

11 State-Society Relations as Cooperative Partnership and the COVID-19 Response in Vietnam

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Abstract

The Vietnamese government used symbolic nationalism to gain public support for its containment strategies over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. This included a transparent communication strategy that portrayed citizens as part of the solution. This chapter argues that this approach is rooted in an emerging cooperative partnership between state and society in Vietnam, and that these comprehensive governance strategies have strengthened trust in the Communist Party of Vietnam, bolstering its legitimacy. However, this approach has also led to questions about the government's lack of transparency during past crises. If the public feels that the government is not protecting national interests against others, particularly China, this will reduce the gains in legitimacy made during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: state-society relations, Vietnam, public health, COVID-19, political legitimacy, symbolic nationalism

Introduction

Vietnam has been relatively successful in handling the COVID-19 crisis, with a low number of deaths (35 deaths until 7 March 2021) and a low number of cases (2512 cases in a country of 97 million people [World Health Organization 2021, 1]). Regional experts and health officials have praised the Vietnamese response to the COVID-19 pandemic as exemplary (Dabla-Norris, Gulde-Wolf,

and Painchaud 2020). This chapter gives an overview of the underlying factors producing this effective response: timeliness in implementation of policies, experience with previous infectious diseases, transparency, and commitment. It analyses the strategies which emerged from these factors, with a focus on transparent communication, a broad social mobilization based on national identity, and the central involvement of the Vietnamese labour movement. The relative success of these strategies provided legitimacy for the Vietnamese state.

This chapter argues that the strategies employed by the government are representative of an emerging cooperative partnership between state and society in Vietnam. This has allowed for the level of transparency and sense of accountability that have been essential for Vietnam's communication and mobilization strategy during the pandemic. However, some of the contradictions inherent in these strategies might threaten the political leverage gained.

Health Governance in Vietnam and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Several factors have contributed to Vietnam's success in combating the coronavirus (Bui et al. 2020). The first factor leading to this success has been the Vietnamese government's timeliness in taking action. The Vietnamese government often took action before the World Health Organization (WHO) issued related advice (Bui 2020). The virus was first detected in Vietnam on 23 January 2020 (Murray and Pham 2020). Then on 28 January the government developed an action plan based on a pandemic scenario (Bui 2020). On 1 February, while case numbers were in the single digits, the government cancelled all flights from China and stopped issuing tourist visas to citizens of affected countries (Murray and Pham 2020). Vietnamese schools were closed and did not reopen after the Lunar New Year holiday but were ordered to extend their holidays on a week-by-week basis (Murray and Pham 2020). Vietnam completely closed its borders to foreign nationals on 22 March (Elegant 2020).

In July 2020 the virus emerged again in the city of Danang following 99 days without confirmed community transmission. After the detection of two new cases, the authorities immediately imposed a lockdown in Danang, implementing social distancing measures and preparing to evacuate 80,000 domestic tourists (Peer 2020). These tourists were ordered to quarantine for fourteen days after returning home (Elegant 2020).

According to Murry and Pham (2020), the Vietnamese Communist Party implemented this rapid response to COVID-19 because it understands the

inner workings of policy- and decision-making in Beijing and distrusts official Chinese communication. Because of this distrust, the Vietnamese government sought its own information through informal channels to understand the situation in Wuhan (Thayer 2020; Stubbs and Satter 2020).

A second factor in Vietnam's effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been its previous experience of handling infectious diseases, including the SARS pandemic in 2003, as well as other infectious diseases such as dengue fever (Bui 2020). Measures that were applied in 2020 had already proven successful earlier (Bui 2020). Since the SARS pandemic in 2003, Vietnam has expanded its capacity to control emerging infectious diseases (Le S.M. 2020). This meant that, when confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic at the start of 2020, the authorities immediately had effective mass testing, contact tracing, and quarantine measures available (Duong, Le, and Bui 2000).

A third factor in Vietnam's successful handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the transparency of government actions. Close and effective coordination and communication among different levels of government ensured that information given out to the public was accurate throughout the initial stages of the outbreak (Bui 2020). This affected public perceptions of how serious the disease was. The way in which the government raised awareness of COVID-19 early on was essential to ensure public compliance and mobilization (Bui et al. 2020, 2). Vietnam suffers from limited resources and fragile health infrastructure. The healthcare system could therefore have been overburdened if a high number of people had been infected. This meant that, particularly during the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis, there was an urgent need for the government to prioritize containment of the virus.

Vietnam's response has been described as aggressive and rooted in authoritarianism (Bui 2020). Nevertheless, its success in minimizing community spread and infection numbers also shows that this level of commitment has been effective in containing the pandemic (Duong, Le, and Bui 2000). Policies have often been harsh in implementation. The government mobilized the military and retired medical personnel to assist the implementation of its response strategy. The authorities issued strict quarantine measures that relied on military supervision. The Vietnamese leadership deemed the use of the military as essential for 'coordinating food, transport and accommodation required to quarantine thousands of people' (Bui 2020). The government also mobilized all sectors of the economy to produce equipment to help fight the virus. These measures have been justified as a means for wiping out the virus entirely (Peer 2020).

Strategies of Grassroots Mobilization in Vietnam

Communication Strategies

The Vietnamese government has proven creative and media savvy in communicating with the public. It framed the fight against the virus using the 'language of war' (Bui 2020). In a clear reference to the 1968 Tet offensive that took place during the war between Vietnam and the US (1955-1975),¹ Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc called the fight against COVID-19 the 'Spring General Offensive of 2020' (Murray and Pham 2020). This wartime language was used with the aim of mobilizing all of Vietnam's citizens as active participants against COVID-19 (Truong 2020b).

Information has been communicated through an array of channels, including the use of social media platforms, as well as messages sent directly to people's mobile phones. Newspapers reported daily case numbers, COVID-19 deaths (or the absence of deaths until July), and the number of Vietnamese repatriated from abroad (La et al. 2020, 12-14; Truong 2020b). When the virus re-emerged in the city of Danang in late July, the state again used the same methods of communication to prevent a public backlash against the strict containment measures. The Vietnamese state presented itself as a competent and caring actor that was promoting the common good. This has helped drive up support for the Vietnamese government's message: that the people of Vietnam should feel national pride in the successful pandemic response, and that success has been a result of cooperative efforts. A study from 30 March 2020 showed that 62% of the survey respondents saw the government's response as adequate, which was the highest percentage in 45 countries assessed. Only 13% of respondents thought that the Vietnamese government should do more and 12% thought that the government had overreacted (Dölitzsch 2020). International recognition of Vietnam, as a model for low-income countries in how to handle the pandemic, has further strengthened this message (Dabla-Norris, Gulde-Wolf, and Painchaud 2020).

The production of coronavirus messaging also involved the creative sector. In late February, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health funded and released a music video by the singer Khac Hun on YouTube called 'Jealous Coronavirus' (*Ghen Cô Vy*) that promoted basic preventive measures

1 We are aware that the term used in academic literature is 'Vietnam War'. However, the use of this term reflects a US-centric narrative. This paper is written from a Vietnamese perspective, and in the spirit of decolonising academia we decided to use the above description and will continue to use 'Vietnam-US War'.

(Saigoneer 2020). The video portrayed the coronavirus as a common enemy against which the Vietnamese nation and every citizen should mobilize. This video was very popular, including outside of Vietnam. It was spread by global media outlets such as HBO and inspired a viral TikTok dance trend that further engaged the public (La et al. 2020, 12-14; Last Week Tonight with John Oliver 2020).

While this music video used cartoon animation, other imagery in the public sphere primarily used a form of symbolic nationalism. The use of historic imagery reminiscent of war propaganda on billboards nationwide is a staple of political communication in Vietnam, reminding the public of a shared history and identity (Humphrey 2020; Kirubakaran 2020; Nguyen M. 2020).

Due to this direct, open, and clear messaging strategy from the state, the pandemic has been successfully framed as a national emergency which demands sacrifices and the participation of every citizen. This strategy has stressed national unity and the role of each individual, and it has thus framed every citizen as part of the crisis management. In this way the COVID-19 response has essentially been a campaign of national pride in accordance with a longer tradition of the 'war against imperialism' that extends back to the Vietnam-US War as well as the fight against French colonial rule (Truong 2020b; Hartley 2021, 159). War metaphors are a common rhetorical tool in public discourse. They relate to an emotional experience and an adversarial threat which needs to be defeated as a common enemy. These metaphors are easy to understand and can be very useful in mobilization. However, they might create adversarial relations and reduce moral complexities (Flusberg et al. 2018, 25). The war metaphors in the Vietnamese public discourse on COVID-19 relate back to the Vietnam-US War, and the sacrifices demanded from Vietnamese citizens during that time. It establishes an emotional continuity. The focus is on the need for sacrifices and behavioural changes from everyone as well as the acceptance of state control to counter the threat. This was successful in mobilizing large parts of the population to follow rules and accept quarantine measures and limits to free movement. However, it might also paint all those who are less willing to make sacrifices, including those who are infected, as threatening the success. It might also push a social narrative in which neighbours police each other.

Social Participation and Communication

The Vietnamese government portrayed every citizen as an integral part of the national solution to the COVID-19 pandemic. Its open manner of

communication has helped increase the willingness of the public to comply with regulations, and there has been a high acceptance of measures such as the quarantining of people and contact tracing (La et al. 2020, 18-20; Tran, DiGregorio, and Nixon 2020). In addition, masks were already widely used in urban spaces because of concerns about air quality (Onishi 2020; Duong M.C. 2020). As a result, instructions to wear masks to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 have met with little resistance (Le S.M. 2020). The government published lists of locations with contact tracing dates, urging anyone who visited these spots in the given timeframe to report to health officials, and social pressure reportedly also increased the willingness of the public to be named as contacts by family members or friends (Bui 2020; Tran, DiGregorio, and Nixon 2020). For example, in a much-reported case in May 2020, a man was reprimanded by his aunt after illegally crossing the border from Cambodia into Tay Ninh province to visit his family. Thereupon, he presented himself to the nearest police station for quarantining (Le N. 2020).

The Vietnamese public's solidarity in tackling the pandemic can also be seen in several grassroots initiatives. In one widely publicized initiative, a Ho Chi Minh City entrepreneur set up rice ATMs to dispense rice to low-income families. These ATMs found official support and can now be found nationwide (Duong and Yen 2020). This cooperation between state and citizens for the public interest was central in official communication, as it exemplified the official message of citizens contributing to the state's efforts (La et al. 2020). The enforcement of quarantine measures has also been widely supported by the public. Social media, newspapers, photos, and paintings, have presented positive narratives about quarantine experiences, supporting the government's strategy (Nhat Minh 2020; MacDonald 2020; Ng 2020; Snell 2020; La et al. 2020, 12-14). For example, Gavin Wheeldon, a British citizen living in Vietnam, shared his positive experience of being quarantined in a government facility on Facebook and wrote an online article (Wheeldon 2020). His story was then picked up by the Vietnamese press and he was interviewed for a documentary on national television (Talk VietNam 2020). This episode showcases how the Vietnamese government has actively presented a positive narrative regarding its response in its communication to the public during the pandemic.

However, social pressure and uncertainties during the pandemic can also have significant side-effects. In early March, a social media influencer and daughter of a wealthy Vietnamese family in Hanoi returned from traveling in Europe and subsequently infected numerous people. The government locked down her neighbourhood, shared private information, and invited the press to a live-stream meeting concerning the woman's health. The

government used the case to make an example of her. After people figured out her identity, she was harassed on social media, particularly on Instagram. People circulated rumours about her being the cause of a new wave of infections, as the first large outbreak in Vietnam in almost a month directly followed her arrival (Max 2020). The government has leveraged this case to emphasize a moral responsibility towards the community, and those defying this morality are perceived by the public in a negative light (La et al. 2020, 12-14). Referring back to the martial language used by the administration, the framing of the pandemic using wartime language thus turns the COVID-19 pandemic into an existential struggle, which can, in turn, heighten anxieties and inspire self-righteous bullying and mobbing (Flusberg et al. 2018, 21-22).

However, public support went beyond observing preventive measures and moral responsibility, as demonstrated by the public interest in the case of a British pilot working for Vietnam Airlines. For months, national media reported on his critical condition almost daily, as many feared he would be the first COVID-19 death in Vietnam. Calls by the local administration for lung donors were answered with public support. The pilot's recovery has been one of the main focus points in the positive framing of the Vietnamese fight against COVID-19. The media attention given here shows the level of community solidarity and moral responsibility the government is trying to convey to the public in its communication during the pandemic. To uphold public morale the government aimed to maintain zero COVID-19 deaths at that time (Vietnam Insider 2020).

However, this particular case also showcases a level of accountability towards the international community (Barnes and Bui 2020). In this narrative, Vietnam takes up the role of saving a European national from death, as though they were a Vietnamese citizen (Truong 2020b). This success story was, in turn, contrasted in the media with the relative failure of many Western countries to effectively respond to the pandemic (Truong 2020b). Set against these Western failings, the effective and level-minded response at home is then emphasized as a point of national pride.

Labour Activism

Beyond this broad social mobilization, Vietnam was also the arena for narrower and more specific social activism advancing the pandemic response, particularly in the field of labour rights and protections. Generally, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL), Vietnam's workers' union, lobbies for national-level changes to improve working conditions. Workers participate in self-organized struggles, so-called wildcat strike

actions,² to deal with local issues of wages and working conditions. This creates a dual structure that has frequently proven to be effective (Däubler 2018, 153). Local government officials often support local worker strikes and help negotiate solutions (Sui and Chan 2015; Kerkvliet 2011; Buckley 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, labour activists have been demanding accountability from the government and the corporate sector in accordance with the idea of this cooperative partnership.

This well-established system has helped mitigate the economic and health risks for Vietnamese workers. The VGCL has followed an educative approach, disseminating information on prevention and distributing masks and hand sanitizers. It has also used a policy approach to lobby the government to find solutions to lessen the economic pressure on workers. At the time of writing, the global economy remained in a recession, and Vietnam's GDP growth was lower than previously predicted, making this kind of economic support increasingly important (Buckley 2020).

Turning specifically to the issue of labour activism, workers held wildcat strikes to demand personal protective equipment (PPE) and other measures to prevent the spread of the virus in factories. Local union officials organized information events with medical experts at companies. These actions by workers have forced companies to implement at least some safety measures at the local level (Buckley 2020). For example, in the case of the Pinetree garment factory, workers stayed home at the end of January 2020 after two employees fainted due to lack of oxygen. Although they turned out to not have been infected with COVID-19, the workers in the factory demanded that precautionary health measures be implemented in accordance with existing regulations. The company agreed to provide free masks, temperature checks, and disinfectant to over a thousand employees (LDO 2020b; Buckley 2020).

Wildcat strikes have also helped prevent companies from passing the economic costs of COVID-19 onto their workers. Many companies, negatively impacted by the economic downturn, have attempted to reduce their wage burden by refusing to pay their workers or by putting them on furlough. Strikes carried out with the support of local state officials have helped to ensure that these companies continue to pay employees (Buckley 2020). For example, the Seething shoe factory in Haiphong announced at the end of May 2020 that it would not pay outstanding bonuses, overtime payments,

2 As Pham (2017) states: 'a legal strike has to fulfil two criteria: firstly, it can only take place after a procedure stipulated by the law which rules out rights-based strikes; and secondly, it has to be led by a trade union. However, all strike incidents in Vietnam appear to be spontaneous and unorganized, and thus are illegal and referred to as wildcat strikes.'

and social insurance contributions due to a lack of money. Consequently, on 22 and 23 May 2020, a thousand workers went on strike. The company then stated that they would pay the money in instalments but would also put a number of workers on leave without pay. This led to more protests on 25 May, leading to an intervention by authorities who declared that the company was breaking legal regulations and would have to continue paying wages to its workers (LDO 2020a; Buckley 2020).

However, this was not a national standard. In other factories, workers still lost their jobs, either temporarily or permanently. These newly unemployed are now dependent on their social networks and on state assistance for financial support (Buckley 2020). Despite the limits of labour activism, local workers and the VGCL have played an important role in helping confront the pandemic at different levels, both for local implementation and enforcement as well as for policy making (Buckley 2020). Once again, cooperative partnership strategies have been adopted, this time by workers demanding accountability. In fact, by supporting these workers, local state institutions seem to have gained a higher level of public support during the pandemic (Hartley 2021, 160-161).

State Legitimacy and Emerging Contradictions

The Vietnamese government has successfully embedded COVID-19 in a historical narrative that depicts the 'fight' of the Vietnamese people against external threats. This creates a sense of historic continuity and can potentially provide further legitimacy for the current political system. Legitimacy here can be understood as a 'quality of a rule which derives from a perception on the part of those to whom it is addressed that it has come into being in accordance with right process' (Franck 1988, 706). Legitimacy leads to the acceptance of government rule as rightful, in this case based on merit, and thus fosters public support. In the narrative about COVID-19 that the government has presented, Vietnam has not only successfully managed the pandemic without outside help, but has painted itself as exemplary, offering help to others. Its effective and prudent response has been made into a focal point for national pride. At the same time, the COVID-19 response has revealed a number of internal contradictions.

Nationalism

The Vietnamese government's narrative has focused on COVID-19 entering from abroad. Due to the complicated historic relations with China (Strangio

2020b, 64-84), the Vietnamese public has been particularly critical of the government's response towards China and Chinese nationals. Border-crossings were seen in public discourse as responsible for COVID-19 re-entering Vietnam several times, which led to public outrage (La et al. 2020, 12-14; Bohane 2020). In February, factory workers based near the border with China felt that Chinese nationals returning from their hometowns after the Chinese New Year celebrations were not quarantining and being tested properly. Workers went on strike to protest this perceived lack of enforcement of COVID-19 regulations by local officials (Buckley 2020). When the number of infections rose sharply in late July, the public was once again quick to blame China. Some official sources echoed the public in blaming Chinese migrants for the rising infections, while other sources did not (Elegant 2020). However, if the Vietnamese public feels that the government is not effectively protecting Vietnamese interests against China, this will reduce the gains in legitimacy that the Vietnamese government has made during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participation and Transparency

The government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has increased public cooperation by including citizens in its efforts. However, public space to challenge the state has not increased, and it has maintained an iron grip on public discourse. In recent years, the Vietnamese government has been using repressive means to stabilize the country (Kerkvliet 2014). During the pandemic, this crackdown on dissidents has continued (HRW 2020; Strangio 2020a). There was a particularly intensive crackdown as the party prepared for the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in January 2021 (The Straits Times 2021).

Vietnam's perceived success in containing the virus has proven the capacity and competency of the Party to effectively address public health crises. However, it also produces questions about the government's lack of transparency during past crises (Truong 2020a). Therefore, how the government deals with political dissent raises questions about its long-term commitment to more open and transparent state communication, which might eventually undermine state legitimacy.

Economic Question Marks

While the Vietnamese government has so far been able to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, its economic recovery is being affected by the situation among its main trading partners such as the United States, Japan, and China

(World Bank 2020, 23). A major recession has so far been prevented, and at the end of 2020 the government still maintained that Vietnam's GDP had grown by 2.91% that year (Nguyen P. 2020). The State Bank of Vietnam expected a full recovery of the economy in 2021, and it predicted a GDP growth of 6.5% (Anh Phuong 2020). However, unemployment and underemployment remain severe problems (Nguyen et al. 2020). By September 2020, 31.8 million people, or more than a third of the Vietnamese population, had been negatively affected by the pandemic (GSO 2020). In order to support its citizens, the Vietnamese government announced a US\$2.6 billion support package (Buckley 2020). At the time of writing, it still remained to be seen how this support package would be used.

Economic success and growing prosperity are important pillars of the Vietnamese government's merit-based legitimacy. A long-term economic downturn might have political repercussions for the party-state. If Vietnam experiences economic uncertainties in the wake of the health crisis, this might undo the gains in political legitimacy the government has achieved as a result of its effective response to COVID-19.

Conclusion

After managing the first year of COVID-19 in the country, Vietnam now faces an uncertain future.³ Domestically, the general consensus is that the low number of cases and fast return to normal everyday life have vindicated Vietnam's strategy. This chapter has argued that transparent communication and social mobilization have been the cornerstones of this successful strategy. The Vietnamese response to the pandemic has been based on a cooperative partnership formed between the state and its citizens (Le and Nicolaisen 2021).

Globally, Vietnam's strict national response has frequently been seen to be rooted in authoritarianism. However, the cooperative relationship between the government and the public has allowed the level of transparency necessary for Vietnam to communicate effectively during the pandemic while still creating a sense of accountability and responsiveness (Koh 2006). In the everyday political reality of Vietnam, these processes often produce localized conflicts (Le and Nicolaisen 2021). Nevertheless, during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the Vietnamese state and society have been able to

3 Following April 2021, Vietnam faced another local outbreak with cases in 39 provinces. By 9 June 2021 this outbreak was responsible for 6,328 cases and 20 deaths. Vietnam is also lagging in its vaccination efforts.

transcend these conflicts by emphasizing a shared Vietnamese struggle, identity, and shared responsibility – all themes that the government utilized in its communication to induce cooperation among citizens.

Once the pandemic ends, a sudden reversal in the transparency of this communication might lead to a loss of the legitimacy built during the pandemic. Economic uncertainties in the coming months might also threaten the gains made in political legitimacy. Additionally, the party-state will need to balance its relations with China with its nationalist narrative. Therefore, to keep the positive momentum going, the Vietnamese government needs to reduce the risk of another local outbreak, find ways to assist citizens suffering economically, and balance the public demand for transparency and national strength with its desire for self-preservation.

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