Research on Public Political Trust in Public Crisis Management in Laos

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Abstract

The public's trust in the government is related to its legitimacy, social stability, and legal effectiveness. As an objective result of the government's administrative ability and an objective criterion for the authority, democracy, and rule of law of government work, government credibility also reflects the government's service capacity to a certain extent. In recent years, with the frequent occurrence of crises, many countries have faced the dilemma of decreasing public trust in their governments. After years of development, Laos has achieved good progress in politics, economy, and society. However, in the current context of economic globalization, increasingly complex social environment, and continuous deterioration of natural environment, public crisis events have changed from occasional occurrences to frequent occurrences, becoming an unavoidable problem for the Laotian government in social management. "Crisis" includes both risks and opportunities. If the government can handle these crises well, it will also be an effective way to enhance the government's image in the people's hearts and enhance public trust in the government. Based on the above, this article explores the issues of public behavior, public trust in the government, and the reasons that lead to these problems, and proposes relevant suggestions to enhance the credibility of the Lao government. I hope it can play a promoting role in improving the ability of the Lao government to manage public crises.

Keywords

Public Relations Crisis, Government Credibility, Crisis Management, Emergency Response Capability

1. The Connotation of Public Crisis, Government Credibility, and the Significance of Credibility in Crisis Management

1.1. The Connotation of Public Crisis

As the 21st century wears on, society is becoming increasingly complex and its

components become ever more interdependent (Alexander, 2018). Public crises have become intricate and complex due to various intertwined relationships. Among many definitions of crisis, American scholars Rosenthal and Pienberg generally agree on the definition of crisis. They believe that a crisis is an event that poses a serious threat to the fundamental values and behavioral norms of a social system, and requires critical decision-making under time pressure and high levels of uncertainty. In addition to "public crisis", relevant scholars and practical departments also use concepts such as "sudden events", "sudden public events", "public safety events", "emergency states", etc. to describe the critical and unbalanced states that cause society to deviate from the normal track, but their emphasis is different. This article uniformly uses the term "public crisis".

1.2. The Connotation of Government Credibility

The academic research on government trust as an independent concept began in the 1950s and 1960s in the West. Scholars have begun to introduce the issue of trust into the field of political science, and the issue of government trust is increasingly receiving attention from domestic scholars. At present, the widely accepted government trust in the Chinese academic community refers to the objects involved in the execution of state power by state administrative institutions, including individual citizens, social groups, and administrative organizations at all levels, that is, administrative objects, reasonable expectations for the overall administrative system, as well as for the various elements of the administrative system, their relationships, and their movement status, as well as an interaction based on the response of administrative institutions A cooperative relationship. In a sense, government trust contains two-way expectations. On the one hand, society and the public believe that the government and its administrative personnel can meet their needs; On the other hand, the government and its administrative personnel also believe that his administrative management activities can bring back cooperation from society and the public. In addition, government trust also includes mutual trust between different departments and levels of government institutions.

The government trust described in this article only refers to the one-way expectation of society and the public that the government and its administrative personnel can meet their needs, that is, the trust psychology of the public towards the government and its administrative personnel in exercising administrative power and engaging in public management and service activities. People believe that the government's actions are to safeguard the public's interests, and the results of their actions can meet the needs of the general public, thereby generating trust in the government and its administrative personnel.

1.3. The Significance of Government Trust in Government Crisis Management

Firstly, government trust can to some extent prevent the occurrence of public crises. To strengthen its own trust, the government will naturally govern in accordance with the law, eliminate government vacancies and corruption, and thus

ensure supervision in areas such as building seismic performance and mine safety operations. On the contrary, citizens, out of the trust of the government, will actively communicate with the government, timely reflect on real-life problems, facilitate the government to penetrate into the public, and take precautions against potential crises.

Secondly, government trust can enhance the efficiency of the government in dealing with public crises. A government with good government trust often adopts democratic measures when dealing with public crises, communicates and consults with the general public, solicits social opinions, and obtains public recognition and support, effectively and properly resolving crises. A government lacking trust in the government works alone in dealing with crises, without the understanding and assistance of the people, and can only resort to coercive measures, even intensifying conflicts with the people and triggering greater crises. The COVID-19 pandemic clearly highlighted the importance of effective crisis management and its relationship with citizens' willingness to cooperate with the government in such turbulent times (Mizrahi et al., 2021).

Finally, government trust affects media participation in public crisis response. In reporting on the government's handling of public crises, the media's reporting tendency is nothing but two choices: political tendency and interest tendency. With the continuous improvement of the market economy, while the media is being pushed into the market, they will also attach importance to interest orientation in their reporting. For governments lacking government trust, this undoubtedly exacerbates the negative impact, while for governments with good government trust, the media's interest orientation will shift towards trust and support for the government. Therefore, the government can only stabilize the public's mentality and guide the public to respond to crises by having good government trust and cooperating with objective and fair media reporting.

2. The Causes of Public Trust Problems in Public Crisis Management in Laos

2.1. Public Relations Crisis in Laos: Vientiane Was "Closed" Due to the Sudden Increase of COVID-19 Cases

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, Laos has been considered as one of the countries in Southeast Asia that have achieved outstanding results in epidemic prevention and resistance. However, data released by the Ministry of Health of Laos on April 21, 2021 showed that the epidemic worsened before and after the Lao New Year holiday from April 14 to 16. On April 21, the country reported 28 new confirmed cases, including 26 in Vientiane. Currently, there are a total of 88 confirmed cases nationwide.

Among them, on April 17, there were 4 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Laos, all of which were Laotian workers returning from Thailand. The No. 59 case confirmed on April 20 went to and from several crowded places in Vientiane City, resulting in a sudden increase of 26 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Vien-

tiane City on April 21, and the investigation results showed that it was infected by Thai smugglers. Therefore, there is public opinion in Laos that the spread of the virus is closely related to the epidemic in Thailand.

On April 21 local time, the Prime Minister of Laos Pankan Vipawan issued an emergency order. The capital of Laos was "closed" for 14 days due to the sudden increase of COVID-19 cases. Other provinces also need to strengthen epidemic prevention and control measures. Vientiane, the capital, is required to temporarily close external traffic from April 22 to May 5 to curb the spread of the COVID-19. Except for specific groups, personnel are prohibited from entering or leaving Vientiane City; Suspension of cargo transportation and passenger transportation; Except for work, medical treatment, or purchasing daily necessities, citizens of Vientiane are prohibited from going out.

On April 20, 2021, the Ministry of Health of Laos announced that there were 2 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 on that day, of which case No. 59 had access to KTV, bars, massage shops and other crowded places. The confirmed case is a 25 year old Laotian university student residing in Vientiane, infected by Thai immigrants.

On the same day, the Vientiane Municipal Special Administrative Committee for Epidemic Prevention issued the No. 4 order, in order to prevent the COVID-19, to close a number of crowded places where patients had access and where there was a risk of COVID-19 infection, and not to operate without permission. At the same time, the Ministry of Health of Laos suggested that residents in historical track locations should immediately go to COVID-19 testing point for testing if they have symptoms.

As a landlocked country in the northern part of the Indochinese Peninsula, Laos is adjacent to China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Thailand. This geographical location determines that illegal immigration is rampant here. In Southeast Asian countries, the human and material costs required to combat illegal immigration are too high, and they have been repeatedly banned. On April 18, 2021, the province of Gammon in Laos issued an urgent order, which clearly stated that migrant workers from Thailand are prohibited from illegally returning home by boat or other means. Once discovered, they will be fined and dealt with in accordance with the law. At the same time, if there are relatives who will illegally return home from Thailand, they must also report to the police in a timely manner. If family or village infections are caused by illegal immigration, the parties involved and their families shall bear the responsibility and handle them strictly in accordance with the law. On the same day, Sayaburi Province also issued an urgent order from the governor stating that from April 19th to 25th, entry and exit to the Bangmeng International Port and the Nantun Friendship Bridge International Port will be suspended.

According to the instructions of the Lao government, from April 22 to May 5, personnel from Vientiane and other provinces are prohibited from traveling except for those returning to their place of residence, trucks carrying goods, and other authorized individuals; Residents are not allowed to leave home unless

necessary; Government departments and public and private institutions should reduce office staff and ensure social distancing; No gatherings of more than 20 people are allowed; All international and local ports will strictly implement epidemic prevention regulations for the next 14 days; It is recommended that provinces outside the capital strengthen prevention and control measures according to their needs and the spread of the epidemic. The Ministry of Education and Sports of Laos issued the Order on Carrying out the COVID-19 Epidemic Prevention Measures on April 21, 2021, the Prime Minister's No. 15, and ordered public and private schools, nurseries, kindergartens, primary schools, middle schools, full-time schools, residential schools, vocational schools, colleges and universities in Vientiane to suspend temporarily. On the evening of April 21, 2021, Lao Airlines also issued a notice stating that in order to comply with Laos' latest epidemic prevention measures and prevent the spread of the epidemic, all domestic flights in Laos from April 22 to May 5 will be cancelled, and passengers affected by the flights will be issued targeted measures.

Vientiane, as the capital of Laos, should not have such a serious spread of the COVID-19. As the capital of a country, during the COVID-19 epidemic, it should strengthen the epidemic prevention and control efforts, strictly prevent and defend the safety of residents, and give confidence to the national epidemic resistance. The sudden increase in the proportion of COVID-19 in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, is a serious public crisis. Although the Lao government has issued a series of response strategies after the case, However, it is not difficult to find that the Laotian government has a serious lag in responding to public relations crises, only adopting response strategies after the crisis occurred, lacking a complete coordination mechanism, poor adaptability, and insufficient government mobility, which have led to a crisis of trust in the Laotian government among the public. This article will conduct a detailed analysis and research on the issue and causes of public trust in public relations crisis management in Laos.

2.2. Frequent Occurrence of Public Crisis Events

Citizens want a stable and orderly living environment. In this environment, people's psychological safety needs are basically met. However, due to the influence of natural and social factors, frequent public crises have undermined people's original sense of security. The natural environment is the material foundation for human survival, directly related to social public life safety and physical health. Humans are more passive and even unaware of changes in the natural environment, creating a natural security crisis that is much greater than another warning to social security. At this point, the public needs to quickly identify the safety of their natural environment and quickly flee areas with safety hazards. But in fact, whether it is a clear threat to public safety or in an uncertain state, the power of individual judgment is limited. Especially in recent years, in the context of frequent outbreaks of large-scale disasters, crises involving the most public have led people to tend to make more rational choices, which are influenced by irrational behavior, resulting in uncertainty and creating a psychological

panic of insecurity.

The rapid development of modernization has accelerated the flow of modern society. The development of information technology has enabled the public to quickly establish and expand social information communication networks, which are disseminated 24/7 through social public information dissemination networks. Information on social public security crises is possible throughout the region. However, due to the difficulty of individuals in identifying the accuracy and objectivity of information, complex, cross regional, and cross social information networks can easily become obstacles to psychological security under frequent public crises. We argue that the crisis and disaster perspectives are largely complementary and mutually informative (Boin et al., 2018).

2.3. No Effective Coordination Mechanism Has Been Established

The Laotian government lacks an effective crisis management coordination mechanism. Due to the current imperfect administrative management system, unclear division of government functions, untimely and effective measures to deal with public crises, strong governance power, serious sense of responsibility, severe regional division, and partial closure, there are obvious communication barriers. Under this system, coordination between the government and departments is difficult. It often happens that responsibility is passed on to each other. When a crisis erupts, it is more difficult to clear who is responsible for some important matters, resulting in a slow response ability of the government to respond to the crisis. The new design orientation in the policy sciences has placed renewed emphasis on problem-solving and developing effective public policies (Bali et al., 2019). The Laotian government has not been very appropriate in establishing and implementing effective public policies.

Public crisis management is a cross regional and cross period comprehensive management system engineering, which is usually not effectively completed by government departments. In many cases, crisis management requires the cooperation and active cooperation of social departments. Although Laos has established crisis detection and early warning mechanisms in some regions, various social classes cannot organically unite and cooperate, and there is a lack of effective coordination mechanisms for crisis information collection. The division of functions and unclear responsibilities among government departments have led to inadequate crisis response. Once a crisis erupts, departments often separate.

In addition, non-governmental organizations also lack coordination and cooperation in crisis management. Public crisis governance is the responsibility of the government, and the government should play an important role in crisis management. But relying on the government is not enough. Effective public crisis governance requires the participation of governments at all levels, the public, and even the international community.

2.4. Lack of a Comprehensive Information Emergency Management System

Information is the foundation and basis of decision-making, and it is a prerequisite for decision-making. In terms of decision-making, comprehensive judgment and use of information, although the government provides a large number of information mechanisms for public crisis decision-making, has formed a relatively complete information system. However, the Laotian government has shortcomings during the period of government function transformation, especially in the emergency management information system, which is prone to being destroyed in sudden public crisis events, leading to information distortion. This flaw is mainly reflected in the government crisis management system that opposes decision-making information institutions, making the information department easily constrained by government entities at all levels, resulting in information distortion and hindering the government from making timely and correct decisions in public crises. The ability to collect information is weak, and some potential social issues and information that decision-making institutions do not clearly require are not collected in a timely manner. The methods of information collection also lack scientificity. There is a shortage of personnel in information institutions and a relative shortage of technical personnel.

2.5. Lack of Emergency Response and Social Mobilization Capabilities

Due to the limitations of government resources and social functions, it is unable to effectively respond to various crisis issues and lacks the participation of social forces, which contributes to the poor effectiveness of the Lao government in crisis response. At the same time, single subjectivity limits the development of social forces, resulting in less self-management in society. Social mobilization remains a traditional priority for administrative mobilization in Laos. Although administrative mobilization achieves social control and plays an irreplaceable role in accumulating social resources, political and administrative means have limitations. The government's power is strictly limited by laws, and resources are limited. Relying on these means will affect its strength and effectiveness, especially in longer crisis situations. The COVID-19 crisis is a stark reminder that modern society is vulnerable to a special species of trouble: the creeping crisis. The creeping crisis poses a deep challenge to both academics and practitioners. In the crisis literature, it remains ill-defined and understudied. It is even harder to manage. As a threat, it carries a potential for societal disruption—but that potential is not fully understood. An accumulation of these creeping crises can erode public trust in institutions (Boin et al., 2020). Social mobilization is not just a government issue. Non governmental organizations, news media, and communities may also play a role. Modern government is a limited government, and in public crisis management, it is necessary to actively participate in society and the public, mobilize social forces to overcome crises, and make various social entities the leading force in social mobilization. Relying on administrative mobi-

lization may lead to adverse consequences.

3. Suggestion and Summary: Enhancing Government Credibility in Public Crisis Management

All crises signify a turning point, and for a mature government, treating crises as opportunities is a fundamental quality that should be possessed. As long as it can calmly respond, scientifically handle, concentrate on summarizing public crises, and turn crises into driving forces, the government's credibility will not be weakened, but will take advantage of this opportunity to improve.

3.1. Establishing Concepts: A Prerequisite for Enhancing Government Credibility in Public Crisis Management

The government should start by establishing the following modern administrative concepts in public crisis management: 1) the concept of a public service-oriented government. A series of public crises warn us that only by making citizens, civil rights, and public interests the primary goals of the government, and placing its main responsibilities in managing social public affairs and providing effective public services, can the government effectively respond to various sudden public events, maintain people's life safety, and promote comprehensive human development. 2) The concept of open information and transparent government. Firstly, the government's public services should be supervised by the entire society; Secondly, break the monopoly of the government on public affairs under the traditional system, and encourage and support various social organizations to participate in social affairs. 3) The concept of lawful administration and legal government. This requires the government to have legal basis for all policies in public crisis management, and all administrative actions must be exercised within the framework of the law. 4) Sense of responsibility and efficient government concept. In crisis management, the government should be responsible, strong, and efficient in order to overcome all obstacles, respond to various public crisis events, and achieve its economic and social development goals. The connotation of a responsible government requires that in the process of responding to events, the government should correctly handle the contradiction between democracy, checks and balances, responsibility, and efficiency, and cannot use democracy to shirk responsibility and use checks and balances to sacrifice efficiency.

The Norwegian government managed to control the pandemic rather quickly by adopting a suppression strategy, followed by a control strategy, based on a collaborative and pragmatic decision-making style, successful communication with the public, a lot of resources, and a high level of citizen trust in government. The alleged success of the Norwegian case is about the relationship between crisis management capacity and legitimacy. Crisis management is most successful when it is able to combine democratic legitimacy with government capacity (Christensen & Lægreid, 2020).

3.2. Improving Mechanisms: Ways to Enhance Government Credibility in Public Crisis Management

Actively improving the government led public crisis governance mechanism, improving the efficiency of government crisis management, and enhancing the transparency of government crisis management are strategic ways to enhance government credibility. Including: 1) Establishing a government crisis warning system. The public crisis warning mechanism is a proactive behavior that solves major public crisis events with minimal social costs. It can improve the government's governance ability and enhance its credibility. The government should do a good job in crisis early warning management from two aspects: cultivating crisis awareness and strengthening foresight management. 2) Establish a crisis management mechanism. A powerful central command system should be established. When a country faces the threat of a major crisis, the crisis central command system will be fully responsible for the entire crisis warning, emergency response, and treatment work. It is not only the maker of the government's crisis response strategy, but also the core decision-maker and commander of crisis warning. 3) Establish a public information disclosure mechanism. Ensuring the timeliness, accuracy, and comprehensiveness of information collection, transparency of information dissemination, and quick response to information is conducive to forming a cooperative management pattern between the government and citizens in public life, as well as improving the government's credibility and social cohesion in crisis management. 4) Establish a mechanism for social participation. Mobilizing all sectors of society to actively participate in the prevention and disposal of public safety emergencies, establishing interactive mechanisms among the government, institutions, enterprises, communities, rural areas, and the public, are all manifestations of the reshaping and innovation of government credibility in public crisis events.

3.3. Summary

Social trust is very important, but for a considerable period of time, the Laotian government has not given it the attention it deserves. The fear, anxiety, and anger triggered by public crises have cast a shadow over social trust, leading to an increase in the cost of social communication. Therefore, as an important part of social construction, the government's social credibility after public crisis events has gradually become an inherent need to maintain good social order. It is related to the happiness of the public and the development of the country, and has important practical value.

Through the study of sudden public relations crisis events, it can be found that the establishment and consolidation of government credibility after public crisis events are actually closely related to the establishment of effective coordination mechanisms, information emergency response management systems, and government social mobilization capabilities. The government should actively guide crisis related parties to participate in the process of public relations crisis

handling, further standardize the public relations response attitude of the responsible parties involved, ensure information symmetry between the government and the public to guide healthy social public opinion, strengthen the prevention and early warning capabilities of public crises, improve the punishment efficiency of the responsible parties involved, and improve the social trust restoration system after public crisis events, ensure the sustained, stable, and healthy development of Laos' economy and society.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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