



People returning from Da Nang in line for COVID-19 test in Hanoi, Vietnam - 31 July 2020 (Credit: Getty Images/Linh Pham/Stringer)

# COUNTRY PROFILE: VIETNAM

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## ABSTRACT

Vietnam has been praised for their 'by the book' public health response to the Coronavirus Pandemic. This prompts the question, what has Vietnam done that differs from other nations? Has the structure of their government or health systems played a role? Was it the interference of media sources or community led initiatives that played the biggest role?

Initiating lockdowns and mandatory testing in January permitted Vietnam to quickly gain control over the spread of the virus; when combined with the population's complacency to strict guidelines and mandates, Vietnam has been able to limit cases to 1060 in a population of over 95 million since the outbreak began. The following paper will look at the structure of Vietnam's government and healthcare system as they related to the handling of COVID-19. Further, the paper will discuss the methods the government and infectious disease specialists utilised to maintain the low rate of infection across the nation as well as how civilians and the media played a role in tackling, or resisting, efforts to control the spread.

# COUNTRY BACKGROUND

## *POLITICAL STRUCTURE*

Vietnam, located in South East Asia, is home to more than 95 million people, its idyllic beaches, rivers and bustling cities attracting travellers from around the world (WHO, 2016). Politically, Vietnam is a Socialist country, currently under the leadership of the Vietnam Communist Party in a single party republic framework, commonly known as a one-party system. The President, his selected Prime Minister and the National Assembly play critical roles in governing the nation (Vietnam Embassy, 2020). Together, these three actors work with representatives from the 64 districts of Vietnam to maintain order across the nation. Through close horizontal and vertical coordination amongst all levels of government, in addition to a new degree of transparency with civilians, Vietnam has been able to successfully implement their aggressive strategic response to the pandemic.

Experts believe that the authoritarian leadership of Vietnam has played a key role in the country's ability to instigate speedy control of Coronavirus as well as with various epidemics that have arrived in the past. Vietnams government has a monopoly on power, imposing strict rules and severe punishments (Sang Minh Le, 2020). This

has shaped an abiding relationship between the people and system that is hard to replicate. For example, people caught or reported for breaking Coronavirus safety mandates will face harsh punishments. It is reported that 'officials sentenced a Vietnamese man to a nine-month prison term for aggressively refusing masks in public' (Nguyen, 2020). The coordination within the communist party, the consistent enforcement of punishments and a civilian population that is compliant to regulations has resulted in successful containment of the virus.

## *HEALTHCARE SYSTEM*

Vietnam's healthcare system is based on a mixed public-private system which is aimed to be provided nationwide. These services are divided into four levels of delivery: the central level (main hospitals managed directly by the Ministry of Health), the provincial and district levels, the commune level, and lastly, community and village health workers who make house calls. Throughout these levels, a two-track system is implemented. One track is considered preventative and centred around public health with an institution similar to the CDC in the U.S. The second track is focused on clinical and acute medical care (Nguyen & Cheng, 2014). Although the breadth and development of Vietnams health system is not to the same prestige and other nations, the country utilises its

resources with care and precision. Additionally, Vietnam continues to invest heavily in its healthcare system, with health expenditures per capita increasing at a rate of 9.0%/year between 2000 and 2016 (Bales et al, 2020).

Similar public health systems exist in previously socialist economies, as well as the neighbouring Australian continent. In many cases, health analysts consider the combined public-private health system as a complex track; however, for many countries that's systems are designed in this way are able to lessen the economic burden of healthcare in the country.

## **HANDLING OF CORONAVIRUS**

### **STATISTICS**

Vietnam's effective response to the Coronavirus Pandemic has been deemed by foreign leaders as the 'textbook public health response'. As of September 11, there have been a total of 1060 reported cases and only 35 deaths (Ministry of Health, 2020). The Vietnamese city of Da Nang has experienced the highest density of cases, being the site of both (contextually) 'large scale' outbreaks in the nation (Bohane, 2020). Vietnam's early response allotted them the ability to maintain

control over the spread of coronavirus early on, allowing upwards of 40-day intervals passing with no new local infections reported.

Vietnam is a particularly interesting country to observe during this pandemic as they share a border with China and have frequent migration between major cities like Da Nang and Wuhan. Vietnam's first two reported cases were identified on January 23rd from a father and son who were returning home from a trip to Wuhan, where they are believed to have contracted the virus. The Vietnamese government responded rapidly, deploying infectious disease specialist teams across the country and enforcing mandatory quarantines.

### **RESPONSE AND TASK DELEGATION**

Experts in a variety of fields have expressed confusion by the outcomes in Vietnam as the capacity of its healthcare system is nowhere near some of their neighbours. A key part of Vietnam's success was the timing and mentality the government had when planning their response. It is true that in comparison to countries like South Korea, Vietnam's healthcare system is not as strong; however, it is a nation with a great deal of experience in control of infectious disease and frequent epidemics. Additionally, as previously mentioned, there is a very obedient relationship

between the citizens and the government, with the people of Vietnam following isolation and mask mandate (Reuters Foundation, 2020).

Communication between the government, health department and citizens are open and up to date. Citizens were made aware of up to date rates and precise locations of new case reporting's (Sang Minh Le, 2020). This aided in contact tracing as individuals could determine if they may have been exposed.

Vietnam began restricting travel and conducting temperature checks for all incoming travellers in January, actions that predated WHO's guidelines and declaration of Coronavirus as a disease of international concern. Following the arrival of their first cases, Vietnam put all their efforts and resources into scaling up the nation's health system capacity and deployed specialist infectious disease control teams across the nation (Sang Minh Le, 2020; Pollack et al, 2020). These teams aided in establishing and running official quarantine facilities and meticulous contact tracing. In addition, the country has also conducted large scale testing. The government did not hesitate to consider the wider effects of a national shutdown and response, such as that on the economy, and this allowed for rapid control of the spread. By April, lockdown restrictions were being eased as local transmissions were holding steady at 0, permitting bars to reopen, football

matches to resume and workplaces to begin in person days (Bohane, 2020). In July, the Ministry of Health established a COVID-19 Special Response team, comprised of 65 leading experts and 4 groups to take charge of surveillance, treatment, testing and communication (Chia sê, 2020).

Come the beginning of August, eased restrictions, increased internal travel and less compliance with facial covering recommendations have been identified as contributors to a second outbreak in factories in the city of Da Nang, which then spread to 10 places including the Capital of Ho Chi Minh City (Reuters, 2020). On August 3, 22 new cases were reported, again setting off a rapid response to lockdown the city, begin widespread testing and contact tracing. Additionally, over 80,000 commuting workers were sent home to their provinces and not permitted to continue daily commutes to and from the city (Bohane, 2020).

## **COVID IN SOCIETY**

### ***MEDIA***

Media can be a powerful tool that can be a blessing or curse. The use of media has helped the Vietnamese government be more present in everyday lives by running media campaigns which included a viral music video prompting and encouraging safe hygiene and protective behaviours. Additionally, both private and public

telecom companies have used their platform to collectively send 3 billion messages focusing COVID-19 prevention techniques.

While Vietnam's government has been forthcoming and transparent regarding case counts and testing, it is still important to note the nature of the government. The tight control the government has on journalism and media, as well as the lack of an independent civil society creates a barrier and rift in the expression of information. Independent media is not present, all media platforms, such as TV, radio, and newspapers, are fully controlled by the government. Additionally, labour unions and official political associations are not permitted to exist to allow individuals the opportunity to contradict government decisions. Is the Vietnamese government only showing what it wants its people to see? To what extent can we trust this proclaimed transparency in information? And if this is a step forward in honesty, what does this mean for access to information going forward?

At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in Vietnam, as early as January 3rd, accounts were made of a "strange pneumonia". From that instant a growing number of rumours stated that the government was withholding information and, consequently, mistrust started to increase amongst the population. However, the Vietnamese

government were quick to quiet down those rumours, releasing a statement focusing on transparency and their partnership with the American CDC to prepare the "best outcome possible" and address the public health concern. At later stages of the outbreak political figures used media platforms to reassure the public of the Vietnamese government as well as strengthen trust in the efforts made by the government during this crisis (La et al, 2020).

Both positive and negative effects have arisen from increased public awareness during the outbreak period. Positively impacting the public was the joint effort of awareness and protection campaigns against COVID-19 on a multitude of social media platforms. As stated earlier, the handwashing song by Vietnamese dancer Quang Dang, entitled "Ghen Co Vy", went viral and has attracted thousands if not millions of views and awareness. Nevertheless, an issue that is continuously growing during this pandemic and which has left no country as a victim is the fake news insurgence. In Vietnam, the fake news issue was most prominent during the early days of the outbreak where celebrities and the public began spreading contradictory news on an array of topics, from case counts and disease facts. To combat this, the Vietnamese government has implemented a decree in which the spread of fake news by an individual can be fined between \$430-\$860, which

translates to 3-6 months of a basic level salary. This again supports the notion that Vietnam's strict authoritarian rule has played a crucial role in the control of the virus.

## **ADDITIONAL NOTES**

Although there is a lack of publications, it can be assumed that Vietnam, like many other nations has been affected by coronavirus at all echelons of society. Those who experienced greater levels of inequality and disadvantage prior to the outbreak likely felt the effects greater than others. More importantly, the strict guidelines and harsh punishments that have characterised the success of Vietnam's response have highlighted the underlying human rights infringements that have long been an issue across the nation. Vietnam's record on freedom of speech and expression reached a new low in 2018 and these problems have continued. Independent media, public assembly and the establishment of political and social organisations are either severely restricted or prohibited. This poses many issues when it comes to the ability for citizens to freely criticise their government or local officials in addition to forming organisations that seek to promote their wellbeing or fight for what they believe is right (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Further, the success of Vietnam in its response to Coronavirus should be applauded and the steps the nation took will hopefully be noted by other nations to better prepare themselves for future outbreaks. However, it is important to note that the replicability of their success is next to impossible for many other nations, particularly those in the West, as it is the degree of control that the Vietnamese government possesses over its citizens and their compliance that has been key to their success (Sang Minh Le, 2020). Moreover, control of media and other platforms has proved to be important when battling fake news insurgence. While fake news continues to trickle out, when compared to what the WHO described as a fake news pandemic, control was relatively well contained within Vietnam.

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