

What Taiwan and Vietnam taught the world about governance in 2020

Quality governance the most important factor when it comes to running a country

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The ravaging effects of COVID-19 have exposed some fundamental truths about the nature of modern governance and leadership, shattering long-held illusions.

Since the 1980s, policymakers have been trapped in a binary debate over the size of government. But if there is one thing that we have learned from the pandemic is that when it comes to governance, size does not matter. Nor does the type of government seem to make much of a difference either. The all-important factor when it comes to governance is quality.

Good governance is not determined by state institutions alone either. Political mettle and social capital are just as important. To better understand the key ingredients of successful governance, it is worth focusing on two nations that -- while very different when it comes to the type of government and respective levels of economic and technological development -- have emerged as the breakout nations of 2020: Vietnam and Taiwan.

One is an authoritarian communist regime, the other a vibrant liberal democracy, yet both are expected to show positive economic growth last year while successfully protecting their citizens from the worst effects of COVID-19.

Having had the privilege of spending considerable time in both nations in recent years, I have not only met with top policymakers -- including heads of state and senior cabinet ministers -- but have been able to observe everyday life as well.

Three interrelated factors best explain Vietnam and Taiwan's success and remarkable resilience in the past year. The first is social cohesion, namely high levels of trust among citizens as well as in their political leaders. From wearing masks to basic hygiene and observing social distancing rules, both countries exhibited very high levels of societal cooperation.

During a visit to Hanoi last March, which included motorbike rides across the city, I was struck by the seamless observation of basic social distancing rules across all socio-economic classes. Astonishingly, this was achieved with almost no lockdowns.

I saw hardly anyone questioning the basic scientific understanding regarding COVID, and both Vietnam -- then the chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations -- and Taiwan even managed to safely host large-scale social events at the height of the pandemic, thanks to the cooperation of careful and meticulous residents.

Meanwhile, back in the democratic Philippines, my experience could not have been more different. Several days into one of the strictest and longest lockdowns in the world, I saw military

checkpoints, armored vehicles and armed soldiers pop up hundreds of meters from where I live in Manila.

Scenes from across the city were almost apocalyptic. One colleague of mine was arrested for daring to momentarily lower his mask for a drink of water as he rode about on a bicycle under a scorching sun.

Visits to the U.S. and the Middle East last year -- where social capital is even more scarce than in the Philippines -- I noticed how quickly I stood out among the crowd with my shield, mask, and almost obsessive attentiveness to personal hygiene.

This brings me to the second vital factor: political leadership. Commendable displays of social capital in places such as Taiwan and Vietnam may partly be explained by their shared Confucian roots, which places heavy emphasis on civic duty and deference to communitarian values.

But the seamless observation of social distancing rules was also a reflection of the quality of political leadership. Though one oversees a democracy and another an authoritarian regime, the administrations led by President Tsai Ing-wen in Taiwan and Nguyen Phu Trong in Vietnam are both bastions of meritocratic competence.

Leaders in the two countries proactively navigated the COVID crisis by emphasizing science and public education, as well as sustained collaboration between the different levels of government and civil society. Nor did they fear, as in neighboring Philippines, the repercussions of quickly shutting down their borders to China in the early phase of the pandemic.

In both countries, one can see popular leaders but no populists in position of power. In contrast, deeply polarized societies in the grip of populism have seen widespread defiance of not only social obligations, but also science itself at the highest levels.

Populists leaders such as former U.S. President Donald Trump resisted wearing masks, while Philippine Rodrigo Duterte mocked COVID-19 threats months into the pandemic and even blabbered about using petrol to disinfect masks.

Similar to his Filipino counterpart, Indonesian President Joko Widodo largely relied on generals with no public health backgrounds to manage the crisis, while India's Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not hesitate to share his yoga techniques at the height of the pandemic.

The final crucial factor is the strength and quality of state institutions. Following decades of neoliberal reforms, many Western countries have seen the steady erosion of state institutions. Thus, the relatively poor handling of the COVID-19 crisis in places such as Britain and the U.S. should not come as a big surprise.

In contrast, Vietnam and Taiwan have maintained robust developmental states, which have allowed them to coordinate crisis response, provide adequate assistance to and inspire cooperation from citizens, and maintain high industrial productivity even amid a global recession.

State-backed export boom and strong domestic stimulus allowed Taiwan and Vietnam to grow at above 2% last year, a remarkable feat when compared to double-digit contractions in neighboring Philippines and India.

In fact, Taiwan and Vietnam are also expected to be among the first nations to achieve herd immunity, thanks to an effective system of mass vaccination. This means, among others, they will also be experiencing accelerated economic recovery for years to come.

What the pandemic has shown is that way more than big government, what matters is the quality of governance. Taiwan and Vietnam are breakout nations, which underscore the importance of competent political leadership, social capital and state capacity, not only in times of crisis, but also in the years and decades to come.