

Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet

Speaking out publicly about certain issues and in certain ways has become a prominent feature of Vietnam's political landscape.

By Catherine Putz

How does one go about speaking out in a one-party communist state? As Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet explored in his book *Speaking Out in Vietnam: Public Political Criticism in a Communist Party-Ruled Nation*, published last year, while Vietnamese citizens rarely voiced public discontent until the 1990s, in the decades since and with the explosion of internet access, more Vietnamese have found ways to be heard. Contrary to simplistic views of the country's political arrangement, the state has handled its critics in various ways ranging from responsiveness to toleration to repression.

In a recent interview with *The Diplomat*, Kerkvliet, an Emeritus Professor at The Australian National University and an Affiliate Graduate Faculty member at the University of Hawai'i, discussed how speaking out fits into Vietnam's political system and the country's response to the coronavirus pandemic, for which it has garnered much praise.

For those “speaking out” in Vietnam, what avenues exist to influence state behavior and what topics bring people either to the streets or to the social media public square to voice their concerns and opinions?

Until the early 1990s, Vietnamese citizens rarely openly expressed their discontent about political matters. They whispered their criticisms to confidants and did things surreptitiously to avoid reprimands that could include imprisonment. Such everyday disapproval and resistance continues, but in addition, Vietnamese people since the mid 1990s have been speaking out publicly to such a degree that it has become a prominent feature of Vietnam's political landscape.

Public criticism ranges from lambasting corrupt authorities to opposing the political system, from condemning repression against bloggers to resisting land confiscations, from demanding decent working conditions to questioning the state's foreign policies, from protesting police brutality to decrying state interference in private religious affairs. The citizens speaking out are also diverse: rural villagers, urban workers, religious groups, intellectuals, students, environmental activists, members of professional associations, and former (even some current) government and Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) officials. They voice discontent and propose solutions through numerous methods: strikes at factories; demonstrations at government offices; marches along provincial roads and urban streets; petitions with hundreds, even thousands of signatures; letters, phone calls, and text messages; videos, photos, and documents posted on websites; and online newspapers. Often they ask lawyers and journalists to assist their causes.

Public political criticism has emerged and expanded because aggravated people are anxious to be heard. And making that more possible has been the rapid spread and accessibility to most

Vietnamese citizens of the internet and mobile phones. Women and men, young and old, rural dwellers and urbanites – all can fairly readily and cheaply text, phone, blog, and post on websites their grievances, make claims, announce demonstrations, describe protest marches, circulate petitions, and do other things to convey their concerns far and wide.

State authorities have dealt with critics with a combination of responsiveness, toleration, and repression. Indeed, one important reason why public political criticism has grown is authorities have been unable and to a degree unwilling to stifle it. Concerted, extremely aggressive campaigns to halt all political criticism would greatly risk an economic and political crisis that would create even more discontent and greater challenges to VCP rule.

Besides, many authorities take rather seriously the idea that the government is “of the people, for the people, and by the people,” an ubiquitous official motto that is more than a slogan. To maintain political, social, and economic order, authorities listen, at least to an extent. They frequently tolerate, even accommodate some of citizens’ criticisms. For example, authorities often side with striking workers. Officials have frequently found that villagers’ complaints against corruption and land confiscations are valid. Authorities have revised labor and land laws to meet some of workers and farmers’ concerns. Officials have countenanced demonstrations and other forms of protest against China and Vietnam-China relations. They have tolerated a number of individuals who advocate democratization.

The points at which authorities’ reactions became repressive vary with the issue and type of political activity. For labor, that point comes when workers try to form their own unions. Regarding land, authorities use police to evict people after disputes have persisted for several years and to disperse large demonstrations. Toward protests against China and Vietnam-China relations, authorities resort to intimidation and repression when demonstrations become lengthy, threaten to grow nationwide, or defy orders explicitly prohibiting them. Against those championing democratization, authorities use intimidation, threats, and detention. They have also imprisoned many democratization advocates, although not all.

Can you explain how public political criticism works within the confines of the country’s political system?

Observers often say that Vietnam’s political system is totalitarian, authoritarian, or dictatorial. Those terms, however, are problematic because Vietnam under Communist Party rule has never conformed to long-standing definitions for them.

Findings from several studies, including my own, have led me to see Vietnam’s political system as a Communist Party-state that handles public political criticism with responsiveness and toleration as well as repression. Responsiveness means to consider, accommodate, or make concessions to the concerns and demands of individuals, groups, and sectors of society. Toleration refers to countenancing criticism and dissent without doing much to stop it or respond positively to it. Repression means to prevent, stifle, or suppress, through force and other methods, citizens saying or doing things objectionable to authorities. My summary label for this system is a “responsive-repressive party-state.

The system has long included a “dialogical” feature, meaning communication and influence between citizens and party-state authorities. Such dialogue does not mean citizens are as powerful as authorities; it simply means their actions and preferences are important aspects of interactions between them and party-state entities. Citizens’ communication can be direct, verbal,

or organized; it can also be indirect, nonverbal, or unorganized, conveyed through things people do or not do that heed or ignore what authorities expect or demand.

In earlier periods, societal pressures and influences on the party-state's actions and policies were difficult to discern because authorities deterred and repressed public criticism. Citizens could only communicate their discontent through quiet, private, and subtle methods. Since the mid 1990s, the dialogical aspect of Vietnam's political system has become much more visible. Several studies show that changes in policies and other aspects of governance have emerged from interaction and dialogue between citizens and authorities.

That the dialogical feature of the political system is now more apparent does not, of course, mean citizens run the country or that authorities are beholden only to societal interests and pressures. We can recognize that authorities frequently listen and respond positively to people's concerns while at the same time acknowledge that authorities often act without input from citizens and frequently dismiss, even repress citizens' criticisms and protests.

Vietnam has been praised for its pandemic response and reported relatively low infection numbers. To what extent do you think the international community can trust Vietnam's COVID-19 data? Has there been public criticism of the state's response to the pandemic? Did Vietnam's previous experience with SARS and its complex dealings with China inform its reaction to the emergence of COVID-19?

Based on reports since February 2020 from Vietnamese and foreign scholars and journalists who are in Vietnam and have years of experience living there, I think the COVID-19 data from there are valid (e.g., zero deaths and just 352 known cases as of June 25, 2020 in a country with 98 million people). Long-term factors as well as recent actions help to explain the country's relatively successful effort thus far to contain the disease.

The long-term factors relate to the evolution in Vietnam's political system discussed earlier. Since the mid 1990s, authorities have become more willing to listen to and take heed of citizens' concerns; meanwhile citizens have become more vocal and public in speaking out. This political dynamic figures in the country's decades-long efforts to improve governance and responsiveness especially at local levels. That, in turn, has contributed to improvements pertinent for dealing with a health crisis. Whereas 60 percent of Vietnamese had health insurance in 2011, 90 percent had it in 2019, which gives most citizens access to reasonably priced health care. Public servants over the last two decades have become better trained and more professional, increasing their credibility and competence in the eyes of a large proportion of society. Corruption has diminished, including in hospitals and other medical facilities. More and more during the last two decades, Vietnamese have been able to get information about what officials and government agencies do and access other sources for information that helps them to assess the credibility of what authorities claim. This condition has mitigated people's skepticism about authorities' pronouncements and procedures for addressing the pandemic.

Recent actions include local and national government agencies speedily implementing preventative measures, some of them based on having dealt with SARS in 2003 and getting post-SARS assistance from the World Bank and other outside agencies. In January, soon after the first COVID-19 fatality in China, Vietnamese officials, already dubious of Chinese authorities' optimistic assessments of the virus, closed Vietnam's border with China. Soon afterwards, all flights to and from China were suspended; later, passenger flights to and from other countries were halted as well. Party-state authorities also instituted health inspections along other borders

and at air and seaports. An extensive network of security police, health officials, and volunteers track down people who have interacted with COVID-19 patients. People possibly exposed to the virus are quarantined in government-provided quarters. Those needing medical attention or hospitalization get it fast. Aiding all of these measures are tests for the virus that a private company and the Ministry of Defense developed in early February. The Ministry of Health rapidly established sites across the country where people can get free tests.

Criticism of the party-state's handling of the pandemic has been modest and confined primarily to accusing authorities of excessive monitoring, surveillance, and quarantining.

The Author

- **Catherine Putz** is Managing Editor of *The Diplomat*.