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Phạm Quỳnh Phương

► **To cite this version:**

Phạm Quỳnh Phương. Covid-19 in Vietnam: Social Engagement, Trust Creation and Political Legitimacy. 2020. halshs-03151081

**HAL Id: halshs-03151081**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03151081>**

Submitted on 2 Mar 2021

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# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



## COVID-19 IN VIETNAM: SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT, TRUST CREATION AND POLITICAL LEGITIMACY

Short description of the document's subject

Phạm Quỳnh Phương<sup>1</sup>, December 2020

### INTRODUCTION

#### Social engagement

In 2020, Vietnam achieved remarkable success in containing and suppressing the coronavirus pandemic. The achievement is explained by political factors, including strong, timely and transparent governance, effective communication, close cooperation between central and local government agencies and between government and citizens. It also resulted from the adoption of effective pandemic control methods, including a proactive containment strategy of testing, tracing and quarantining, targeted isolation and social distancing. Unlike other repressive contexts where compliance is achieved through coercion, the obedience of Vietnamese people in this epidemic was accompanied by a high level of trust in the government – which has rarely been seen in recent years and surprised many of its citizens.

How was this trust created? It stemmed partly from a government strategy of social engagement, and partly from the people's cooperative response rooted in Vietnamese culture and Vietnam's contemporary history. This trust is unlikely to endure after the crisis, yet the Covid-19 pandemic has turned out to be a significant opportunity for the government to strengthen its legitimacy among the population.

### EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

#### Suspended distrust

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, distrust of the government was a prominent feature of Vietnamese social life. Discontent about land disputes, the polluted environment, corruption, and the state's weakness in dealing with China over disputed islands caused deep distrust among the people leading to "public political criticism"<sup>2</sup> and a good deal of private grumbling. Besides direct

<sup>1</sup> Phạm Quỳnh Phương, Institute of Culture Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

<sup>2</sup> Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, *Speaking Out in Vietnam. Public Political Criticism in a Communist Party-Ruled Nation*. Cornell University Press, 2019.

confrontation with the state by dissident groups, defaming the state had become daily practice for ordinary people.

Then the pandemic took place and brought about new feelings toward the state. In social media and everyday chat, people shared their admiration and gratitude towards the government. Without a word of complaint, they obeyed directives on wearing masks, social distancing, closing shops and other drastic measures that directly affected their finances. There was some discussion about the way contact-tracing and surveillance was carried out, yet the government's containment methods enjoyed wide public acceptance and people continued observing safe practices even after the epidemic was contained. Social media was filled with praise and pride, with such emotions as "we are grateful to the Party and government", "I love my country", "I'm so proud of you, Vietnam", "our government is so good", "our country is so humane".

Citizens did more than just voice their support, moreover. Government agencies' calls for financial contributions received an enthusiastic response. Millions of people nationwide voluntarily sent money to help the government fight the epidemic. Donations via text messages through the switchboard 1407 managed by the Fatherland Front received over 158 billion VND (nearly 7 million USD) from March 19 to June 18. Private donors set up "rice ATMs", "mask ATMs", and "zero-VND supermarkets" to support the programme "All people support Covid-19 epidemic prevention", promoted by the Ministry of Information and Communications and the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

This response was the outcome of a state strategy developed on the basis of the government's awareness of the need to engage the population in the fight against the pandemic. It was also the outcome of people's engagement with government efforts, which stemmed from their experience and fear of SARS, Avian Flu and other recent epidemics. During those crises too, the government had succeeded in containing and suppressing the disease.

### **Trust creation strategies**

From the start of the pandemic, the government set out on a deliberate policy of trust creation among the population. This relied on a number of strategies.

#### *Strategy of decision-making transparency*

Given officials' reputation in normal times as secretive and corrupt, the government's transparency in fighting the coronavirus surprised foreign observers as well as Vietnamese. From the start of the crisis, government decisions about the pandemic were communicated to the public. Daily televised press briefings by ministers flanked by medical experts, text messages regularly sent to people's phones with news updates, health warnings sent by the Ministry of Health, and even by the Prime Minister himself, created an atmosphere of transparency that increased people's trust. People noticed that the information sent was reliable, the news received from official outlets was true. Even the pro-democracy bloggers who often criticise the government for their cover-ups recognized its openness and cooperation with citizens during the crisis.

Underpinning this trust was the government's effective pandemic containment strategy. Its swift and decisive response in the early stages of the pandemic gained respect from Vietnamese who understand very well the limitations of their country's medical system. Vietnam's experience in previous public health crises, notably during the SARS outbreak in 2003 when Vietnam was the first country to contain the disease, also helped people have confidence in the authorities and follow their directives.

#### *Leadership strategy*

Trust in the government also stemmed from admiration for Deputy Prime Minister Vũ Đức Đam, assigned as the head of the National Steering Committee for Disease Control and Prevention of COVID-19. A comparatively younger politician (aged 57) with good foreign language skills due to his training in Europe, he presents as a qualified, informal, sport-loving man who embodies Vietnamese hopes for a new generation of leaders. Mr Đam has no medical expertise, but is well-respected and appears as a responsible technocrat. He was visibly backed by scientific experts. People believed that Mr Đam was telling the truth and was leading with competence.

#### *Economic strategy*

Right from the start of the outbreak, the government sent a clear message about its willingness to make economic trade-offs. The Prime Minister repeatedly stated in the media: "We are willing to

sacrifice short-term economic interests to better protect people's health and lives". The very early decision to close the border with China was a sign of the seriousness of this intention. This message touched people's hearts, given Vietnam's status as a developing country which sets GDP targets above all else. For many years, the government has prioritised rapid development, strong growth, industrialisation and modernisation, with large revenues from tourism. Its willingness to give up these development strategies and economic benefits to safeguard the people's health contributed to the creation of trust.

The government compounded this policy with an expensive policy of care for its citizens affected by the pandemic. Even as it cancelled commercial flights from overseas, it swiftly organized flights to pick up Vietnamese abroad who wished to return home. Food and accommodation was provided free of charge for those placed in 14-day quarantine in dedicated facilities, including people classified as F0 (someone infected with the virus), F1 (direct contact of someone infected) and F2 (second degree contact). Free testing and treatment was offered to all citizens hospitalised with the virus. To the public, these policies came across as very humane. The government's strategy was to implement a policy of free services in relation to the epidemic, before calling for financial support to fight the epidemic. In advance of such calls, the policy of generating public gratitude was so successful that many people did not only actively support the programme "All people support Covid-19 epidemic prevention" but also proposed that fees should be charged for such services.

#### *Communications strategy*

The government used communication with great effectiveness to gain people's trust. This rendered decision-making as transparent as possible, as noted above. It also called on reserves of nationalism and war discourse, mobilized now to touch public sentiment. A millennial history of struggle against foreign aggression was evoked in discourses of "the nation", "solidarity", "sacrifice", "heroes" and "the enemy". Posters drew on the traditional iconography of official propaganda. Before the national lockdown directive issued by the Prime Minister, on the afternoon of 30 March the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Nguyen Phu Trong, issued the following call: "For the sake of the whole nation of Vietnam, let us work together, unanimously surmounting all difficulties and challenges to overcome the Covid-19 pandemic". This call reminded Vietnamese of their wartime past, when the government needed the people's cooperation to survive and win the war.

'Putting people first' and 'no one is left behind' became powerful messages in the battle against Covid-19. People were touched by the widely broadcast images of exhausted doctors who are quarantined in the hospitals, heroic young soldiers who become cooks for hundreds of quarantine inmates, porters of supplies for those placed in isolation, sleeping on the ground while giving their beds to others.

#### *Cultural strategy*

The Vietnamese government made optimal use of the communitarian characteristics of Vietnamese culture. As a traditional society based on small-scale agriculture, cooperation has long been key to people's existence and the country's economic and social systems. Community values are treasured, sentiment is appreciated, and caring and gratitude are standard behaviour, perhaps not always in normal daily life, but certainly in contexts of crisis. In the context of Covid-19, trust in the government and a sense of personal responsibility in the fight against the coronavirus (wearing masks, staying at home in isolation, accepting quarantine, declaring private information, etc.) were presented to individuals as expressions of their responsibility to the community in general, from which their families would also benefit. The Vietnamese saying "When a horse is sick, the whole stable refuses grass" was thus brought into play. This emotion-centred strategy shows how the government understood the importance of cultural values and communitarian factors as it sought to build trust.

#### *Disillusionment with the West*

Disappointment and disillusionment with Western democracy contributed to people's trust in the government. Before Covid-19, Western values and Western countries were seen as the definitive path to development and modernity. The pandemic revealed weak governance in the West and a dark side to democracy. State-controlled television broadcasts about the situation in the US and Europe and newspaper articles such as "0 new cases in Vietnam, over 50,000 deaths in the US" fed

talk that communist rule might be not so bad after all.<sup>3</sup> Comparing those images to the well-handled situation at home, Vietnamese started to talk about an upside to one-party rule.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Implications: legitimacy at moments of crisis

Governments around the world, even unpopular ones, entered the pandemic enjoying solid support from populations who hoped they would act to protect them. Depending on the perceived effectiveness of their fight against Covid-19, governments lost or kept that support. In Vietnam too, performance was, ultimately, the main criterion.

Other interpretations may be placed on the compliance of Vietnam's population with its government during the pandemic. A top-down view would suggest that obedience is understandable given the repressive nature of Vietnam's governance. A bottom-up perspective might see the population's obedience as a smart way to deal with crises. Vietnamese have experienced different types of danger in the past, much of it emanating from China, including threats to health like SARS. This certainly helped them understand the government's proactive strategy.

History also shows that at moments of crisis (war, famine, epidemic, etc), Vietnam's government skilfully mobilized people to achieve a common goal. It successfully consolidated support, not only using coercion, but also by leveraging common values embedded in Vietnamese traditional culture. And thus, the regime's legitimacy is often consolidated by crises. There is no doubt that the pandemic has stoked the spirit of nationalism in Vietnam and that the main beneficiary of this is the government. Top-down policies that resonate with culturally embedded values at the base are a key factor in the government's trust creation strategy, a key factor in its successful suppression of Covid-19, and a key factor reinforcing the legitimacy of the government.

This also means that the trust might not endure after the situation returns to normal. The injustice of certain judicial trials continued to upset those who believe in justice and democratic values. After the pandemic was brought under control, criticism of the government flared up again. The Covid-19 situation was an ideal opportunity for the Party to reinforce its legitimacy, and it effectively seized that opportunity. Yet Vietnam's population remains sceptical that it can rise to the challenge of effective governance, not just at moments of crisis, but also in normal times.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

**Competing Regional Integrations in Southeast Asia** (CRISEA) is an interdisciplinary research project that studies multiple forces affecting regional integration in Southeast Asia and the challenges they present to the peoples of Southeast Asia and its regional institutional framework, ASEAN.

CRISEA innovates by encouraging 'macro-micro' dialogue between disciplines: global level analyses in international relations and political economy alongside socio-cultural insights from the grassroots methodologies of social sciences and the humanities.

Coordinated by the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) with its unique network of ten field centres in Southeast Asia, the project brings together researchers from seven European and six Southeast Asian institutions, with three objectives:

### 1. Research on regional integration

Multiple internal and external forces drive regional integration in Southeast Asia and compete for resources and legitimacy. CRISEA has identified five 'arenas of competition' for the interplay of these forces, investigated in the project's five research Work Packages. It further aims to assess the extent to which they call into question the centrality of ASEAN's regional model.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Dịch COVID-19 sáng 25-4: Việt Nam 0 ca mới, số người chết ở Mỹ vượt 50.000' retrieved on 28 October 2020 from <https://tuoitre.vn/dich-covid-19-sang-25-4-viet-nam-0-ca-moi-so-nguoi-chet-o-my-vuot-50-000-20200413221303778.htm>.

## 2. Policy relevance

CRISEA reaches beyond academia to engage in public debate and impact on practitioners in government and non-government spheres. By establishing mechanisms for dialogue with targeted audiences of policymakers, stakeholders and the public, the project furthers European science diplomacy in Southeast Asia and promotes evidence-based policymaking.

## 3. Networking and capacity-building

CRISEA reinforces the European Research Area (ERA) in the field of Asian Studies through coordinated EU-ASEAN academic exchange and network development. It connects major research hubs with emerging expertise across Europe and Southeast Asia. CRISEA also promotes participation of younger generation academics in all its activities, notably policy dialogues.

### PROJECT IDENTITY

<b>PROJECT NAME</b>	Competing Integrations in Southeast Asia (CRISEA)
<b>COORDINATOR</b>	Andrew Hardy, EFEO, Paris, France, hardyvn25@yahoo.com.
<b>CONSORTIUM</b>	Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient – EFEO – Paris, France University of Hamburg – UHAM – Hamburg, Germany University of Naples l'Orientale – UNO – Naples, Italy Institute of Social and Political Sciences – ISCSP - Lisbon, Portugal University of Lodz - UL – Lodz, Poland University of Oslo – UiO – Oslo, Norway University of Cambridge – Cam – Cambridge, UK Chiang Mai University – CMU – Chiang Mai, Thailand The Centre for Strategic and International Studies - CSIS – Jakarta, Indonesia Ateneo de Manila University – ADMU – Quezon City, Philippines University of Malaya – UM – Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences – VASS – Hanoi, Vietnam The University of Mandalay – MU – Mandalay, Myanmar
<b>FUNDING SCHEME</b>	H2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation of the European Union – Research Innovation Action (RIA) – Europe in a changing world, Engaging together globally
<b>DURATION</b>	November 2017 – February 2021 (40 months).
<b>BUDGET</b>	EU contribution: €2,500,000.00
<b>WEBSITE</b>	<a href="http://www.crisea.eu">www.crisea.eu</a>
<b>FOR MORE INFORMATION</b>	Contact: Jacques LEIDER, CRISEA scientific coordinator – <a href="mailto:jacques.leider@efeo.net">jacques.leider@efeo.net</a> Elisabeth LACROIX, CRISEA project manager – <a href="mailto:ideas.lacroix@gmail.com">ideas.lacroix@gmail.com</a>