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POPULISM IN VIETNAM TODAY: STATUS-QUO AND POLICY RECOMMENDATION¹

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Abstract: Populism has been on the rise globally since the earliest years of the twenty-first century. Recently, the term “populism” has appeared with relatively high frequency on a number of news media, notably at a time during the double shock of the 2016 Brexit movement and the success in the US presidential election of Donald Trump. In Vietnam, populism does not have enough grounds to exist in a form of “ism” in the original sense, but mainly in specific manifestations. Despite the fact that the idea has not yet governed the Vietnamese people’s lives, its influence is still considerable. This is one of the complicated problems that need to be carefully studied. This article focuses on analyzing the status-quo of populism in Vietnam, thus offering some policy recommendations.

Keywords: populism, Vietnam, political movements, ideology, policy recommendations.

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Introduction

“Populism”, as a political ideology and sociopolitical movement, is a trend that provokes major political and social upheavals. There is a growing body of evidence indicating that populism is a notable factor causing “chaos and instability”, which challenges nation-states and the world order in terms of contemporary values and institutions.

Internationally, there is a deep concern in the face of globalization. A number of values, institutions, and international law (though imperfect) are being violated and distorted by the extreme tendencies of populism; for example, that is the threat of IS to global security and to the citizen’s safety;

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or the destabilized EU by separatist movements. On the national level, many states are facing negative forms of populism aimed at inciting the “discontent” of the people and particular populations, creating divisions between the people and the government, as well as among ethnic communities, etc. Therefore, identifying the tendencies of populist movements is not purely an epistemic requirement, but also the practical complex movement of contemporary political life. In Vietnam, “populism” has been a relatively new concept so far. Hence, the task of clarifying theoretical and practical issues of populism, and assessing its impact on the world in general and Vietnam in particular, becomes increasingly urgent.

This research article is carried out by clarifying the two primary study questions and hypotheses as follows:

Q1: What is populism and how to identify it?

Q2: Is populism likely to arise and give threats to the political life in Vietnam?

H1: In Vietnam, populism does not exist in the original sense.

H2: Although it is not likely to become the mainstream political movement, populism is still posing challenges to Vietnamese politics.

This article uses data and materials from several recent and up-to-date research projects to answer these above questions. To start with, we should also keep an objective attitude toward populism as a research object.

Literature review

Populism has been at the spotlight internationally in recent years due to its rise in different political settings. When it comes to theories on populism and the populist emergence in Western politics, there are some prominent studies worth mentioning such as “The Oxford Handbook of Populism” [Kaltwasser et al. 2017] and “Populism and Democratic Theory” [Mansbridge & Macedo 2019]. Closer to the context of Vietnamese politics, it is also worth referencing such documents as “Populism in Southeast Asia (Elements in Politics and Society in Southeast Asia)” [Kenny 2018] and “Populism in Southeast Asia: A Vehicle for Reform or a Tool for Despots?” [Robison & Hadiz 2020], which clarifies the socio-political origins of populism in several Southeast Asian cases (like the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, etc.) and the impacts of populist movements in the region in the context of advanced social media and increased internet use. The following materials are reviewed for a better understanding of populism from Vietnamese scholars’ viewpoints.

One of the typical research projects on populism recently in Vietnam is the one titled “Populism: history of formation and development, status-quo, and consequences” carried out by a group of authors from Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics [HCMA 2019]. The research pulled together a number of high-quality scientific reports that address many aspects of populism. Many of the arguments in this book affirm that the de facto populism in Vietnam has no economic and politico-social basis to exist in the form of “ism” or “ideology”. It only exists as opinions and thoughts, which do not develop a system of reasoning and manifest itself in the words and actions of some people, especially influential ones. However, there are some negative effects of these thoughts and actions on social life. Hence, the research suggested a number of effective solutions to put a restraint on the threat of populism.

The book titled “Changes of the world situation – Opportunities, challenges and prospects” was drafted by the Central Theoretical Council in 2018. This book is composed of discourses by theoretical researchers, presenting the challenges and opportunities in the fast-changing world. Referring to populism, the book states that the populist movement has recently been in a growing surge in developed countries. In particular, the populist movement in Europe is characterized by the backlash against the trend of international integration and globalization, the support against immigrants, and opposition to giving the EU’s interests priority over each nation’s sovereignty and interests. In the United States, the surge of rightist populism has attracted the support of Republicans, bringing success to Donald J. Trump’s presidential election as a result. In the case of Vietnam, the book argues that the populist movements are promoting the building of a powerful state capable of tightly controlling its territory and national borders as well as defending the people’s interests [Hội đồng lý luận 2018].

Besides, there is also another remarkable work on populism in Vietnam titled “The fight against Trotskyism to protect the Party's directions (1930–1945), and the lessons today against opportunism and populism” by Nguyen Trong Phuc, published in 2019. The work is to show that a number of Trotskyists, mainly from France, had designs on forming their own party to oppose their “leftist” slogans against the Communist Party's revolutionary line, aimed at deceiving the masses and taking them out of the revolutionaries. A sharp struggle against the Trotskyists was taken up in a timely manner, from which we can draw valuable lessons for today’s politics. The article underlines the need to build a strong and transparent ruling party, developing and completing the political system to counter opportunism and populism [Nguyễn Trọng Phúc: 08.09.2019].

In addition, the work “The thematic paper on today’s populism” [Võ Văn Hải 2019] also points out several noteworthy issues and suggestions to prevent the risk of populism in Vietnam. Accordingly, to defend against populism, the most important thing is to raise consciousness about populism as well as taking account of some acute problems. *Firstly*, there is the need to identify and warn against the populist manifestations in Vietnamese political life. *Secondly*, from practical experiences in the world, one major reason why the people believe and follow populist movements or support populist characters is partly related to ineffective management of the government in solving the people's problems. *Finally*, it is necessary for people of all ages, especially young people, to be known more about the flip side of populism through the mass media, including public broadcasting agencies, social networking sites, etc.

Although the aforementioned research results have discussed a number of issues about populism in general and how it relates to Vietnam, the political impacts of populism on Vietnam have not been comprehensively interpreted. To reiterate, populism is still a relatively new topic in Vietnam so far. Hence, the task of clarifying theories on populism, assessing its impact on Vietnam, and providing policy recommendations becomes increasingly urgent.

Theoretical framework on populism

“Populism” is the term that brings controversy and ambiguity in terms of its connotations and other related expressions [Kazin 2016]. This view is supported by several political scientists like Cas Mudde. He supposed that “populism” is one of the most controversial concepts in the domain of social sciences, and there is no academic consensus on how to define it [Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013]. From the

perspective of political science, we reckon that populism is a combination of a variety of factors. Similar to the views of some other researchers, we believe that populism could be studied as an ideological issue, approached as a strategy or a tactic, or even acknowledged as a particular style of political leaders, to attract the masses. It is important to consider all the above factors in many ways to get the overall picture.

More specifically, with the aim of interpreting the concept of populism in Vietnam, we create the theoretical basis of populism as follows:

Firstly, as pointed out by recent studies, populism has no economic and politico-social basis to exist in the form of “ism” or “ideology” in Vietnam. It mainly exists as opinions or thoughts expressed by words and actions of some people, especially influential political ones. This leads to the fact that there have been no widespread populist movements in Vietnamese political landscape.

Secondly, from the political perspective, specifically focusing on the struggle for political power, populism is deemed to be a political movement that places emphasis on chanting slogans, giving idle and empty promises due to the lack of viability in concrete situations for the purpose of achieving certain political goals. Accordingly, populism is associated with activities aimed at disseminating populist views among the masses with baseless promises and demagogic propaganda [Nguyễn Vũ Hảo & Nguyễn Thị Châu Loan 2018: 153]. Based on the realities in Vietnamese politics led by the CPV, Vo Van Thuong [2018] wrote an article to further specify populism and its manifestations in Vietnam. According to him, there have been statements in Vietnam that were not in line with the CPV's platforms, ignored legal basis and lacked feasibility, exceeded or fell within the authority of a few individuals, even some top political leaders, praised by mass media and social networking sites. Combining all of these arguments, when approaching populism in Vietnamese politics, we mainly focus on the statements and activities of influential individuals, especially political officials, aimed at disseminating baseless promises and demagogic propaganda, many of which are not in line with the CPV’s platform and Vietnamese legal framework, among the masses.

Thirdly, for studying the recent resurgence of populism in Western countries, which provides good examples and lessons for the Southeast Asian region, we use the analytical model developed by H. Kriesi and J. Schulte-Cloos [2020] (Fig. 1).

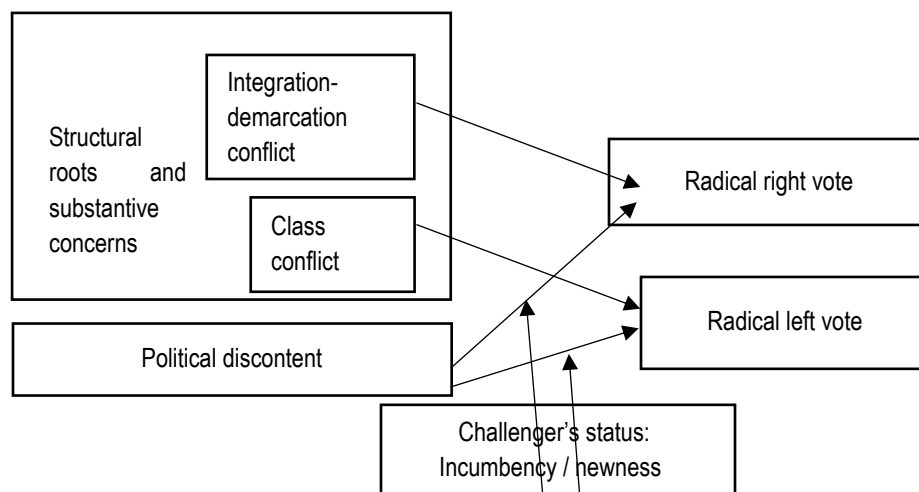


Fig. 1. The conditions for the rise of populism in Europe. *Source:* [Kriesi & Schulte-Cloos 2020]

Populism in Vietnam today: Manifestations and reasons

Even though the pros and cons of populism are still controversial among social scientists worldwide, the official approach to it in Vietnam inclines to treat it negatively. In the authors' opinions, there are two main reasons for this tendency.

The first has its root in the development history of the CPV. Looking back to the 1930s, the communists, during their party's infancy, were striking against the Trotskyists, whom they deemed populist and criticized for denying national independence, self-reliance, and creativity of the Indochinese peoples in the revolutionary process [Nguyễn Ngọc Hà & Nguyễn Thanh Huyền: 30.11.2020]. Despite the fact that populism has transformed greatly over time, this combat against the populists and the ideology behind it has long been anchored firmly in the political history and tends to incite preventive reactions among the CPV's followers to populism.

The second reason should be the practices of populist movements in recent years. Populism has evidently provoked substantial changes in political settings across the globe, ranging from the rise of demagogues and anti-establishment movements to the fragmentation of regional integration. Objectively speaking, many of these outcomes run counter to the established political direction of Vietnam, which is set for upholding the leadership of the CPV and political monism. That is why the behavior of "supporting extreme views" is mentioned among the 27 signs of degradation in political ideology, morality, and lifestyle of the CPV's members [Nguyễn Thị Phương Hoa 2019].

Accordingly, populism tends to express itself in Vietnam through the following aspects.

Firstly, although populism is considered an opposition to the CPV's ideology and not a theoretical tool of the whole political system, part of CPV members and state officials have shown the signs of being influenced by populist movements, especially in the form of demagogic politicians. They made lots of decisions and policies based on the opinions and wishes of a certain group under the label of "for the masses", whether complying with the legal policy-making process or not, for the purpose of reaching the position of power and gaining personal benefits for themselves and for their interest groups. One of the most prominent characters of this case should be Dinh La Thang (Đinh La Thăng, recently being sentenced to 30 years in prison). During his time as the minister of transport ministry and then a member of the CPV Politburo, he was famous for his simple and resolute working style. In fact, many people "admired him from strictly scolding his subordinates for breaking the rules, publicizing his hot-line so that people could promptly reflect on their problems ... Therefore, when knowing that 'Mr. Thang' was disciplined for being related to past mistakes, many people were even surprised that they did not believe it was true. Simply because the public knew more about Dinh La Thang as an assertive and for-the-people leader than his violations in leadership positions" [Ngọc Huyền: 22.04.2020].

Secondly, as an opposition to the mainstream political ideology in Vietnam, populism provides the anti-CPV forces, both domestic and overseas, a channel to spread their anti-system propaganda and activities, especially through social networking sites. They often capitalize on these sites to gather their domestic supporters under the words and acts contrary to the policies of the CPV and Vietnamese government, mainly on the label of demanding freedom and unlimited democracy, political pluralism and multi-partism, and the abandonment of socialism. These individuals and groups abuse the rights of freedom and democracy to make unreasonable demands and demagogic programs of action, which are

inconsistent with the directions and policies of the CPV and the State of Vietnam. An instance to be mentioned here should be the case of China's illegal deployment of the HD-981 oil rig in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone and continental shelf in 2014. At that time, the anti-system populists took advantage of the people's justifiable combat against the incident to provoke resentment and xenophobic sentiments toward both the Chinese authority and the entire Chinese people. Similar observations could be found in several subsequent cases like the 2015 tree-felling scandal in Hanoi, the 2016 Formosa protests, etc.

Although it is hard to generalize the core characteristics of these populist manifestations into environmental populism, nationalist populism, or anti-establishment populism, all of these cases share a common point that the populists intend to mobilize support from the masses in demagogic, sentimental, and/or illegal ways. The reasons for their emergence could be explained as follows.

First, the deterioration in ideology, morality, lifestyle, and working style of a certain part of the CPV members and State officials. This is the cause of corruption, the chase for promotion and power, group interests, and lobbying. These are the negative manifestations of politics in Vietnam that make the people lose faith in the pure-mindedness and the leadership of the CPV, the constructive and managing role of the State as well as the fairness and transparency of the judicial system. The 4th Plenum of the 12th CPV Central Committee affirmed that "Many cadres and Party members, including the heads, have not shown their pioneering role and exemplarity; there are still signs of red-tapes and authoritativeness. Besides, the Party's supervision, inspection, and discipline have not enough deterrence to prevent and push back the degradation" [Văn kiện Hội nghị Trung ương 2016: 22]. Such manifestations as the deterioration in political ideology, morality, and lifestyle, the divergence from the policies of the CPV and State, or the pursuit of immediate interests of parts of cadres, party members, and people, could be considered as the motives for degraded Vietnamese politicians to utilize populist viewpoints and actions as their political tools.

Second, the limitation in political awareness and practices of certain segments of the Vietnamese population. In certain instances, this becomes an opportunity for the populists to distort the policies of the CPV and the Vietnamese Government. These falsifications over-amplify difficulties in people's livelihood as well as affecting domestic, international, religious and belief affairs. To be specific, some individuals and organizations with populist expressions took advantage of erroneous information on the Internet and Vietnamese patriotism to unleash a series of protests, which then escalated into violent riots in some cases. That not only made the problems hard to resolve at home but also affected the foreign relations between Vietnam and some other concerned countries.

Third, the objective factors such as economic globalization, the drawbacks of market economy or information explosion, and many others also exacerbate the domestic affairs, widening the polarization between the rich and the poor and social inequality. The fact that these pressing problems have not been fully resolved, which is likely to be exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, is the condition for the appearance of populist manifestations. The CPV and the Vietnamese Government have been striving to associate economic growth with social progress and equity for years. However, the downside of the market economy clearly reveals the shortcomings that amplify the disparities between the urban and the rural, river deltas and mountainous areas, or even among ethnic minorities, etc. (see

Table 1 as an example) These limitations are likely to cause great division and frustration among the population, becoming the important factors for the surge of populism.

*Table 1. Average income per capita per month during the period 2010–2020
thousand VND*

Year	Average	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	a	b (times)
2010	1387	369	669	1000	1490	3410	3041	9.2
2012	2000	512	984	1500	2222	4784	4272	9.3
2014	2637	660	1314	1972	2830	6413	5753	9.7
2016	3098	771	1516	2301	3356	7547	6776	9.8
2018	3876	932	1907	2934	4291	9320	8388	10.0
2019	4295	988	2100	3330	4954	1010	9115	10.2
2020	4249	1139	2491	3528	4896	9193	8053	8.1

a: Income gap between Group 1 and Group 5 (Absolute Difference);

b: Differential times in income between Group 1 and Group 5.

Note: According to General Statistics Office of Vietnam, there are 5 income groups in Vietnam including Group 1/Quintile 1 (the lowest-income households), Group 2/Quintile 2 (the near-poor households), Group 3/Quintile 3 (the middle-income households), Group 4/Quintile 4 (the good-income households), and Group 5/Quintile 5 (the highest-income households)

Source: GSO (2021). Statistical Yearbook 2020. Hanoi. P. 362

Returning to the aforementioned Kresi model, social and class inequality issues tend to be on the agenda of leftist parties, including both populist and progressive left-wing ones. Accordingly, these are the suitable conditions for the rise of populism in many European countries. Although there are no opposition parties, not to mention the populist ones, in the party system of Vietnam, these social phenomena are still tapped by the anti-CPV forces in populist ways as revealed for their purpose of weakening the CPV's leadership.

Based on recent studies on populism in Southeast Asia [Kenny 2018], over the past few years, some countries following the multi-party system in the region (like Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand) have been facing the rise of populism, and one reason for its spillover in these cases should be the mushrooming of social network users. As illustrated in Fig 2, Vietnam ranks 12th over the globe and 3rd in the Southeast Asian region with respect to the highest growth rates of social network users from 2021 to 2026.

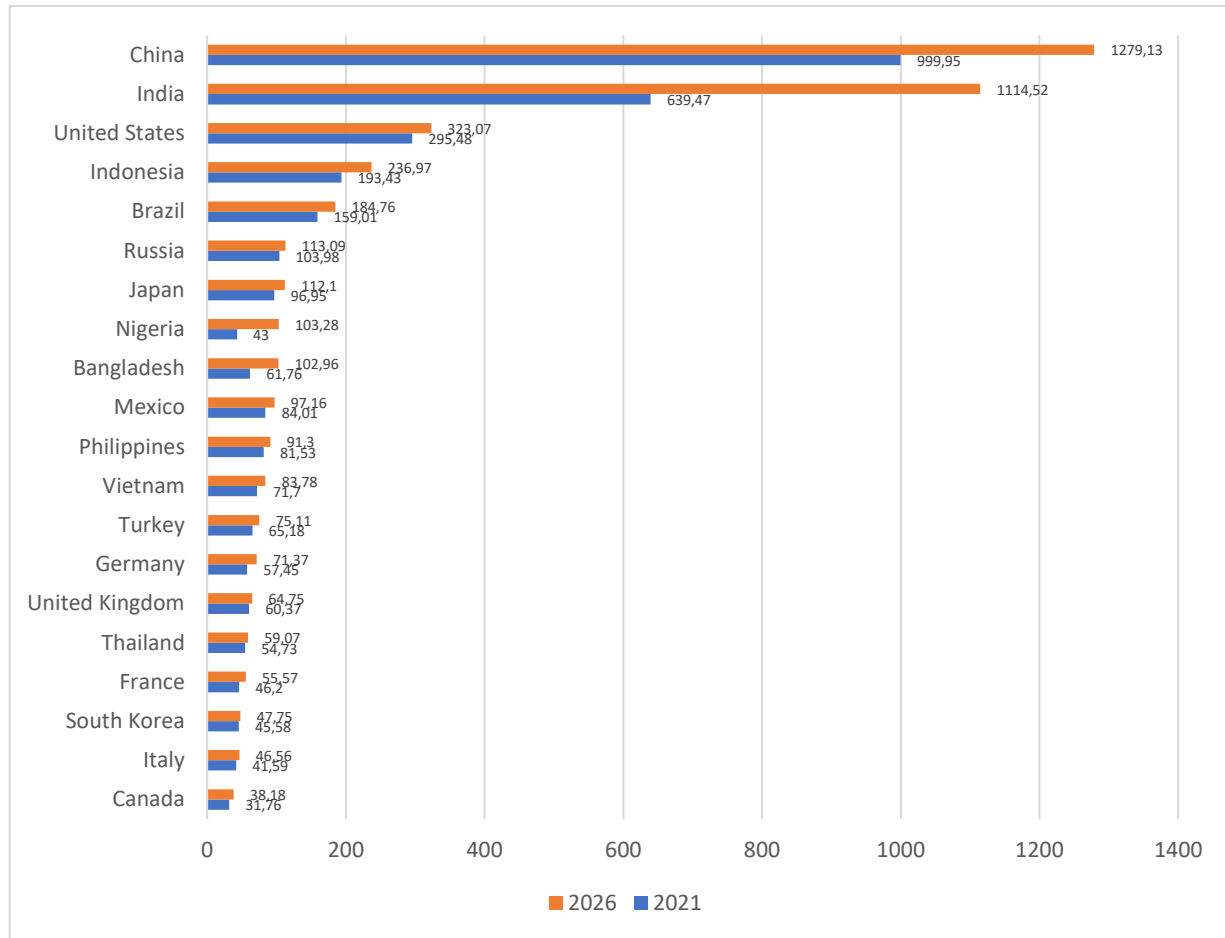


Fig. 2. Number of social network users in selected countries in 2021 and 2026 (in millions).

Source: [Statista: 16.05.2022]

Information overload in the age of information technology and social networking sites makes it hard for many citizens of all ages to evaluate and classify. Moreover, the provision of information in Vietnam in some cases, some of which are hot and confidential, is not yet sufficient, accurate, and timely. Besides, the cultural and legal standards of many Vietnamese citizens, including young people, are not high enough, making them easily directed by the populists. The booming of these sites assists political populists in forming promising images in the eyes of the masses, many of which bear little resemblance to reality, pushing people to follow populist programs contrary to the official directions and policies. Despite not being the heart of the matter, it is undeniable that the rapid increase of social network users in Vietnam in this day and age also adds fuel to the fire.

Conclusion

Populism at present is a burning and complex issue that could become one of the decisive political phenomena over the next decade. As explained above, in Vietnam, populism does not have enough economic and socio-political grounds to exist in a form of “ism” in its original sense, but rather in populist manifestations. Despite this fact, its influence is still considerable, especially in political aspects. More specifically, a segment of CPV members and state officials in Vietnam have shown signs of being

influenced by populist movements, especially in the form of demagogic politicians. No less complicated is the way the anti-CPV forces, both domestic and overseas, use populism as a channel to spread their anti-system propaganda and activities, many of which is through social networking sites. Facing this status-quo, the article supposes that it is necessary to pay attention to the following recommendations.

Firstly, step up research on the connotation, forms, sources, manifestations, and impacts of populism. Along with that are practical activities on communication, dissemination, and education for the officials, party members, and the people to be aware of populist manifestations. It is necessary to provide sufficient and accurate information, especially about political flashpoints, in order to raise people's knowledge about ways to identify and prevent the flip sides of populism.

Secondly, accelerate national renewal and development led by the CPV, thus preventing corruption and regaining public confidence; building up a clean, strong, and wholehearted CPV and political system to serve the people; strictly implementing what Ho Chi Minh said, "What is beneficial to the people, we must do our best" and "What is harmful to the people, we must do our utmost to avoid" to reinforce the people's faith in the CPV and Vietnamese State [Le Minh Quan: 23.06.2019].

Thirdly, learn from international experiences in building the economic and socio-political environment that halt and reverse the downside of populist manifestations. If not being well-regulated, political media and social networks are likely to facilitate the surge of populism. From that reality, Vietnam should draw other countries' lessons, Southeast Asian ones for instance, on establishing more efficient communication and improving the understanding of populism, thus further raising the Vietnamese people's awareness to avoid them from being drawn into the negative populist manifestations.

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