

Will the pandemic motivate the Vietnamese government to become more transparent?

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Being dubbed as an authoritarian government (The Economist, 2019), Vietnam is under suspicion of hiding the real data about COVID-19 (Dan Tri, 2020). The doubt is based on the monopoly of the Communist Party in controlling the data, which is similar to China (BBC, 2020). Despite this conspiracy, Vietnam's success is widely recognised for its handling of the pandemic by the international community (IMF, 2020). The change in the attitude of the Vietnamese Communist Party regarding information dissemination and communication sparks a hope that transparency will be embraced by Vietnam. (Hutt, 2020; Truong, 2020).

The transparency of Vietnam amid Covid-19

Due to shared borders with China, the Vietnamese government perceived COVID-19 as a severe threat and conducted serious preventive measures (La et al., 2020), such as travels between the two countries (Tuoi Tre, 2020). Only a week after this move, the Ministry of Health (MoH) launched the specific website on COVID19: <http://ncov.moh.gov.vn> and the NCOVI and Vietnam Health apps "to provide updated information about the epidemic, including testing data, advice on precautionary measures and live chat for questions related to COVID-19" (La et al., 2020). Mr Cuong,

an official of MoH, affirms that the Ministry has worked closely with the World Health Organisation and Public health emergency operations centres (Zing News, 2020). Furthermore, the Vietnamese authority chose to filter instead of restricting the flow of information.

On the one hand, they distribute verified information. MoH has actively collected and published scientific analysis from public health specialists (Nguyen & Malesky, 2020). The National Television Channel conducted interviews with various experts to raise public awareness about the pandemic. The governmental media channels have been mobilised to reported not only updated cases but also the relevant information of the infected cases to inform affected people to follow the further instruction (La et al., 2020). They also actively verify credible news and publicly punish fake news distributors. Along with other preventive measures, the government published decree No. 15/2020/NĐ-CP about the Regulations on Administrative fines in terms of Information and Communications Technology, which is the upgraded version of the decree No. 174/2013/NĐ-CP, to expand the target of the decree to the users of social media. Until March, police departments in different levels announced that more than 146 social media users had been charged administrative fines, which includes celebrities, under this decree (Tuoi Tre, 2020). In April, they warned that fake news distributors could face criminal convictions (MoH, 2020).

Discussions about the pandemic situation are approved without severe censorship and interference by the government. In particular, some observers concluded that the discussions about the disease on the internet are not restricted, and the activists have not expressed any concern about “widespread fatalities or cover-ups” (Nguyen & Malesky, 2020; Trien & Huu, 2020).

The reason behind the new approach

For an authoritarian system like Vietnam, these transparent moves should be perceived as the result of accumulated experiences and collective decisions. There are three reasons to explain this new approach.

First, Vietnam learnt from the lessons of the SARS 2003 epidemic and H5N1 flu in 2008. They were able to establish a professional response mechanism to deal with the public health crisis (La et al., 2020). This is a technical foundation to work transparently.

Second, Vietnam effectively took the advantage of a being lucky because the virus did not strike there first. It saw the flaws in the secretive approach of China (Trien & Huu, 2020), hence, avoiding that mistake. Besides, the information about the new virus was regularly updated by media since 9th January (La et al., 2020). The Vietnamese and the State were equipped with the basic knowledge in containing the virus. Consequently, Vietnam was in a better position to make more transparent decisions.

Thirdly, the Communist Party needs to improve its legitimacy to rule the country as it continuously faces challenges (Hutt, 2020). Handling the pandemic is the vital mission to prove the ruling position of the Party. The transparency of information would help improve the efficiency of governance and gain more public trusts. Hence, the Party must prioritise the transparency to survive this test, especially in stabilizing its fast-growing economy.

Expectation from this positive signal

To date, the Vietnamese government has been successful since they chose transparency. Perhaps people are expecting more robust reforms. We should understand that the transparent approach is the tactic to deal with the crisis rather than a systematic change. The effectiveness of transparency in crisis management can be a good practice. For the Communist Party, its position was not challenged because of this. Pessimists can conclude this short-term change will prolong the Party's dominant position in the political system. The optimists can believe that this good practice could promote Vietnamese elites to act more transparently in future. Will the pandemic motivate the Vietnamese government to become more transparent? It is still immature to jump in any conclusion.

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