‘Authorized to Depart from the Law’
The Curious Case of Viet Nam in Times of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT
The COVID-19 pandemic has posed myriad brain-wracking questions to decision-makers at all levels. Viet Nam managed to curb mortality and morbidity to praiseworthy levels in the past COVID-19 waves, however, has now had its back against the wall amidst the recent exponential infection cases and draining medical resources. For swiftly flattening the curve, the legislature authorized the Government to take bolder steps where needed, even different from the laws. This article argues that while the empowerment comes from the goodwill of the legislature for the purpose of containing the raging outbreak, there remain procedural irregularities. This should garner more attention from the state authority to ensure the rule of law and legality of all state actions during the time of public health emergency.

1. INTRODUCTION
The world has wrestled with the COVID-19 pandemic for almost two years. The impacts of this public health crisis are immeasurable. As new variants of the novel virus unraveled, the infection cases and fatalities have kept rising exponentially. Many economies have not got back on their feet after a recession year with millions of jobs being lost, hanging people’s livelihood by a thread. Worse yet, it has not seen the light at the end of the tunnel as in the words of the World Health Organization’s Chief: ‘World may be tired, but virus not tired of us’.

It is little doubt that decision-makers have faced various conundrums that could significantly affect lives domestically and possibly abroad. One of those is how to mount an effective coordinated response to a health crisis. This type of question has been subject to much academic debate. From a legal perspective, responding to an emergency within the remit of the existing legal system is never an easy task. During a health crisis, legal clarity and predictability might be up in the air due to the fast-changing nature of the circumstances, evidenced by a myriad of regulations introduced by

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1 France24, ‘World May Be Tired, But Virus “Not Tired of Us”: WHO Chief’ (9 November 2020) <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20201109-world-may-be-tired-but-virus-not-tired-of-us-who-chief> (15 August 2021).
governments. To illustrate, the Czech Republic enacted 65 resolutions in response to the pandemic between three months from 12 March to 12 May 2020. Between 28 January and 23 July 2020, the UK Parliament introduced 153 coronavirus-related regulations.

Viet Nam’s COVID-19 achievements were a surprise to many observers and have garnered keen interest in academic debate. However, as the raging pandemic has continued to unfold, the country has begun to flounder. In an attempt to urgently respond to the raging outbreak, the Vietnamese legislature—National Assembly (NA)—has authorized the Government to take necessary measures different from the prescription of the laws. The authorization is somewhat odd from a legal perspective.

This article comprises five sections, including an introduction. Section 2 presents an overview of the development of the COVID-19 pandemic and measures taken by the authorities. Section 3 provides the background of the NA and its Standing Committee (NASC) in terms of their power to issue a resolution. This serves as a springboard to probe the legitimacy of the recent legislative authorization in the form of a resolution in Section 4. The main argument is that while the empowerment comes from the good faith of the legislature for the purpose of crushing the virus, there remain procedural irregularities, meriting further attention of the law-makers with a view to ensure the rule of law and legality of all state actions during the time of public health emergency. Section 5 provides concluding remarks.

2. THE UNFOLDING OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN VIET NAM

The COVID-19 pandemic in Viet Nam by far can be divided into four phases with breaks during which there were no recorded cases. The first phase was marked on 23 January 2020 with two Chinese men from Wuhan confirmed as the novel coronavirus carriers, mounting the fear of the authority, especially given the fact that Viet Nam borders China and the flow of people between the two countries remained free at the time. In the wake of an epidemic, the Government required all passengers departing from China to undergo strict screening and declare their health status. For a coordinated response to the looming epidemic, the National Steering Committee on the COVID-19 Prevention and Control was established on 30 January 2021, along with specialized task forces at all hospitals at the central and local levels. Grappling with the severity of the novel disease, a day later, the Government decided to close overland borders with China and suspended all flights from and to China. The Government also reassured the public that the prevention of COVID-19 would remain its top priority.

Until 6 March 2020, a series of serious cases were recorded. A patient returned from a European COVID-19 hot spot but failed to report her itinerary to the authority. She

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2 J Grogan and N Weinberg, ‘Principles to Uphold the Rule of Law and Good Governance in Public Health Emergencies’ (2020) REConnect Policy Brief, Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law, pp. 8–9.

3 Government of the Czech Republic, ‘Measures Adopted by the Czech Government against the Coronavirus’ (2020) <www.vlada.cz/en/media-centrum/aktualne/measures-adopted-by-the-czech-government-against-coronavirus-180545> (15 August 2021).

4 Hansard Society, ‘Coronavirus Statutory Instruments Dashboard’ (2020) <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/data/coronavirus-statutory-instruments-dashboard> (15 August 2021).

5 See Open Development Vietnam, ‘Timeline of COVID-19 and Vietnam Policy Actions at a Glance’ (2020) <https://vietnam.opendevelopmentmekong.net/stories/timeline-of-covid-19-and-vietnam-policy-actions-at-a-glance/> (15 August 2021).
was allegedly the probable source of many infection cases. After the incident came to light, her neighborhood was quickly barricaded out. International travel restrictions were put in place, including complete border closure, and mandatory 14-day quarantine in sanctioned facilities to all overseas arrivals for those allowed to enter. At the same time, the Government moved to apply stricter preventive measures in COVID-19-impacted areas, such as a ban of entertainment services, mandatory facemask wearing at public places, and compulsory health declaration for all domestic travelers.

Amidst the severe outbreak without any sign of slowing down, Hanoi, the capital of Viet Nam, found itself in hot water as one of its largest hospitals detected dozens of infection cases. This watershed induced the Prime Minister to issue two normative documents, Decision 447/QĐ-TTg declaring a state of epidemic nationwide and Directive 15/CT-TTg for temporarily halting non-essential services from 28 March to 15 April. Considering the severity of the incident and the overburdened health care system, the Prime Minister issued Directive 16/CT-TTg sanctioning nationwide social distancing for 15 days from 1 April. People were strongly encouraged to stay inside their residence. They might go out in cases of pressing needs, such as for food, medication, or emergency. In addition, gatherings of more than two persons at public places were prohibited. Essential services and manufacturing might go on as long as regulations on safe distance, mask-wearing, and area disinfection were observed. From 23 April, while the nationwide lockdown was removed, many restrictions were kept in place under the newly sanctioned Directive 19/CT-TTg dated 24 April 2020. Many social and economic activities were allowed to restore with vigilance, especially in major cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. As of July 2020, the first phase of the pandemic recorded 415 patients with COVID-19 and no fatality.6

After a long period of recording zero infection cases, the country entered into the second phase of the pandemic from 25 July 2020. Many community transmission cases were found in Da Nang hospitals and quickly spread to other localities. All domestic flights from and to Da Nang city were therefore halted. The local government also declared 15-day social isolation as sanctioned under Directive 16/CT-TTg imposed on the entire city. This measure was followed by other hard-hit localities. The first COVID-19-related deaths were also recorded during this phase. Notably, this phase saw a change in the Government’s mentality and strategy to control the spread.7 Departing from the former approach of quickly enforcing nationwide social isolation, the Government prioritized targeted quarantine of zones where the COVID-19 risks were high. This helped make space for other places to continue production, and as a result, the economy would not be wrecked by prevention efforts. Given the burden of Da Nang city in the treatment of COVID-19 patients, the Government dispatched a group of medical experts to support it. As of December 2020, Vietnam recorded 1551 COVID-19 patients, 35 succumbed to the disease.8

The third phase of the pandemic in Viet Nam broke out on 27 January 2021 as Hai Duong and Quang Ninh provinces detected many infection clusters in their industrial

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6 Ibid.
7 DT Nguyen and ATT Chu, ‘Weathering the Storm: Viet Nam’s Legal and Policy Measures in the Time of COVID-19’ (2020) 6(2) Public Administration Issues 9–10.
8 Open Development Vietnam, supra n 5.
zones. This has spread to many localities. At first, targeted community lockdowns were imposed based on outbreak situation and risk assessment. However, as mass testing gained traction, the number of infection cases surged swiftly. Hence, many provinces went into social isolation in accordance with Directive 16/CT-TTg, while others remained highly alerted and warned dwellers coming from the two infected provinces for health self-declaration and at-home isolation. The silver lining was that most of the cases resided in industrial zones. Therefore, it was arguably easy for the authorities to locate and quarantine the impacted areas. As of March 2021, 1301 more cases were added to the country’s record without a fatality.9

The recent and also most serious phase has taken place from 27 April 2021 and still wrought havoc on the country. The Delta, a new and highly contagious variant of the coronavirus, is a game-changer, threatening the fruits of Viet Nam’s prevention efforts since the beginning of the pandemic. Many cities and provinces have gone into social isolation for weeks; however, the heat of the pandemic is still on. The consequences of this phase have induced the authorities to rethink its containment strategy, placing a higher priority on the vaccination plan. In July, the COVID-19 vaccination campaign was launched nationwide. Along the way, the Government has found its hands tied in taking measures to respond to the viral pandemic in many localities. In August 2021, it made a proposal to the National Assembly and its Standing Committee on authorization to take measures different from the laws for the prevention of infection. This issue is analyzed further in subsequent sections. As of August 2021, Viet Nam has recorded more than 265 thousand infection cases with almost 5,5 thousand fatalities.10

3. FUNCTIONS OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY’S RESOLUTION: SEVERAL IRONS IN THE FIRE

Influenced by the Soviet constitutional model,11 Viet Nam adopted constitutional statism, which saw the concentration of power into the hand of the legislature. According to Viet Nam’s 2013 Constitution, the National Assembly serves as the highest representative body of the people. It is vested with the supreme state power, including constitution- and law-making, deciding on important national issues, and supervising all state activities.12 The full legislature is normally very large and meets infrequently (twice a year with a two-week session each). Therefore, its Standing Committee is expected to fill the gap when the National Assembly is not in session. This smaller body is vested with extensive power, such as interpreting the constitution and laws.

In performing its functions, the NA exercises power to make a constitution, the power to make a law, and the power to make a sub-law. The Constitution is the basic law providing for fundamental issues of the State. Meanwhile, a body of codes and laws are enacted to regulate fundamental social relations in terms of domestic and foreign affairs. Codes and laws concretize the provisions of the Constitution according to branches of law or specialized fields of law.

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9 Ibid.
10 The Health Ministry of Viet Nam, ‘News Portal on COVID-19 in Viet Nam’ <https://ncov.moh.gov.vn/> (15 August 2021).
11 W Partlett and E Ip, ‘Is Socialist Law Really Dead?’ (2016) 48 NYU J Int’l L & Pol 482.
12 Art. 70 of the 2013 Constitution.
Besides, the National Assembly and its Standing Committee may issue resolutions. Resolution is a legal document that contains regulative norms.\(^\text{13}\) Apart from the National Assembly and its Standing Committee, other state bodies might issue this type of legal document. However, the scope and legal effect of the resolution issued by those are much limited than that of the National Assembly.\(^\text{14}\) The focus of the paper is centered upon the resolution of the National Assembly and its Standing Committee.

According to Article 15 of the 2015 Law on Promulgation of Legal Documents (hereinafter the Law 2015), resolutions of the NA are used to, among others, ‘suspend or extend the implementation period of the whole or part of a law or resolution of the NA in order to meet urgent requirements for socio-economic development, guarantee of human rights and citizens’.

Article 4 of the 2015 Law enumerates an exhaustive list of legal documents to be enacted by state bodies. Although it is not explicitly stated, the order of the enumeration appears to correspond to the descending legal value as the first-mentioned is constitution, followed by ‘codes, laws, and resolutions’ of the NA and then sub-laws of other state bodies. This is especially illuminating when taken into account the predecessor of the 2015 Law—the 2008 Law on Promulgation of Legal Documents—which put ‘constitution, laws, and resolutions’ of the NA in the same category. The 2015 Law has put ‘constitution’ in a separate and top clause, denoting its paramountcy. Also and importantly, this is deemed that a resolution of the NA as a sub-constitutional would be forbidden to modify the supreme document, a practice that was seen in 2001 with the enactment of Resolution no. 51/2001/QH10 of the 10th NA to alter parts of the 1992 Constitution, despite that it had undergone equivalently rigorous rounds of drafting and deliberation.

That being said, the 2015 Law lumping the NA’s ‘codes, laws, and resolutions’ in one basket still creates a fuzzy understanding about the effect of this legal document. The enumeration of Article 4 of the 2015 Law gives an impression that the legal value of the NA’s resolution is on par with its codes and laws.\(^\text{15}\) This view helps explain the use of the NA’s resolutions to ratify Viet Nam’s membership to international treaties such as Resolution no. 102/2020/QH14 on the ratification of the EU–Viet Nam Free Trade Agreement, and Resolution no. 103/2020/QH14 on the ratification of the EU–Viet Nam Investment Protection Agreement. Also, the 2015 Law allows the NA’s resolution to ‘suspend or extend the implementation period of the whole or part of a law or resolution of the NA in order to meet urgent requirements for socio-economic development, guarantee of human rights and citizens’. This implies that the 2015 Law sees the NA’s resolution may possess the legal value similar to that of its laws in order to ‘suspend or extend’ the latter’s effect. This is the central issue to be discussed in the next section.

Nevertheless, many of the NA’s resolutions do not contain regulative norms but target laying out overarching development strategies and policies, such as Resolution no. 77/2014/QH13 of the 13th NA on the socio-economic development plan for 2015.

\(^{13}\) Art. 4 of The 2015 Law on Promulgation of Legal Documents.

\(^{14}\) The 2015 Law on Promulgation of Legal Documents 2015 Art. 21 (Resolution of the Adjudication Council of the Supreme People’s Court), and Art. 27 and Art. 30 (Resolution of the local People’s Councils).

\(^{15}\) PT Hiền, ‘Nghị quyết của Quốc hội là văn bản Luật hay văn bản dưới luật?’ [Whether the National Assembly’s Resolution Is a Law or Sub-Law?] (2011) 18 J Legis Stud 12–17.
There are typical formalities and layouts for this kind, including assessment of the situation and results of the implementation of the previous year’s plan; and setting general socio-economic goals and targets for the upcoming year, main tasks, and solutions. Many scholars see this more as a ‘principal document’ than a ‘legal document’. This means that this type of resolution does not comprise peremptory norms like ordinary legal documents, and it displays policy-like contents. In addition, the NA’s resolution is also used to remove the title and membership of the NA’s delegates, and approve state titles such as state president, prime minister and deputy prime ministers, ministers, president of the People’s Supreme Court, chairman of the People’s Procuracy.

Hence, it can be observed that the NA’s resolutions, although clothed in the same name, may serve different purposes and contain varied contents. Notably, despite that the drafting, deliberation, consultation, and scrutiny of a resolution are similar to law-making, there are certain peculiarities in the resolution-making process.

The 2015 Law requires an annual program for law-making to be approved by the NA upon the proposals of a variety of actors listed in Article 32(1) thereof. The program shall go under scrutiny and review rounds with the participation of various actors. This would serve as an orientation for the subsequent deliberation of the National Assembly on each law draft to ensure the compatibility of the law with the pressing needs in practice. Along the way, the NASC may make an adjustment to the program provided certain circumstances. For the NA’s resolution-making, it is not stipulated under the 2015 Law. Besides, while a law shall be announced by the State President, the NA’s resolutions are declared by its Secretary-General. This is perplexing if one holds the view that the NA’s resolutions are of equal legal value as a law, provided that the significance and impacts of the two are profound and wide-ranging.

Besides the NA’s resolution, according to Article 74 of the 2013 Constitution and Article 16(2) of the 2015 Law, the NASC is empowered to issue a resolution to (i) interpret the Constitution, laws, and ordinances; (ii) suspend or extend the validity of the whole or part of its own ordinance or resolution promulgated to meet urgent requirements for socio-economic development; (iii) nullify its own ordinances and resolutions; (iv) declare and cancel states of emergency at the national or local level; (v) provide instructions on operation of the People’s Councils; and (vi) decide other issues within its competence.

**4. LEGISLATIVE AUTHORIZATION FOR DEPARTING FROM THE LAW: GOOD FAITH, TROUBLED WAY**

Due to a new alert on the pandemic in Viet Nam, the second session of the 15th NA was cut short to nine days from 20 to 28 July 2021. A number of issues on the NA’s agenda were delegated to the NASC for consideration and decision. According to its Resolution no. 30/2021/QH15 dated 28 July 2021, the NA authorized the Government to take restrictive measures where necessary to quickly keep the infection under control, including measures applicable in times of public health emergency. Notably, the Government is authorized to ‘decide and organize the implementation of measures ...
different from those prescribed in the existing laws and ordinances to meet the urgent requirements of COVID-19 epidemic prevention and control.\textsuperscript{19} The NA’s Resolution also makes it clear that this blanket authorization shall be considered and approved later by the NASC regarding what specific regulations to be overridden.\textsuperscript{20}

On 6 August 2021, upon the proposal of the Government on the permission to take certain measures not in line with the existing law to urgently prevent and combat the COVID-19 pandemic, through a summary procedure, the NASC adopted Resolution no. 268/NQ-UBTVQH15 to authorize the Government to take actions ‘differently from the laws’. This Resolution consists of two parts.

The first part has three points. First, in rapidly fending off the spread of the coronavirus, several field hospitals have been established in localities to admit and treat patients with COVID-19. Notably, the 2009 Law on Medical Examination and Treatment does not envision this urgent scenario, given the absence of reference to field hospital whatsoever. According to Article 42 thereof, two concurrent conditions for a medical hospital to be in business include: (i) an establishment decision or a business registration certificate or investment license issued by a competent state agency; and (ii) an operation license granted by the Minister of Health, the Minister of National Defense or the director of a provincial-level Health Department. If the two concurrent establishment conditions under Article 42(1) are applicable, the preventive efforts would be left hanging because there is no procedure for granting such an operation license. In expediting the process for admission and treatment, it is deemed reasonable to shorten the administrative procedure with the establishment decision issued by local governments. Hence, the NASC’s Resolution approves that ‘the Decision on the establishment of a facility for admission and treatment of COVID-19 patients shall serve as an operation license’.

Second, normally the Government is in charge of issuing administrative procedures in its decrees, while Ministries are not allowed to do so. However, given the urgency of the situation and medical expertise, according to the NASC’s Resolution no. 268, the provision of administrative procedures related to the prevention and control of the COVID-19 pandemic is assigned to the Health Ministry in its circular. This authorization is not in line with Article 14(4) of the 2015 Law on Promulgation of Legal Documents, which forbids the stipulation of administrative procedures in a circular of any Ministry, and Article 147(3) thereof, which allows only the Government to issue legal documents in a summary procedure. This authorization is deemed reasonable since the Ministry and its staff have been directly involved in the medical examination and treatment of patients with COVID-19 as well as mounted coordinated responses to the pandemic. It is expected to bring the regulations in closer line with practical conditions.

Third, as many localities have entered into social isolation phases, mobility and travel have been restricted to a minimum. The NASC has decided to empower the Standing Committee of a People’s Council to decide on issues falling within the competence of the People’s Council and shall report to the People’s Council at the upcoming meeting. This authorization is not in line with the provisions of the Law on Organization of Local

\textsuperscript{19} The National Assembly, Resolution no. 30/2021/QH15, para. 3.1.  
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, para. 3.3.
Government and Resolution no. 629/2019/UBTVQH14 of the NASC. The empowerment appears to be suitable amidst the context that many localities have to undergo strict pandemic prevention and control measures such as public gathering and mobility restrictions and are unable to shift their work to a virtual platform.

The authorization, however, does not go unchecked as the NASC made inputs that matter to be regulated shall be confined exclusively to COVID-19 and subject to review of the People’s Council at its following meeting. Furthermore, a sunset clause is also instated as it prescribes that the validity of all measures shall expire from 31 December 2022. Those inputs help the NA and NASC keep tabs on the authorization and review the rules where needed. Seemingly, as the situation turned sour quickly, the legislature has done its utmost to address the raging pandemic.

Despite the goodwill, there are procedural irregularities in having a resolution as an authorization to deviate from the laws. Neither do the Resolutions of the NA and the NASC ‘suspend’ the legal effect of any law, nor the two bodies explicitly claim so. The wording of the NA’s Resolution is ambiguous, which leaves ‘necessary measures [taken by the Government] differently from the laws’ to be decided by the NASC. In its deliberation and final Resolution, the NASC does not make any reference to the suspension of law. In fact, all the laws claimed to be ‘differently applied’ remain legally effective by far. What the Resolution does actually is carve out an exception to the applicable legal provisions in specific circumstances related to COVID-19. In other words, the power the NASC exercised is not resolution- but law-making. As shown above, this is not a function of a resolution of either the NA or the NASC as per the 2015 Law on Promulgation of Legal Documents. The only legal document that can modify the legal effect of a law is another law. If the NA’s resolution cannot alter the effect of a law, it would make the delegation of the NA to the NASC somewhat ultra vires. On top of it, law-making power is not vested in the NASC even in a state of emergency.

For the second part of Resolution no. 268, regarding the expenses of medical examination and treatment for COVID-19 patients, the NASC has made clear to the Government that the state budget is responsible for covering all medical costs for patients with COVID-19. This content likely stems from the fact that many COVID-19 patients are not covered by the national health insurance, and not admitted and treated at the medical establishment they have registered initially. To incentivize people to come out and seek medical help and expedite the treatment process, the NASC has deemed it necessary to waive all COVID-19 treatment expenses. This is a laudable effort given the tight budget and strained economy facing Viet Nam at the moment due to the impacts of the pandemic.

21 The News Portal of the National Assembly, ‘Ủy ban thường vụ Quốc hội họp bất thường cho ý kiến về Dự thảo Nghị quyết của Chính phủ về việc thực hiện các giải pháp cấp bách phòng chống dịch COVID-19’ [An Extraordinary Session of the National Assembly’s Standing Committee on the Government’s Draft Resolution Regarding Urgent Measures to be Taken for Preventing and Controlling the COVID-19 Pandemic] <https://quochoi.vn/tintuc/Pages/tin-hoat-dong-cua-quoc-hoi.aspx?ItemID=57822> (15 August 2021).

22 Ibid.

23 This includes the 2007 Law on Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases, the 2009 Law on Medical Examination and Treatment, the 2015 Law on Promulgation of Legal Documents, and the 2015 Law on Organization of Local Government.
Nevertheless, it is unclear what legal provisions are to be infringed concerning this authorization. In general, medical establishments are allowed to charge fees for the medical examination and treatment. The patients shall be liable for the payable costs incurred from the medical examination and treatment ‘except cases of exemption or reduction under the law’. More specifically, Article 48(2) of the 2007 Law on Infectious Disease provides persons suffering from an epidemic disease of class A are entitled to free medical examination and treatment. In fact, in January 2020, the Ministry of Health’s Decision no. 219/QD-BYT and the Prime Minister’s Decision no. 173/QD-TTG already added acute respiratory infections caused by SARS-nCoV-2 (the novel coronavirus) to the list of class-A infectious diseases in accordance with Article 3(1)(2) of the 2007 Law on Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases. Taken those together thus, patients with COVID-19 are already legally entitled to free medical treatment. In other words, in its Resolution, the NASC merely restates what the law says and reminds the government of the obligation in treating patients with COVID-19. It would make this part of the NASC’s Resolution legally redundant.

5. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the world to its knees. In response to this health crisis, many governments have floundered to reconcile between public health and human rights, as well as the rule of law. For Viet Nam, it made many accomplishments in curbing the spread of the virus within the ambit of the existing law for a long period. However, the recent unfolding of the pandemic has exposed deficits in its legal system in swiftly addressing the highly contagious disease and alleviating the overburdened healthcare resources. Re-pivoting on public health objectives and containment approach is needed to alleviate the burden posed by the pandemic and quickly get the people back on their feet. However, the State is bound by the rule of law. That means every action taken by the State shall reside in the remit of the law regardless of the state of emergency. This article has demonstrated the authorization of the legislature for the government to depart from the law stems from the goodwill but contains procedural irregularities. This is odd from a legal perspective. Despite the urgency of the ongoing situation, in order to authorize measures different from the prescription of the law, the NA must exercise its law-making power to modify the effect of the relevant provisions. This is an important step that the legislature can take toward respecting and safeguarding the rule of law.

24 Art. 52(3) of the 2009 Law on Medical Examination and Treatment.
25 Art. 16 of the 2009 Law on Medical Examination and Treatment.
26 See ND Minh and NT Đức, ‘Rule of Law in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Viet Nam’ (paper presented at conference The COVID-19 Pandemic and Protection of Rule of Law organized by KAS Singapore on 25 April 2021).