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Vietnam's Communist Party Finds a Silver Lining in COVID-19

The coronavirus outbreak provides a unique opportunity for the Communist Party of Vietnam to strengthen its legitimacy.

By Mai Truong

The coronavirus outbreak affords the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) a unique opportunity to regain its people's trust and strengthen its legitimacy in the midst of criticism toward how the party handled several issues in late 2019 and early 2020.

2019 was an unlucky year for the CPV on many fronts. On the economic front, the tragic death of 39 illegal migrants in the United Kingdom, while having complex roots, raised the question of whether the party's economic policies could generate equal opportunities for different segments of the population. On the social front, the party was criticized for its slow response to two pollution issues in the capital of Hanoi, including the contamination of tap water in southeast Hanoi and a fire at a major light bulb factory in Thanh Xuan district. The deadly clash between the government and villagers over a long-standing land dispute in Dong Tam commune in suburban Hanoi in early 2020 attracted strong criticism from liberal forces toward the party's land policy and widespread corruption at the local level related to land grabs. All these issues combined raised doubts among some about the CPV's leadership.

The global coronavirus outbreak began at a time when the CPV was desperate to move past these social events and improve its image in the eyes of Vietnamese people. The party has gone to great lengths to make this seemingly unfortunate crisis to work to its advantage. And so far, it has been successful.

During the Lunar New Year, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc declared a war on the coronavirus. Interestingly, this fight against the virus resembles wars that the Party led against the French and American forces in the 20th century. Most importantly, the CPV has once again relied on a mobilization strategy, galvanizing the whole of society including security forces, the military, authorities of all levels of government, and every individual, to act against the outbreak. In many areas, police and neighborhood leaders (or village leaders in the countryside) go to every house asking if anyone has recently returned from abroad. Neighbors pay careful attention to families with members who appear to have symptoms or have recently traveled to foreign countries, then report their observations to the government for potential quarantine.

This strategy, again, has proved effective. At the time of writing this article, Vietnam has 153 reported cases of coronavirus with no deaths. While the number of cases is growing, Vietnam has been quite successful so far in containing the spread of the virus relative to other countries.

The positive effects of the war against coronavirus on the regime's image are already strongly visible. As it did in past wars, propaganda plays a significant role in manifesting the CPV's leadership.

To demonstrate the CPV's success in the war against COVID-19, state media implicitly juxtapose the uncontrollably soaring numbers of cases in other countries, especially in Europe and the United States, with Vietnam's controlled situation. State media give the impression that even overseas Vietnamese who legally reside or are naturalized abroad are "flocking home" to avoid the coronavirus outbreak and to get treatment. Articles about overseas students returning home with emotion-provoking titles such as "I am finally alive" and "Thank you my country for saving me" are widely shared in many state newspapers and reshared on Facebook, a popular social media platform in Vietnam. This strategy provokes a nationalist attitude and attachment to the country and the Party. It is hard to miss statements such as "So proud of Vietnam," "I am so lucky to live in Vietnam right now," and "Thank you my government" on social media these days.

More importantly, the CPV is successful in equating support for the Party and its efforts to quell the coronavirus outbreak with nationalism. Anyone who criticizes the conditions people in quarantine face or the Party's policies risks provoking anger among netizens and being labeled as pro-Western and unpatriotic. In the second week of March, a video of a Vietnamese resident of Poland arguing with a policeman in Noi Bai International Airport in Hanoi received more than 500 comments. Many comments asked her to be grateful for the country's willingness to welcome her back home when Europe abandoned her. In a response to complaints by some overseas students about the conditions in a quarantine area, a high school teacher composed an emotional poem that asks complainers, "What have you contributed to your homeland?" The poem has been vigorously shared on social media coupled with an image of the prime minister, the deputy prime minister, and the chairman of the capital city of Hanoi with the slogan "Vietnam leaves no one behind."

The coronavirus outbreak also provides the military an opportunity to improve its image. State media and social media are full of photos of police and soldiers on duty. Netizens have started to call them the familiar name "uncle soldier," harking back to the image of soldiers under Uncle Ho Chi Minh. Perhaps, many have forgotten that just over a month ago, these same "uncle soldiers" may have been deployed to evict villagers from the disputed land in Dong Tam commune in suburban Hanoi.

Vietnam entered 2020 with a desire to improve the image of the government in the face of criticism over how it handled social issues in 2019 and early 2020. The coronavirus outbreak unexpectedly helped the CPV regain the people's trust and underscore its leading role in the country. While concerns about the long-term economic impacts of the Party's drastic measures are valid, people's notable support and trust in the CPV's leadership in the war against the coronavirus may pave a favorable environment for the Party to tackle the economic impacts later.

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