



Detlef Briesen | Thi Thuy Trang Nguyen | Quang Minh Pham [Eds.]

Times of Uncertainty

National Policies and International Relations
under COVID-19 in Southeast-Asia and Beyond



Vietnam – Politics and Economics

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Nomos



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Preface

Florian Feyerabend

When in early 2020 the news that a new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) had been detected and was rapidly spreading in China hit international headlines, for many observers in Europe it was far removed from their everyday lives. At that point in time, nobody could have predicted the pandemic and how it would profoundly alter our way of living, the global economy, and international relations. Nobody foresaw that Europe would soon turn into the epicentre of a global health crisis. Many, myself included, expected Southeast Asia, due to its geographic proximity, permeable borders, its people-to-people contacts with China and socioeconomic factors, to be severely negatively impacted by the novel disease. Yet, in 2020, many Southeast Asian nations – first and foremost Vietnam – were relatively successful in containing the spread of the corona virus by applying strict social distancing rules, harsh quarantine regulations and rigorous contact tracing. Other regions were surprised and curious about the success stories bearing in mind the limited resources of these Southeast Asian countries. What is more, it led some observers to laud the efficacy of political systems differing from the liberal democracies of *Old Europe*.

However, the arrival of the Delta variant in 2021 has reversed the anti-pandemic results in the Southeast Asian nations. It also changed strategies pursued by these countries, forcing them to switch from eliminating COVID-19 (*Zero COVID*) to living and adapting with a *new normal*. The rollout of vaccines and progress made with the vaccination campaigns were necessary preconditions facilitating this new approach. Many regional governments face the challenge of striking a balance between fighting the pandemic and developing the economy. They had to resume production and recover the economies – the socioeconomic costs simply became unbearable. Still, there is much public and scholarly interest in the early successes of those countries' national strategies, the regional response to the pandemic and the impact and repercussions for regional and international relations. Therefore, the idea presented by Dr Nguyen Thi Thuy Trang from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University (USSH-VNU) to develop a publication that brings together regional voices and consolidates analyses on the national policies and

Preface

international relations under COVID-19 in Southeast Asia and beyond, immediately received support from Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) in Vietnam.

This publication documents the discussions of a seminar on ASEAN and the fight against Covid-19 that was co-organised by KAS in Vietnam and USSH-VNU. The workshop took place on 26 May 2021, when Vietnam had just entered the fourth and most severe wave of the pandemic. In addition to contributions about the situation in Vietnam, the publication also contains analyses on the role of ASEAN, cases studies from Cambodia and Indonesia as well as perspectives *beyond Southeast Asia*.

The book is the result of the long-term and fruitful cooperation between KAS Vietnam, USSH-VNU and Dr Detlef Briesen from the University of Giessen. Dr Briesen has been a DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) visiting professor, supporter and consultant to scientific studies and publication at the USSH for more than ten years. His commitment was salient for the success of this publication project. The edition is the second one of the series about Vietnam and Southeast Asia, published by the German publishing house, Nomos. The book *Collaboration in Water Resource Management in Vietnam and South-East Asia* was published in 2020. By supporting this series, KAS in Vietnam promotes academic exchange between the East and the West on the issues of regional integration and international relations.

Florian Feyerabend
Berlin in November 2021

Introduction

Detlef Briesen/Nguyen Thi Thuy Trang/Pham Quang Minh

This book deals with the domestic and foreign policy implications of the COVID 19 pandemic. The focus is on the countries of Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam, but also on its closer and wider neighbours, especially South and East Asian countries such as India, Sri Lanka and China. Other international actors are also considered, including Japan and the EU. Indirectly, the influence of the USA in the region in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic is also addressed in several contributions.

The anthology presents various aspects of the impact the pandemic had on domestic and foreign relations in Southeast Asia. All of this is underpinned by an interest in social and political science, with which our anthology breaks new academic ground in many areas. To put it somewhat bluntly: the COVID 19 crisis has had too great an influence on internal relations and external relations, especially in Southeast Asia, for this not to be intensively addressed by the social sciences. Especially at the beginning, the epidemic was left far too much and exclusively to virologists or physicists, for example in countries like Germany or other European states. With their often-insufficient knowledge of the society to which their recommendations were directed, or with predictions or prevention strategies based purely on mathematical simulations, they shaped action in politics and society for far too long. The crisis was and is too serious to leave the corresponding counter-concepts to transport scientists and theoretical physicists alone at first, as happened in Germany. In the meantime, however, an intensive discussion and learning process has begun in large parts of the world, in which we would like to try to contribute from a social science perspective and with a focus on Southeast Asia.

How can we now try to summarise the results of this anthology? Basically, one thing can probably be said first of all with regard to the domestic political situation in the individual countries examined more closely: the fight against the pandemic was and is, as one of the authors has summarised very well here, a difficult balancing act between various socio-political goals: adequate health protection for the population, safeguarding economic activity, avoiding serious social and socio-psychological consequences

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and the attempt to ensure a balance of interests between different social groups.

This was such a difficult and complex process that all those acting in the crisis were more or less bound to fail to varying degrees. Here are just a few of the social or health policy goals that basically could not be bridged: complete health protection of the population, an important goal, was not possible at least as long as sufficient vaccination protection could not be guaranteed for everyone. All health policy measures taken, however, led to more or less severe impairments of economic and social life. On the other hand: too lax a handling of pandemic prevention initially prevented economic slumps, but on the other hand led to considerable health hazards, serious illnesses and deaths. In this dilemma, not all actors involved have always been able to keep the balance, which is certainly very difficult to maintain, especially since it was hardly possible to assess the COVID 19 disease correctly at the beginning. Corona is not a bubonic plague, but it is not a simple flu either. In this medium-risk situation, tragically, zero COVID strategies did not prove to be the right remedies, nor did a widespread ignorance of the dangerousness of the disease.

If one takes a closer look at the internal conditions in the selected countries, it becomes apparent on the one hand that the crisis has given the domestic conflicts in the respective countries sharper contours than was the case before the crisis. For not all people have suffered to the same extent from illness and lockdown, and for social scientists it is almost self-evident that general phenomena of social inequality are making themselves felt here: The poor, the old, the marginalised, minorities and people working in the informal economy were much more affected by the crisis than wealthy, permanently employed and educated people. It is obvious that the latter were more willing to demand or comply with harsh lockdown measures. Hardly surprising, this was structured from country to country by the respective basic social structures: in our sample, too, the way Corona policies are implemented is strongly influenced by whether a country is characterized by a rather exclusive or inclusive social model.

On the other hand, it turned out that the way the respective societies try to fight the pandemic also refers to a fundamental dispositive, especially their socio-political system. This becomes clear when one compares, for example, the countries represented here in the anthology: mobilisation of nationalism (Vietnam), sometimes violently forced regulatory policy (Philippines), religiously inclusive concepts (Cambodia), attempts to implement epidemic policy measures on the basis of a claim to great power (India) or priority for the economy (Indonesia). It would be an attractive task to compare this more closely with other examples from other coun-

tries. Here, national isolation (Japan), mobilisation of the welfare state (EU countries), rigorous regulatory policy (China) or campaign-like combat (USA) have also played a role. In their own way, all the countries mentioned have achieved limited success in the fight against the pandemic.

However, the extent of success was not solely influenced by the national societies or their political leadership: whether success was achieved or not was determined to a considerable extent by inequality of resources and power relations at the global level. After effective vaccines had been developed in a gratifyingly short period of time, the richest and most powerful countries in the world, first and foremost the USA in a shirt-sleeved manner, succeeded in securing raw materials, patents, production facilities and access to vaccines, initially for their own populations. In international vaccination policy, therefore, it was first the rich and powerful countries that were targeted, and indeed South-East Asia is largely not one of them. As a result, those countries that had initially been very successful during the first two waves in 2020 and had quickly implemented measures against the pandemic, have increasingly fallen behind since the end of the year. Most Asian countries, apart from rich countries such as Japan or Singapore or countries with a huge pharmaceutical industry like China, had no access to the vaccines that should have been distributed according to a more equitable global formula according to the WHO's ideas.

This leads to another question addressed here, namely how the COVID 19 pandemic has affected international relations. In this context, it can be stated that, according to most authors present here, international or transnational forms of cooperation have functioned relatively well in the region: ASEAN in particular, as the most important organisation in Southeast Asia, has proven itself as a mechanism of multilateral mutual support in times of crisis. This also applies, with limitations, to international cooperation in a broader field, especially with actors such as the EU and Japan. With countries such as world power ambitions, especially the USA, China and India, on the other hand, it is more likely that the crisis has even been functionalised within the framework of international vaccination diplomacy. This is not a very encouraging result.

What are the lessons to be learned from this publication, if any can be drawn at this stage? Two points in particular seem to be important: With regard to the internal situation of the states examined here, above all the expansion of socio-medical prevention instruments. An epidemic or pandemic cannot be fought with individual medicine, but only as the social phenomenon as it appears: through vaccination, hygiene, education, information systems and the associated changes in behaviour. Here, by the way, clear deficits became apparent not so much on the scale of Southeast

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Asia as in the rich countries of the first world in particular. Secondly, the forms of supranational cooperation against epidemics and pandemics must be improved and institutionalised. After all, the crisis would hardly have been possible in this form if the origin of the disease had been better documented by the country of origin from the very beginning.

It remains to be said that in the second year of the pandemic, this book cannot be more than a snapshot. It is to be hoped, however, that this book will be published at a time when an end to the COVID 19 pandemic is foreseeable globally: or, rather, when a time has been reached at which the disease has changed from an epidemic to an endemic state. For, contrary to all hopes, COVID 19 will remain and will continue to occupy scientists of all disciplines, including the social sciences, in the future.

The editors would like to thank the Konrad Adenauer Foundation for its generous support of the conference from which this anthology emerged and, of course, for that of the anthology itself. The book is part of an ongoing publication project through which the two universities involved, USSH Hanoi and JLU Giessen, will continue to offer scientifically sound information on the latest developments in Southeast Asia and especially in Vietnam.

Detlef Briesen/Nguyen Thi Thuy Trang/Pham Quang Minh
Giessen/Hanoi in November 2021

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