short period of time. In 2001 when I first arrived in Vietnam there was absolutely no acknowledgement of gay or lesbian (particularly lesbian) people and the concept of same-sex relationships or different sexual identities was treated as a ‘foreign social evil’. However, by 2008, the first NGO had formed to address gay and lesbian issues with support from small grants from international donors. Within a few months they had convened a small meeting (approximately 15 people) of gay and lesbian people to discuss common goals and how to address stigma and discrimination against LGBT people. Of course, there was activity within the LGBT community prior to 2008, but it was conducted in secret, using avatars and pseudonyms on webforums and social networking sites. It was the administrators of the main web portals that hosted discussion lists and forums that met in 2008 and formed the core of a movement (Tran, 2013).
By 2011, the movement had grown substantially in terms of members.\(^3\) Information, Communication, Sharing (ICS), the main social movement organisation, had by this time attracted funding from international donors and local corporate sponsors so as to be able to rent an office in HCMC, hire staff and organise activities. As of December 2013, ICS has seven full-time staff and two part-time staff conducting an extensive program of activities and events in support of the LGBT community in Vietnam. In addition, there are local groups in at least nine provinces in addition to Hanoi and HCMC.\(^4\) Recently, PFLAG (parents of lesbian and gay) groups have also formed in Hanoi and HCMC and are joining movement activities.

**Political influence of the LGBT movement**

Clearly then a movement of LGBT people has mobilized, but has it been able to have any political influence in the Vietnamese system?

How to demonstrate that it is movement activities that have influenced a policy change and achieved new advantages and/or inclusion, and not some other actor or political process is a key issue for social movement theory. Amenta argues that to ‘prove’ movement influence a researcher would need to ‘demonstrate that the challenger achieved one or more of the following: changed the plans and agendas of political leaders; had an impact on the content of proposals as devised by executives, legislators or administrators; or influenced disinterested representatives key to the passage of the legislation’ (2002, p. 75). Even based on the limited field data I have been able to collect thus far, the LGBT movement has undeniably had significant political influence, as discussed below.

The LGBT movement, through its community organising, public events and awareness raising and specifically through lobbying of both bureaucratic and political actors has been able to transform a regular, scheduled revision of the Law on

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\(^3\) The movement doesn’t keep a register or list of members, but participation in events and activities held by the movement can attract large numbers. For example, the first flash mob held simultaneously in Hanoi, Danang and HCMC in 2012 attracted over 1,200 people, presumably primarily gay and lesbian people and supporters (Leach, 2012). The recent ‘I Do’ campaign attracted 53,000 individuals to post a photo of themselves online to pledge their support for same-sex marriage and family, 2,000 of whom attended the ‘I Do’ festival in Hanoi in October 2013 (iSEE, 2013).

\(^4\) Representatives from groups in nine provinces, Hanoi and HCMC attended the annual National Conference of the LGBT Community in HCMC in 2013.
Marriage and Family into a national debate about whether Vietnam should be the first country in Asia to legalize same sex marriage. The movement was able to take advantage of this ‘policy window’ (Kingdon, 1984; Tarrow, 1993) to get their particular concerns related to same sex marriage and family relations onto the national agenda and stimulate a political and public discussion.5

In addition to this agenda setting, the movement has also managed to influence the content of the law, to deliver new collective benefits to some LGBT people. While they have not yet achieved all their goals of legalising same sex marriage and ensuring property rights, rights to adopt children, etc, they have achieve a significant policy change in the form of a decree decriminalising same-sex weddings. Decree 110/2013/ND-CP ‘various administrative sanctions contributing to strengthening order and discipline in the management of state judicial activities’ passed by the National Assembly on 26th September 2013 removes a fine that was previously levied on same sex weddings. In addition, the latest draft of the Law on Marriage and Family currently being discussed by the National Assembly, while it continues to define marriage as ‘between a man and a woman’ does treat cohabiting same sex couples exactly the same way as heterosexual couples, which extends some property rights protection, potentially an extremely significant benefit for homosexual couples.

Further to influence over the content, it seems that institutional actors have been influenced to change their thinking in response to movement actions. According to the key campaigner and the leader of the main SMO, consultations with Ministry of Justice and National Assembly members were initially characterised by high levels of ignorance and discrimination against LGBT people and little interest in the issue of same sex marriage (Le, 2013; Tran, 2013). However, by 2013 after activities by the movement, Dr Dinh Xuân Thảo, National Assembly delegate and Director of the Legislative Research Institute opened a consultation on LGBT rights in 2013 with the comments ‘numerous barriers and difficulties that LGBT face all come from society’s prejudice and discrimination. . . . The absence of legal policies regarding LGBT puts

5 As yet I don’t have sufficient, strong empirical evidence that the NA would not have considered same sex marriage anyway, I have only an interview from the main movement campaigner. However, I’m pretty sure such evidence exists and that when I interview government officials they will agree
them between a rock and a hard place when their basic individual rights are not protected.’ (Dinh, 2013).

The tactics used by the movement in the campaign for same-sex marriage have also managed to achieve greater recognition by senior decision makers of LGBT people as a specific community that deserves recognition and rights. As part of the campaign for same sex marriage, the leaders of the movement were able to convene meetings between representatives of the National Assembly and members of the LGBT community to discuss relevant issues. Two meetings were held, in Hanoi on 10 May 2013, and in HCMC on 27 July 2013 (Dinh, 2013; Luong, 2013a; Phap Luat (Law) TPHCM, 2013; Thanh Nien (youth) news, 2013). These meetings represented the first time National Assembly representatives had met with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people and family members, and represent a significant recognition of the legitimacy of these identities and the movement. In addition, the Ministry of Justice and members of the Marriage and Family Law drafting committee met with representatives of the LGBT Community on 17th September 2013 to discuss the final draft of the law before it was presented to the National Assembly (Luong, 2013b).

Thus it seems clear that the Vietnamese LGBT movement has achieved significant political influence, in a very short period of time. The extent this influence will deliver widespread collective benefits and continued inclusion and empowerment of LGBT remains to be seen, however at least for this particular campaign, a social movement in a repressive, under-democratised environment has achieved significant political influence.

While I do not yet have detailed data related to the framing and tactics of the movement, it is clear that they have not used assertive or aggressive tactics. The movement has primarily focussed on public education and raising awareness of the rights of LGBT people. For example they have educated media outlets to counter discriminatory coverage of LGBT issues, held public events and activities such as photo exhibitions and flash mobs, and conducted online campaigns in support of same sex marriage (see for example ICS, n.d.; iSEE, 2014). In order to influence bureaucrats and political decision makers, they have relied on providing quality research about LGBT people’s lives and difficulties and engaging with them in formal
consultations and conferences (Le, 2013; Tran, 2013). This would seem to be a contradiction of the hypothesis that repressive environments require assertive tactics.

**Conclusions**
This paper has considered the mobilization and impact of the LGBT movement in Vietnam through the lens of the political mediation model developed in the mainstream social movement literature. Although a relatively authoritarian society, Vietnam does offer some political opportunities that enable social movement mobilization, including increasingly decentralised institutional structures, a factionalised political elites and high state capacity to implement any policy gains that are made by movements. Thus, it is perhaps not completely surprising that movements of LGBT people, people living with HIV and people with disabilities have emerged and grown over the past ten years.

However, initial fieldwork indicates that the LGBT movement has achieved very significant political impact in a very short period of time, without resorting to violent or even assertive tactics. The movement has managed to get their issue of same sex marriage and protection of family rights onto the political agenda, to the extent that a routine revision of the Marriage and Family Law has been captured by the movement and become a nationwide debate on same sex marriage. The revised law has not yet been finalised and passed by the Assembly, but the debate has resulted in the decriminalisation of same sex marriage, and there is still a possibility of legalization in the new law (Tran, 2014). Social movement theory would not expect such significant political impact in this environment, particularly not in such a short period of time.

Even more puzzling is the evidence that these significant gains have been achieved using highly consultative and non-assertive tactics rather than the assertive, or even violent tactics hypothesised as necessary according to the literature. It could be that the political context of Vietnam should rather be considered as not repressive or authoritarian, and thus there is no requirement for assertive tactics. This would mean however modifying the definition of open, democratic environment such that it could
include a one party state without competitive elections and with a strong and active repressive machinery. This seems unjustified.

More likely, this puzzle is an artifact resulting from the types of empirical studies that inform the literature; i.e. movements that primarily rely on protest tactics in democratic states, and movements in non-democratic states that are ‘revolutionary’ and use protest and violence in order to overthrow the system. The LGBT movement in Vietnam is neither, it is a movement striving for a better deal for LGBT people within the existing system. As such, it wouldn’t make sense for the movement to employ aggressive tactics that would likely trigger repression and shut the movement out of the political system. More fruitful is to employ tactics of engagement with the state in order to take advantage of opportunities to influence policy change and ensure collective benefits and greater inclusion in policy processes.

However, this doesn’t necessarily mean that the political mediation model is invalid for consideration of non-revolutionary movements in non-democratic contexts. In fact, this case seems to highlight an internal inconsistency within the model, which simultaneously hypothesises that repression must necessitate aggressive tactics, and also that ‘challengers need to alter strategies and forms to address specific political contexts, such as the level of democratization in the policy, the partisan regime in power, and the development of bureaucratic authority surrounding the issue at hand’ (Amenta et al., 2010, p. 299). If we take seriously the importance of fine-grained, detailed analysis of political opportunities, then it is not possible or necessary to hypothesise which tactics might work in all democratic, or repressive environments, and for all issues. The model provides a useful specification of political context in order to enable detailed examination of the specific contexts not only within a country, but according to a particular issue of movement concern.

Thus, I argue that the political mediation model is flexible and detailed enough to be instructive for the study of movements in Vietnam. However, for application in this context, there is likely a need to supplement the model to take into account the additional factors identified in the literature on movements in non-democracies, in particular the role of international influence and of social networks. It isn’t yet clear how these factors and the political context interact to influence the likelihood that
movements can achieve political influence and change the distribution of collective benefits for their members. However, further empirical evidence from several movements in Vietnam will hopefully be instructive.
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