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Leveraging Vietnam's COVID-19 Success

Vietnam's success in containing COVID-19 provides a chance to to use earned legitimacy as a springboard to reforms.

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A masked man walks past a poster encouraging people to wear face masks correctly in Hanoi, Vietnam, Thursday, Apr. 23, 2020.
Credit: AP Photo/Hau Dinh

The political stability of many countries has been challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic. As authoritarian governments in countries like [China and Vietnam](#) strive to maintain the fruits of economic growth, questions about their legitimacy arise in the face of compounding crises. These governments use their authoritarian control to legitimize societal rules and regulations in service to [a shared belief system](#) that maintaining centralized control can not only mitigate chaos in the market but also secure public safety in a pandemic crisis.

The Communist Party in each country is thus raising the stakes on economic recovery by betting the political capital earned in managing the pandemic to justify their monopoly on securing societal order. While China's early response to the outbreak has been widely criticized for its lack of transparency and the loss of life, the atypical [openness and transparency](#) in the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has strengthened the legitimacy of the CPV's political system aligned with the power of the people's shared beliefs in communal values. The question is how might the CPV take advantage of this earned legitimacy to springboard the economy and accelerate social reforms for long-term resilience.

Pre-pandemic: Economic Growth and the Legitimacy Dilemma of the CPV

Stable economic growth since the [Doi Moi](#) economic reforms of the late 1980's has provided the CPV with legitimacy internally to rule its people as well as externally to attract foreign investments. However, the gains have not been shared equally. Stories of corruption are common as consolidated power has translated to more opportunities for self-serving investments against the public interest (not to mention significant environmental degradation). Trust ebbs and flows in the long-term legitimacy of the CPV especially when corruption, environmental issues and inequality have become increasingly salient to the public looking for stability in the face of market disruptions and compounding crises.

In another twist of fate, Vietnam's economic success is dependent on both politics (ideologically speaking) and investments from China. This may have complicated the government's response to China's accelerating aggressive approach in the consequent issues, such as the debt trap, environmental degradation from natural exploitation, not to mention the military expansionism of China in the South China Sea.

These issues represent a critical question on balancing economic development with issues of security and sovereignty embedded in multiple social, environmental and political vulnerabilities.

Post- pandemic: Maintaining the Momentum of Openness, Transparency, and Accountability

The success of Vietnam through the CPV to control the COVID-19 pandemic has convinced most appraisers of the government's strategy to effectively minimize exposure to [328 affected cases](#) and no deaths. Vietnam's unique source of legitimacy while other countries continue to struggle underscores the opportunity of political transformation to be seized. What if its solid footing in leadership leveraged the legitimacy in conjunction with reforms that commit the CPV extensively to openness, transparency and

accountability? Such a transformation would further distinguish Vietnam from China by encouraging higher quality investments, global trade partnerships and natural resource protections.

Aiming to Be a More Trustful and Democratic Society

To warrant success in the above approach, a public governance system should be revised accordingly. Specifically, the government may ease restrictions on freedom of expression, including public voice on the Chinese issues and more checks and balances on public governance. Reciprocally, further legitimacy could be earned by alleviating the peoples' concern and doubt on the fighting of corruption and protection of sovereignty and by improving foreign investments in quality and quantity.

In a similar manner, the Vietnamese government should promote the operation of civil societies in addressing many social issues. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown many organizations are quite willing to share the burden with the government in taking care of vulnerable groups of people with many initiatives around the country, such as the "[rice ATM](#)." Encouraging civil society organizations to mobilize operations for public service can also share the responsibility of preventing abuse of power from predatory interest groups in the country.

Pursuing political transformation would therefore reinforce the legitimacy Vietnam earned in the COVID-19 crisis, build and integrate social trust into public life, and hence reduce the costs of maintaining a heavy repression apparatus. People would enjoy more rights and show their responsibility and honor in building a trustful and democratic society of their own.

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