

Vietnam's Public Diplomacy and the Peril of Mixed Messages

COVID-19 has been a victory for the country's communist party – but a taste of transparency might whet the public's appetite for more.

By Vu Lam

Vietnam's communist government has recently been forced to grapple with three major conundrums: the coronavirus pandemic, the country's endemic levels of corruption and the South China Sea disputes, in order of temporary prominence. All of those could have a substantial impact on the nation's public diplomacy – its ability to appeal to publics at home and abroad in order to further its objectives.

In terms of public diplomacy, the country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has so far been a big victory for the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). As a few Vietnam watchers have argued, transparency has been a win-win for the Party, helping to mitigate the impacts of the novel coronavirus while bolstering its reputation among the public at large. Vietnam's relative success in fighting COVID-19 has been acknowledged both at home and abroad, and the country's leadership has been uniformly lauded for its transparent and proactive response. Public support for the regime's COVID-19 action plan has been consistently high.

Similar benefits have flowed from CPV chief Nguyen Phu Trong's "hot furnace" campaign against graft and corruption. Major investigations of high-ranking government and party officials have given the impression that nobody is safe from the long arm of the law. In one of the latest and high-profile developments, the chairman of the Hanoi People's Committee was suspended for his involvement in three major criminal cases, and was later arrested. Elsewhere, senior officials and military officers have been prosecuted on an unprecedented scale. With this anti-corruption campaign having been praised as an exception in Southeast Asia, Vietnam's party-state is seemingly winning a multi-front battle in the court of public opinion.

Despite these recent wins, however, there is a good chance that public dissatisfaction will increase over the long run. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed Vietnam's citizenry to a higher level of transparency than that to which they are usually accustomed. Naturally, some might expect to enjoy that transparency universally. And if the public has a chance to see the obvious discrepancies with other important areas of governance, they may question the intent of such transparency. Selective transparency, after all, is no transparency at all. In a context of rising public expectations, mixed messages will only foster public frustration. And currently, there are a lot of mixed messages when it comes to how transparent the Vietnamese party-state has been in dealing with issues besides COVID-19.

The regime is not nearly as transparent and open on other political matters. In the lead up to the CPV's 13th National Congress of the CPV in January 2021, the party has engaged in a frenzy of

personnel rotation and promotion in the important Ministries of Public Security (MPS) and Defence (MOD). The MPS has shuffled its senior staff between provinces, while also promoting several new deputy ministers. The same has happened with the MOD, where executive staff at regional commands have been cut and new deputy ministers have been installed.

As a result of these recent changes, both the MPS and MOD now have nine deputy ministers each. These numbers are the highest ever, which begs the question: why now and why so many? Indeed, common sense suggests that the elevation of top-level executives in the areas of public security and defense indicates that the Party is anticipating conflict or social instability. The most likely conclusion is that Vietnam's government is preparing for a major crackdown against public dissent before the next Congress.

This seems all the more evident given the seemingly half-baked nature of the anti-corruption fight. So far, the campaign has only targeted high-profile cases, mostly at the central level. But corruption in Vietnam is vertically rampant, right down to the commune level. Despite widespread allegations on social media and on some news outlets, little has been done aside from these handful of high-profile cases. Again, the public has every reason to question the decision not to invest more in investigative staff rather than executive staff.

Worse still, one could also point to the expansion of various task forces aiming at controlling the internet and social media. Besides the controversial cybersecurity law, the government has tightened its ability to scrutinize public participation in cyberspace. In 2018, the MOD established a new Cyber Command, to protect the country's military and defense information systems, while the MPS has similarly established the Department of Cybersecurity and High-Tech Crime on the foundation of several agencies at the departmental level, and put the new department directly under the Ministry. All the while, the Ministry of Information and Communications has expanded the mandate of its Authority of Information Security. So there's a good chance that the policy of streamlining staff may be perceived as just a façade for the expansion of task forces aimed at curbing online freedom of expression.

From a public diplomacy perspective, it is likely that the public will come to view the CPV's COVID-19 transparency as a bandage solution to win popular support. The tightened grip on online activism shows that an about-face regarding political transparency is unlikely to happen anytime soon. This means that in the long run, public trust is likely to deteriorate, and that the state's public diplomacy work could end up undermining its legitimacy.

Currently, Vietnam's party-state is employing public diplomacy as a diversion strategy to steer public attention away from high-risk political issues. The government's official Facebook page offers an interesting example of the CPV's approach. Building on the country's triumphs against COVID-19, Hanoi has implemented a two-pronged approach to its public diplomacy, which includes messages targeting both international and domestic audiences. From July 22 to October 2 of this year, the Facebook page saw 320 updates on the second wave of COVID-19, averaging five posts per day. Those posts attracted tens of thousands of likes, while most of the thousands of comments heap praise on the government and the party.

Meanwhile, for all the worrisome developments in the South China Sea, in 2020 so far there have been merely 39 posts on this subject. Similarly, nine months into 2020 and there are only 50 posts about notable investigations of wrongdoings, including several cases related to the mishandling of COVID-19. In terms of the raw numbers, the obvious focus is on the COVID-19 pandemic, for good reason. (Due to limited public access to Facebook Graph API, the collected data may not be total, but the general trends are consistent.)

But again, the situation is just temporary. Sooner or later, the party-state will be forced to face the same lingering questions about accountability and transparency. In the long game of winning hearts and minds and bolstering the party's legitimacy, transparency is clearly the way to go – but it is unlikely to find much support among the die-hard ideological conservatives in the CPV's ranks, who view the party's firm control as a precondition for its continued rule. Who then will start the fire?

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