

How Vietnam Learned From China's Coronavirus Mistakes

Hanoi, a fellow communist state, realized quickly that a China-style cover-up would only make things worse.

By Trien Vinh Le and Huy Quynh Nguyen

All over the world, countries are working to contain the human toll of the unprecedented health crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not only a numbers game — how communities self-organize to flatten the curve from the bottom up — but also a multifaceted calculation of how governments organize from the top down. It has been difficult to judge whether dictatorships or democracies will fare better because there are many determinants of success or failure beyond institutional systems. Still, this paper discusses some of the aspects affecting a country's ability to control the spread of the coronavirus to reflect on current implications and future reforms.

China: An Authoritarian Style of Endemic Control

The world watched as the consequences of an authoritarian regime gave rise to outbreak in Wuhan, China. With a lack of transparency and accountability from the beginning limiting public awareness of the new coronavirus, clearly officials from the local to the central level were acting with political motives. China's institutional characteristics made officials unwilling to hear honest, upright voices from the outset, when the epidemic was initially discovered and controllable. By the time the outbreak became clear, it was too late to contain the damage, affecting not only Wuhan and Hubei province but China and now the whole world.

China's use of an iron hand in controlling information and resources follows the principle of "the end justifies the means," despite all human right standards to treat disease. This is an inevitable outcome of a totalitarian regime. Up against walls on both sides, the people of China were forced into silence and unable to address mounting threats. Under the guise of political stability at all costs, disease statistics were manipulated to serve political goals, leading to a lack of transparency that has been institutionalized as the default position of government officials. Despite these challenges, the tight control of information can also, ironically, be used as a tool with the power to both stop the outbreak and block social networks.

Looking at the process of dealing with the problem in the rest of the world, superficial observers may admire the iron hand of the Chinese dictatorial regime and praise its effectiveness — forgetting that this same dictatorship covered up the virus and exacerbated the outbreak, which in turn has taken the lives of so many people.

With democratic, well-off countries in crisis — such as Japan, South Korea, and Italy — China's response may further be reinforced as a strength, with the strictness of authoritarian regimes outperforming more diffuse measures. People in democratic countries have been slow to isolate and maintained their privacy rights and less restricted travel. Ironically, the lack of vigilance and overconfidence in disease prevention systems may be spurring on preventable outbreaks in countries with the freedom to choose their response.

So, is a democracy or authoritarian system better equipped for disease prevention and control? Or does the question of democracy or dictatorship even make sense when there are so many individualized factors at play?

Using the case of Vietnam can illustrate an alternate political model that challenges this common dichotomy.

Vietnam: Combining Democratic Principles and Authoritarian Practice

As a country with political institutions quite similar to China, Vietnam has long been considered to be a lot more open than China in terms of media censorship and information control. People in Vietnam, for example, can use most of the world's social networks. Facebook is especially widely used and serves as a giant platform for people sharing information as well as expressing criticism, directly or indirectly, of government policies. While China's media was slow to reveal its vulnerabilities and information about the mysterious pneumonia in Wuhan, doubts about the disease statistics from China in the early stages were laid bare to the Vietnamese internet community, enabling a stronger sense of prevention. Anecdotally, some scholars were seriously criticized when they proposed that face masks were unnecessary and coronavirus was not as dangerous as seasonal influenza in the United States.

The response to the virus showed the Vietnamese government the power of social networks as Vietnamese communities read and relied on information to formulate strategies. The government learned from observing the flow of information how it could build trust and strengthen self-reliance in communities that might have been very fragile otherwise.

The Vietnamese government seemed to recognize that Chinese-style information blocking only worsened the situation and that people questioned top-down disease propaganda campaigns. In turn, the Vietnamese authorities remained transparent about the disease information as well as allowing unrestricted information on Facebook. Early on, there were some concerns at the beginning when Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh said a closure of the Chinese border closure was unnecessary, and that Vietnam would maintain open and ongoing relations with China. The Vietnamese people were initially bewildered that their government could place political and economic relations with China above the health of the people. However, the government quickly regained confidence by committing to thorough inspections and supervision and even, eventually, banning visitors from China.

Vietnam is still considered as a communist country, but in fighting the epidemic, the government put the existence and life of the people first and foremost. In that spirit, the government has been remarkably transparent, briskly addressing the psychological crisis among the people. On the one hand, as a one-party state, Vietnam appears unconstrained by strict regulations about the privacy of infected people, even disclosing their identities. Recently, even the identity and itinerary of a key figure in charge of communism theory for the party who tested positive for COVID-19 have been made public. People in Vietnam have also generally been more cooperative than people in democratic countries when quarantined and isolated. Those who show disrespect for self-isolation or quarantine will be harshly criticized on social media.

Thus it can be said that, although Vietnam is still a one-party state, the government has been more transparent in fighting the epidemic and its people have created their own system of accountability. On the other hand, because people are not familiar with the practice of the rule of law, they are willing to give up their privacy easily and cooperate strongly with the authorities in

disease prevention. So far, the Vietnamese government, fairly well-informed of its limited resources, has made good use of the positive elements of a democratic spirit of openness and transparency as well as the lack of experience of rule of law to fight against COVID-19. The government has shown an interest in people's lives, putting people's health first, and a willingness to temporarily lower ideological elements to regain confidence and fight the epidemic as it has grown into a global pandemic.

These tactics have proved to be effective and furnished positive results for Vietnam. Now rule of law principles such as transparency and accountability should be sustained more vigorously in addressing other issues of the country, such as corruption and nepotism. At the same time, Vietnam should consider institutionalizing the practices of publicizing identities and compulsory isolation in special national conditions such as fighting epidemics.

It is difficult to conclude which political institutions are better able to fight a pandemic especially given disparities in health technologies, economic resources, and climatic conditions, all of which compound preparedness and the spread of diseases. In the case of Vietnam, the conclusions that may be drawn are that to effectively combat the pandemic, governments in developing countries need to be transparent and open to gain people's confidence in government messaging against the epidemic and in order to win public acceptance of the need to limit privacy for the common good. And most importantly, perhaps the most important factors should be the openness and urgency of the government to place the well-being and protection of life above all political endeavors.

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