

COVID wave challenges Vietnam's national election Sunday

One-party state wants high turnout for races that include first gay candidate

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HANOI -- Vietnam has gone on high alert nationwide to contain COVID-19 outbreaks in the north, even as the country holds a general election Sunday for 69 million voters to select 500 members of parliament.

Vietnam reported 131 more local coronavirus cases Friday, pushing its community tally in the latest wave since April 27 to 1,892. Bac Giang Province, the epicenter, recorded 99 infections. Bac Giang and neighboring Bac Ninh -- home to around 20 industrial parks and more than 20 industrial zones -- essentially went into lockdown Monday.

Deputy Prime Minister Vu Duc Dam asked authorities to bolster efforts to prevent supply chain disruptions, especially in the troubled northern provinces. Dam said the priority in the north is to ensure adequate disease precautions to let multinational manufacturers such as Samsung Electronics sustain their operations.

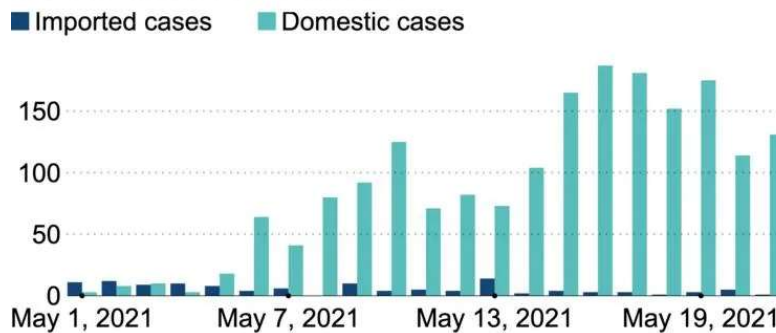
"Besides closely monitoring outbreaks and strictly managing workers in industrial parks, Bac Ninh and Bac Giang need to quickly allow" businesses to resume operations if safety, hygiene and epidemiological measures can be ensured, Dam said Friday. He focused on enterprises involved in large supply chains stretching nationwide and globally.

Samsung's two plants in northern Vietnam handle more than half the company's global smartphone output. But 13 local suppliers for Samsung in Bac Giang have been forced to shut temporarily.

The outbreaks come at a delicate time in the communist-dominated country, with the National Assembly seats up for grabs Sunday. Vietnamese 18 and older choose members of the unicameral parliament every five years.

The country's constitution stipulates that the Communist Party of Vietnam is "the force leading the state and the society" and that the National Assembly is led by the party, Ha Hoang Hop, a visiting senior fellow at Singaporean research group ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, told Nikkei Asia.

COVID cases in Vietnam



Source: Government Portal

More than 90% of the National Assembly's lawmakers are party members, including General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, President Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh.

"The Communist Party always wants to secure over 95% voter turnout to maintain democratic legitimacy," Duong Quoc Chinh, a Hanoi-based political expert said. Turnout in 2016 totaled 98.77%.

The law stipulates that voters cast ballots by themselves, but "actually, we have tolerated proxy voting by family members and have achieved a high turnout," Chinh said.

The 866 candidates in Sunday's election include 74 who are not Communist Party members. One of those independents is Luong The Huy, 32, who also is the first openly gay candidate for parliament. He is running for a constituency in Hanoi.

While Vietnam has not legalized same-sex marriage it also does not forbid it, though married LGBT couples have no legal status or protections.

The communist leadership aims to ensure the stability of one-party rule by gradually accepting the participation of independent candidates and minorities in politics. If Huy wins, the result would fall within the party's calculations, Duong Quoc Chinh said.

On Friday, Pham Minh Chinh ordered authorities to ensure a safe election. The epidemic situation is under control for now, and Vietnam will have well-organized elections, he said.

Securing a safe and smooth election will be a big challenge for the prime minister, who came to power in April following the party National Congress in January. He inherits the "dual goals" of containing the pandemic and achieving economic growth at the same time, Hop said.

The outbreaks in northern Vietnam are attributed to a coronavirus variant first detected in India.

"The Hanoi government can only rely on stricter prevention measures at all voting sites, as the current COVID situations are complicated and uncertain," Hop said. "Thanks to 76 years of experience on conducting elections under a one-party political regime, it is likely to end up a smooth election."

Final results of the general election will be announced within 10 days after the vote.