

# GOOD GOVERNANCE AS A PREMISE FOR CRISIS GOVERNANCE: AN ANALYSIS FROM VIETNAM'S CURRENT EFFORTS TO COPE WITH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## ABSTRACT

*Crisis governance is one of the essential parts of national governance. The success and failure of handling crises reflect the national governance level of a government. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected every field, every corner of society, and all levels of governance. The pandemic has highlighted challenges to national governance in every country but has also provided valuable lessons for effectively handling future crises.*

*The article uses the theory of good governance to analyze the successes and limitations of Vietnam in the fight against Covid-19 from the beginning of 2020 until now. The authors believe that Vietnam's success in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 to the first six months of 2021 stems from many different reasons, but the most important thing is that Vietnam has a model. Crisis management is quite suitable to the conditions and circumstances of the country. However, even during that period, Vietnam could still solve the problem better if this country properly applied some principles of good governance. According to the authors, the problematic situation that Vietnam has faced since June 2021 has more clearly revealed the limitations of Vietnam in applying the rules of good governance to handle the crisis. This is an excellent lesson that Vietnam needs to learn to effectively deal with crises that may occur more and more often in the future in the context of an increasingly uncertain world.*

**Keywords:** Crisis Governance, Good Governance, State of Emergency, Covid-19, Vietnam.

## INTRODUCTION

Crisis governance is part of a national governance mechanism that responds to sudden changes in situations that require urgent, extraordinary measures to address immediate issues. The Covid-19 pandemic is a typical situation that challenges the crisis governance mechanism of all countries in the world, including Vietnam.

In Vietnam, since the outbreak of Covid-19 in early 2020, the Government has taken many urgent measures to control the pandemic. The measures taken by the Government have

brought undeniable results in practice, but at the same time, have caused certain debates about the constitutionality, proportionality, responsiveness, openness, transparency—the requirements of good governance. Those problems had emerged once again, more profoundly since June 2021, when the Delta strain caused great difficulties in Vietnam in controlling the pandemic and ensuring people's lives and livelihood and the stability of the economy. A big question was raised: Would Vietnam's response to the Covid-19 pandemic is more effective if the rules of good governance were noticed and applied in this process?

Since good governance and crisis governance are relatively new issues in Vietnam, the above question has not been thoroughly studied. This article contributes to filling that gap in research. Applying the theory of good governance to analyze the actions of the state to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic in Vietnam from the beginning of 2020 to the present, the authors assess the importance and identify the opportunities where good governance principles can be used to improve crisis resolution. On this ground, the article also suggests directions and solutions to improve Vietnam's current legal framework on the state of emergency in general and on crisis management in particular.

### **Vietnam's Success in Crisis Management at an Early Stage—a Good Governance Perspective**

Vietnam's strategy of fighting the Covid-19 pandemic is considered a low-cost model (Nguyen et al., 2021) and achieved many successes throughout 2020. Compared to countries in Asia such as Taiwan, Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam do not have significant resources to carry out mass testing, so this country has prioritized tracing, strictly concentrated isolation, and establishing strict control points at border gates. With this approach, throughout 2020 and the first months of 2021, Vietnam has succeeded in controlling the disease with very low infection and mortality rate, despite having a 1,300 km land border with China and thousands of kilometers of land border with Laos and Cambodia. Economically, Vietnam still maintains a favorable growth rate in 2020 while worldwide faces recession and stagnation.

Many studies point to the reasons for Vietnam's success during this period (Nguyen et al., 2021; Quach et al., 2021). First, the government acted quickly after the first information and reports of the epidemic in Wuhan. The border with China is tightened, and concentrated isolation is applied to people suspected of being infected due to contact with cases. The government has also implemented a policy of propagating and providing accurate information about the dangers of Covid-19. This is one of the most critical factors in crisis management. It is an indicator of responsiveness and efficiency—one of the characteristics of good governance—in Vietnam in the early days.

Vietnam's success also comes from a well-built, managed, and operated public health system based on prevention, not poor treatment. This health system has also accumulated much experience in preventing severe acute respiratory syndrome (SRAS), influenza A/H5N1. All in line with the country's economic conditions, this is also evidence of good governance (effectiveness characteristics). In addition, strict preventive measures were applied thoroughly without any significant obstacles or objections from the people. Of course, these measures

significantly affect the rights and freedoms of individuals. However, the peculiarity of Eastern culture emphasizes community values, accepts patriarchal states, and believes in state institutions (Fulbright, 2020). People hence easily accept policies of epidemic prevention and control that, in essence, limit individual freedom. Most people accept to sacrifice personal freedoms such as the right to move, reside, and assemble, even handing over personal data to the state for management such as the application of “*tracing measures via smartphone*,” publicly announce the identities of F1, F0 people to protect the public interest. Even the government applied strict epidemic prevention measures without declaring a state of emergency but did not receive objections from the people (Metwally et al., 2021).

The above context of Vietnam is not an exception. In the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, the more or less “*tough*” and “*autocratic*” national governance model that is quite common in Asian countries showed its advantages over other Western democracy governance models in dealing with the crisis (He et al., 2020). In Vietnam and some other Asian countries, the state can impose strict, harsh top-down measures without much hindrance. The government can also mobilize resources from state-owned enterprises (which fulfill socio-political goals, not merely pursuing business performance requirements) and from people and other social classes. For example, there is the active participation of Covid, community, and residential groups to prevent and control the pandemic. Social resources are also mobilized and play an essential role in implementing and monitoring social distancing and isolation policy (Passetti et al., 2021).

However, it should also be noted that not only Vietnam and China have adopted strict governance measures that have succeeded in the early stages of the fight against the pandemic. Taiwan, South Korea, and some other democratic countries also achieved the same success in 2020 without having to apply strict restrictions on human rights instead of applying high technology and strategy of testing and vaccination on a large scale. In addition, the changing situation since the end of 2020 shows that democratic countries such as the United States, Britain, France have finally achieved success in the fight against the pandemic after a difficult early period, mainly thanks to wise vaccine strategy rather than into harsh social distancing and control measures. Meanwhile, the situation in Vietnam since June 2021 up to now shows that strict social control solutions to prevent the pandemic are entirely inadequate, and in some contexts, ineffective before the virus variant that infects very quickly is the Delta strain (Jeacle & Parker, 2013).

## **Limitations in Vietnam’s Policy to prevent and Fight against the Covid-19 Pandemic**

### **Delay in vaccine strategy**

Since June 2021, the number of infections in Vietnam has increased out of control, with the death rate among the highest in the world. Some authors argue that Vietnam’s difficulties in dealing with the second wave of the Covid pandemic stem from Vietnam’s own success in the first phase (Le & Hartley, 2021). Accordingly, success with the traditional way of disease prevention of tracing, isolation, and blockade seems to make Vietnam’s policymakers too confident in this strategy. This strategy is prone to bankruptcy by the Delta mutation. With a low

infection rate until June 2021, Vietnam is not forced to find a vaccine by any means like Western countries when vaccine source is scarce in the early stages. Although this nation has signed several small contracts to buy vaccines, Vietnam is not a priority customer for the delivery of vaccine manufacturers and vaccine delivery mechanisms (COVAX).

Vietnam's difficulties in the recent period in the fight against Covid-19 mainly stem from the too-late vaccine strategy. In terms of national governance, this is an indicator of the lack of responsiveness in macro-management. Specifically, it seems that until June 2021, Vietnam has no intention to implement the strategy of universal vaccination.

A deep-freezer storage system (-40oC to -80oC) for the Pfizer vaccine is virtually non-existent. Until January 2021, there are only a few facilities capable of long-term storage of this vaccine in Vietnam. Nevertheless, those facilities are not managed by the State but belong to a private enterprise (Vietnam Has the First Super Refrigerated Warehouse Eligible to Import a COVID-19 Vaccine, 2021) (VNVC vaccination system) with the scale of storing 3 million vaccine doses. In June 2021, Vietnam signed the first contract to buy the Pfizer vaccine with 31 million doses (HNV News, 2021). However, the Ministry of Health did not seem to be prepared to use this vaccine in Vietnam. This agency did not purchase a suitable storage system, forcing the Government to ask for the help of the US Aid Agency (USAID) to apply for 77 deep freezers (Thanh, 2021). This number of specialized refrigerators was transferred to Vietnam by the US Air Force at the end of August. Nevertheless, in fact, this type of specialized refrigerator has been used and sold quite popularly in Vietnam before (Binder brands of Germany, Froilabo of France used for biotechnology laboratories with the price of about 300-400 million VND/cabinet). This lack of logistical preparation shows the fundamental weakness of governance in the health sector (Rababah et al., 2020).

Thirty million doses of Astra Zeneca vaccine in Vietnam's first contract with the Anglo-Swedish manufacturer is actually a contract signed by VNVC for business purposes. However, in the context of the outbreak, this company ceded it to the State at the original price. This fact shows the lack of preparation and vision of the state management agency in health. Due to this delay, by September 2021, most of the vaccines used in Vietnam for vaccination came from direct aid sources (Japan & China) or through the COVAX mechanism. The number of vaccines from commercial sources accounts for a low proportion.

### **Inadequacies in Vaccination Policy**

In the absence of vaccines, Vietnam's vaccination policy reveals weak implementation. The government plans to complete vaccination for most people by the end of 2021 to achieve herd immunity. However, due to limited vaccine resources, the Ministry of Health has adopted a vaccination policy in order of priority. According to publicly available data, most Covid-19 deaths in Vietnam are over the age of 50, and the vast majority has not been vaccinated. While other countries have carried out and WHO itself has recommended giving priority to vaccination for the elderly and those with underlying medical conditions, these two groups of subjects are almost not vaccinated in Vietnam until the regional epidemic in the southern provinces.

They also belong to the 5<sup>th</sup> priority group in the list issued by Decision 1467/QĐ-BYT dated March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021, of the Ministry of Health (2021). In addition, many older adults (not over 65) for screening are denied because of high blood pressure, whereas worldwide, high blood pressure is not a reason for being denied vaccination. On the contrary, experts have recommended priority vaccination for people with heart problems, blood pressure. However, in Vietnam, only recently has the Ministry of Health abolished the regulation of measuring blood pressure before vaccination – a belated action but an appropriate decision.

Realizing the inadequacy of Decision 1467 of the Ministry of Health on the order of priority for vaccination, on July 31, 2021, Ho Chi Minh City issued Official Letter 2552/BCĐ amending the Covid-19 vaccination plan for phase 5 in this locality. Accordingly, the city prioritizes vaccination for people over 65 years old and with underlying diseases. This is also the right decision. However, the price to pay is enormous since it can be considered the fundamental cause of more than 10,000 deaths in Ho Chi Minh City until September 10, 2021. In Hanoi, the policy of giving priority to vaccinations for the elderly and those with underlying diseases has only started since the beginning of September.

In summary, it can be seen that the unreasonable vaccination policy of the Ministry of Health is one of the reasons leading to the death rate/total number of Covid-19 cases in Vietnam is higher than the world average (2.5% vs. 2.1%).

In addition, the abuse of power and deviation in vaccination policies still occur, expressed in many different forms. For example, some local governments have issued documents to distribute the Pfizer vaccine to leaders and former officials, leaving the rest for the people. Alternatively, there are cases of vaccination “*thanks to grandfather*” (Pham, 2021) or ward officials give priority to give injections to relatives in Hanoi. All situations cause frustration in public opinion and weaken people’s trust in the State.

### **Assessment of Limitations in the Prevention and Control of Covid-19 in Vietnam – a Good Governance Perspective**

Good governance is a set of criteria for social management aimed at promoting and ensuring the harmonious and sustainable development of a country (Vu, 2017). It can be affirmed that good governance is not a method or model of organization and operation of a state or a political system, but rather the guiding principles for the design and operation of the state apparatus. or that political system (Vu, 2017). Key features of good governance (Vu, 2017) include citizen participation, consensus-oriented, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, effectiveness, efficiency, equality and inclusiveness, and following the rule of law.

The global health crisis caused by Covid-19 shows gaps and weaknesses in risk management at the national and international levels. The fight against Covid-19 clearly shows the importance of good governance in a harmonious and interconnected global world. The pandemic also proves that the current approach to health management and global crisis management has failed. Getting out of this pandemic requires increased international cooperation and coordination. From a national perspective, if the correct application of the elements of good

governance will limit the damage caused by the epidemic, which Vietnam has done in the early stages.

Covid-19 has become a test of national governance in every country, including Vietnam. The pandemic has exposed many inadequacies in Vietnam, based on many criteria of good governance, which can be summarized as follows:

Regarding the application of science and technology, the Government has long vowed to promote digital transformation and bring information technology achievements to support the prevention and control of the Covid-19 epidemic. However, due to weak governance and no clue, the electronic health declaration alone has many different applications. Each industry (medical, police, information, and communication) builds its application. Although there are many different reporting software, whenever detecting cases of F0 and F1 who have used means of transport (trains & airlines), the authorities must issue a search notice on the means of mass media. Thus, it can be seen that the practical and responsive criteria of good governance did not capture state agencies' attention.

In terms of participation, shown by mobilizing the private health system and social associations to support the fight against the epidemic, the private healthcare system in Ho Chi Minh City in the early stages of the outbreak was hardly used and exploited. In contrast, the public hospital system was overloaded. Many of the jobs unions can ultimately shoulder but have not been mobilized and used rationally by the government. The role of the private sector is also underappreciated. For example, during the pandemic outbreak, the government banned shippers and used the military to buy goods for the people. Since this solution did not work, the government had to restore the role of shippers from grocery delivery services offered by applications (i.e., Grab).

As mentioned above, the policy of procurement, preparation of warehouses for storage, and distribution of vaccines by the Ministry of Health reveals many shortcomings in terms of accountability and transparency. It seems that the Ministry of Health (2021) acted without the participation of epidemiologists or concerning the international experience. For example, in Hanoi, central hospitals are allocated many vaccines for injection. With their limited capacity, the crowded waiting vaccine caused a very high risk of infection. The application of information technology to the appointment and schedule of vaccinations is hardly focused, although the experience of other countries is abundant.

In terms of efficiency, the issuance of road permits in Hanoi is typical of inefficiencies in governance. From August until now, the city government has had 4-5 changes to the regulations on road permits. Each decision is different. While Vietnam has 1.5 years to prepare for these situations, it seems that the authorities still have not developed reasonable scenarios. Technological achievements 4.0, which can replace manual pass-through, have hardly been used. The test certificate policy is also a testament to the inefficiencies in governance. Negative certification does not mean any infection (due to time delay, reliability of rapid test), but only causes troubles for people and businesses.

In terms of the rule of law and effectiveness, crisis governance from the start of the pandemic in early 2020 has revealed a lack of synchronization, unity, and science. However, so far, it has not been resolved effectively. In terms of law, administrative agencies at each level

must base on the direction of the Government and the Prime Minister to organize the implementation of measures and solutions promulgated by the Central Government. Local governments can issue legal documents on specific measures in their areas, but they must not be contrary to central regulations. However, in practice, this rule has been violated from the very beginning of the fight against the epidemic and lasted until recently, especially in traffic and goods circulation. The situation that each province regulates epidemic control in a way and in a way that causes difficulties for businesses and people is quite common. The problem is that the measures applied often have low effectiveness, such as closing the people's market, the traditional market, the shipper level. After a period of application, they see the inadequacy and have to fix it again. In this regard, it is also necessary to see the limitations of the whole central level, reflected in the unclear and specific instructions, making it difficult to apply or asynchronously applied at the local level. For example, a general directive at the central level that only allows the circulation of essential goods during the pandemic has led to a Vice Chairman of the People's Committee of an official in Nha Trang arguing that bread does not belong to an essential commodity. Only then did a host of public authorities jump into the fray to explain what essential goods are.

## CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic is a global challenge, testing the governance capacity of all countries, including Vietnam. Pandemic management most clearly demonstrates the capacity of national governance, requiring the application of the principles of good governance to be successful.

In Vietnam, the qualities of good governance were evident in the early anti-epidemic period, more by accident than by intention. This is because besides the elements of good governance, in the beginning, there are also elements of poor governance, such as a lack of synchronization and consistency in some activities, mainly ignoring the provisions on the publication and use of measures to deal with emergencies that are enshrined in the Constitution and many specialized laws. The success in containing the epidemic offsets those limitations, but it is not lost and will still leave bad precedents for national governance in the long run.

In the later period (from June 2021 up to now), the Covid-19 epidemic prevention and control limitations revealed more and more diversity, reflected in most aspects of good governance. These restrictions have been causing severe consequences in all aspects, especially in terms of people's lives and health and the development of the economy.

Theoretically, the Covid-19 epidemic prevention and control limitations represent a gap in awareness of the importance and content of good governance in our country. While it has been widely recognized and applied in many countries around the world, most of the principles of good governance have not been substantively appreciated and applied in Vietnam. In a normal context, the consequences of this are difficult to discern. However, in emergencies like the Covid-19 pandemic, poor governance's adverse effects are very evident and cannot be justified or concealed. That further shows the urgency of studying and applying comprehensively and deeply the principles of good national governance in our country in the coming time.

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