

## PHAN CHAU TRINH'S THOUGHT ON PEOPLE'S GOVERNANCE

### O PENSAMENTO DE PHAN CHAU TRINH SOBRE A GOVERNANÇA DO POVO

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#### Abstract

Phan Chau Trinh (1872–1926) was one of Vietnam's most prominent reformist thinkers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Throughout his revolutionary career, he contributed significantly to the nation's ideological heritage, particularly with his notable doctrine on people's governance (dân trị), which emphasized empowering the populace and asserting their sovereignty in the country's development. This body of thought is rich, distinctive, and revolutionary, especially within the colonial semi-feudal historical context of Vietnam at that time. Due to certain objective and subjective conditions, Phan Chau Trinh's theory of people's governance inevitably bore some historical limitations. However, if these limitations are critically addressed, the enduring values within his political thought may offer valuable lessons for Vietnam's contemporary development.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Phan Chau Trinh, Phan Chau Trinh's Political Thought, Vietnamese Philosophy.

#### Resumo

*Phan Chau Trinh (1872–1926) foi um dos pensadores reformistas mais proeminentes do Vietnã durante o final do século XIX e início do século XX. Ao longo de sua carreira revolucionária, ele contribuiu significativamente para o patrimônio ideológico da nação, particularmente com sua notável doutrina sobre a governança do povo (dân trị), que enfatizava o empoderamento da população e a afirmação de sua soberania no desenvolvimento do país. Este corpo de pensamento é rico, distinto e revolucionário, especialmente dentro do contexto histórico colonial semi-feudal do Vietnã naquela época. Devido a certas condições objetivas e subjetivas, a teoria da governança popular de Phan Chau Trinh inevitavelmente apresentava algumas limitações históricas. No entanto, se essas limitações forem abordadas criticamente, os valores duradouros dentro de seu pensamento político podem oferecer lições valiosas para o desenvolvimento contemporâneo do Vietnã.*

**Palavras-chave:** Democracia. Phan Chau Trinh. Pensamento político de Phan Chau Trinh. Filosofia vietnamita.



## 1 INTRODUCTION

The history of Vietnam in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was marked by profound upheavals across all aspects of society. These disruptions raised numerous pressing issues, foremost among them the urgent question of how to find a path and a method for national liberation and for freeing the people from oppression, exploitation, and social injustice. In response, various thinkers of the time proposed different approaches to resolving these critical societal challenges. Although these solutions—shaped by the limitations of historical context and ideological perspectives—achieved varying degrees of success or even failure, they left a distinct imprint on the development of Vietnamese thought during this transitional period.

One of the most prominent intellectuals of this era was Phan Chau Trinh (1872–1926). In analyzing the causes of national subjugation, he asserted: *"Our nation lost its sovereignty primarily because the poisonous influence of monarchy had penetrated too deeply into the people's minds, while the general level of the populace remained too low"* (Phan Chau Trinh, 2005c, p. 283). A patriotic thinker with a bourgeois-democratic orientation, Phan Chau Trinh recognized the value of democracy across many domains of social life. To him, democracy was not alien to the Vietnamese people; on the contrary, it was deeply embedded in national cultural traditions. However, under the grip of despotic monarchy, democratic values were stifled, suppressed, and repressed, rendering the people's democratic spirit defenseless. As a result, the Vietnamese population was unable to resist the dual yoke of colonialism and feudalism, which deprived them of their fundamental democratic freedoms.

At the time, France had already established a developed democratic system. Yet, under the false pretense of a "civilizing mission," the French colonialists brought regression rather than progress to the nations they occupied. With his acute political insight, Phan Chau Trinh quickly saw through the deceit of French colonialism. He advocated for national unity, popular awakening, and social cooperation as essential steps toward liberating the nation and the people—paving the way for a society founded on freedom and democracy.

## 2 ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Phan Chau Trinh's democratic thought was not merely a reflection of his deep concern and quest for solutions amid Vietnam's socio-historical turbulence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It also embodied a unique synthesis of Vietnamese cultural traditions, Eastern philosophies—particularly Confucian thought of the Confucius–Mencius lineage—and Western bourgeois-democratic ideals. At its core were democratic principles of *liberty, equality, and fraternity*, introduced into Vietnam through the *tân thư* (new books) translated from Europe.

In acknowledging the role of these new texts in transforming his ideological outlook, Phan Chau Trinh stated explicitly:

"Only when Western books (*tân thư*) translated from Europe arrived did we come to understand clearly that the life or death of our nation depended upon the global balance of power among the five continents. For a thousand years, the noble qualities and enlightened essence of our nation had been buried and obscured by the doctrines of the examination system. They were hidden away, unable to develop naturally for the cause of survival—so much so that we nearly perished without even realizing it. Then one day, the dream suddenly shattered, as if clouds were lifted to reveal the blue sky, as if stepping out of darkness to see the sun and the moon." (Phan Chau Trinh, 2005c, p. 283)

The rich and distinctive content of Phan Chau Trinh's political thought on *people's governance* (*dân trị*) is expressed through the following core themes:

***First, on the Concept of People's Governance (Dân trị)***, In his writings, Phan Chau Trinh used various terms to refer to the idea of democracy, such as *dân trị* (people's governance), *pháp trị* (rule of law), *dân quyền* (people's rights), and *dân chủ* (democracy). While different in expression, these concepts share a common core of meaning. In his famous speech "*Monarchism and People's Governance*", delivered on the night of November 17, 1925 at 13–15 Albert I Street in Saigon, Phan Chau Trinh explicitly stated:

"People's governance is, in essence, the rule of law. The rights and duties of every individual in the country—whether a government official or an ordinary citizen—must be clearly defined by law, just as though lines were drawn in advance. As long as one stays within those lines, one is free to go as far as desired, without

obstruction from others. Only when someone infringes upon the rights of others is it prohibited.” (Phan Chau Trinh, 2005c, p. 283)

Accordingly, Phan Chau Trinh’s idea of *dân trị* refers to a system of thought in which the people’s power and sovereignty are exercised through the law and the state, with the ultimate aim of liberating the nation, fostering development, and improving the quality of life for all citizens.

## 2.1 Second, the content of people's governance in Phan Chau Trinh’s Thought

According to Phan Chau Trinh, in a society governed by the principle of *dân trị* (people’s governance), it is the people who establish the state apparatus and construct the legal system. The state, in turn, must serve the legitimate rights and interests of the people and take responsibility for the common affairs of the community and the nation. Phan Chau Trinh emphasized:

“The doctrine of people’s governance is far superior to that of monarchism. To govern a country based on the personal will of one man or of a royal court is no different than tending a flock of sheep—the wellbeing or suffering of the people depends entirely on whether the shepherd is kind or cruel. In contrast, under the doctrine of people’s governance, the people themselves establish laws and set up institutions to handle public affairs. Whatever the people desire, that is what shall be done. Even if their will is not entirely wise, they would never be as oppressed and wretched as slaves under another’s command.” (Phan Chau Trinh, 2005c, p. 283)

To guarantee the practice of *dân trị*, Phan Chau Trinh believed that a strong political regime was necessary—one based on a clear and comprehensive constitution and legal system. In this regard, he fiercely opposed the monarchical regime, which he termed *quân trị* (monarchical rule), and advocated for the establishment of a bourgeois republican regime, which he called *dân trị*. He explained:

“Although the monarchical doctrine includes laws, those laws are unilaterally created by the monarch, while the people remain completely unaware. Thus, when a wise and heroic king who understands the relationship between the people and the state happens to come to power and suppresses corrupt officials to allow the people to live in peace, then the nation prospers.” (Phan Chau Trinh, 2005c, p. 276)

He reiterated this critique, stating:

“Even if the doctrine of monarchical rule includes laws, they are created by the king alone, and the people have no knowledge whatsoever.” (Phan Chau Trinh, 2005c, p. 273)

In comparing *quân trị* (monarchical rule) and *dân trị* (people’s governance), he affirmed: “*The doctrine of people’s governance is far superior to that of monarchism.*” (Phan Chau Trinh, 2005c, p. 283):

“Under the doctrine of people’s governance, the people themselves establish laws and create institutions to serve the public. Whatever the will of the people is, that is what shall be done.” (Phan Chau Trinh, 2005c, p. 283)

Phan Chau Trinh poetically summarized the ideal of a people-governed political system in the following verses:

“Let politics be ever more inclusive,  
Guiding us toward a civilized realm.  
Let constitutions and laws be promulgated,  
So that speech and thought may freely flow.  
Let education be truly worthy,  
Not just decorative, shallow form.  
Let industry, commerce, and science thrive,  
Let knowledge and reason flourish alike.  
Let public welfare be nurtured,  
Let transportation link all distant lands.  
Bring peace of mind to the people,  
And prosperity to the nation year by year.” (Phan Chau Trinh, 2005a, p. 373)

Based on these principles, Phan Chau Trinh strongly asserted that Vietnam needed a constitution. In his revolutionary thought, he often emphasized the importance of a constitution as a legal tool to limit the arbitrary power of absolute monarchy in the East. Drawing from the French democratic model of the time, he analyzed the relationship between the President and Parliament as grounded in constitutional law. It is the constitution, he argued, that builds and sustains the stability of a democratic legal order.

For Phan Chau Trinh, *dân trị* was synonymous with *pháp trị* (rule of law). The law must define the powers and duties of government officials at all levels—from the highest to the lowest—and ensure that all citizens are equal before the law. He wrote:

“Whatever the case may be, once a detailed legal system is in place, government authority must be limited. When power exceeds its defined scope, it must not be permitted to act. Thus, even if there is a desire to oppress, there will be no way to do so. Furthermore, if anyone breaks the law—be it the President or a common villager—all must be held equally accountable.” (Phan Chau Trinh, 2005c, pp. 282–283)

## 2.2 On democratic institutions

In the historical and social conditions of Vietnam at that time, he criticized the monarchy for suppressing the people's awareness. Phan Châu Trinh argued that it was precisely the backwardness of Confucianism, the monarchy system, and the low level of popular knowledge that made it easy for the French colonists to invade and rule.

“In Europe, nobles had to prove their valor in battle to rise to power, and once they did, it was difficult to lose their position. But in East Asia, the noble class preferred literary examinations; those who passed became officials, and those who failed did not. The military class only mattered during wars or the founding of a regime, otherwise, incompetent soldiers were rewarded... Yet if the rulers kept the people ignorant enough not to challenge the king, foreign countries could easily take over, meaning the people did not even understand what the nation was.” (Phan Châu Trinh, 2005c, p. 274)

Phan Châu Trinh pointed out that all European countries had democratic parties in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Only in Vietnam was there no republican democracy. Even the educated barely understood the meaning of the word “république” (republic), let alone the rural people. Not knowing democracy while worshipping the king as a deity poisoned the people’s minds. He concluded that the monarchy poisoned the Vietnamese people, keeping their awareness and intellect low and ignorant.

“In Europe, people revered the monarchy, but every country had democratic parties in the upper and lower houses. Only in our country, even though the French had ruled the south for over 60 years, the word ‘république’ was only spoken on the lips but never truly understood or compared with the old monarchical rule. Educated people seemed to think monarchy was better. The rural people did not understand democracy at all and worshiped the king as a god.” (Phan Châu Trinh, 2005c, p. 279)

Phan Châu Trinh highlighted the harm of monarchy to national development, asserting that monarchy killed the patriotism of the Vietnamese people. He proposed discarding the Nguyễn dynasty's kings and mandarins. According to him, only when people truly understand democracy can there be hope for independence and freedom; otherwise, they will remain forever enslaved by colonists and feudalists.

“Monarchy has completely killed the patriotism of our people. Now, to make the Annamese understand that the country belongs to them, we must throw away the puppets in Huế... Only when the people understand democracy can they love their country, and only then can they hope for freedom and independence; otherwise, they will be slaves forever.” (Phan Châu Trinh, 2005c, p. 280)

He summarized the history of democracy, outlining two forms he knew: the slave democracy of ancient Greece and Rome, and the bourgeois democracy of England. In Greek democracy, he admired the “Council of Elders” and the “People’s Assembly,” where kings and nobles had to get approval before proceeding with decisions. In Roman times, he praised the “Senate” and the “Plebeian Council.” In England, he valued the “House of Commons” and the “House of Lords,” both composed of talented people, who held legislative power. This model was later adopted successfully by many European countries. However, Phan Châu Trinh did not analyze deeply the nature or organization of these democratic forms but noted the principle that laws must be issued only with broad consensus.

“Later in Rome, the council of a hundred men, mostly soldiers, was formed to discuss public affairs. Remarkably, the English kept institutions like the House of Commons and House of Lords, composed of talented citizens, to exercise legislative power. By the 17th and 18th centuries, this system spread across Europe. This is a brief history of European democratic rights.” (Phan Châu Trinh, 2005c, p. 281)

Phan Châu Trinh regarded the ideal “democratic regime” as that of European countries. Generally, this “democratic regime” was organized under the principle of separation of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. He stated: “According to the doctrine of separation of powers, legislative, executive, and judicial powers are distinct and are not united in the hands of any single person.” (Phan Châu Trinh, 2005c, p. 283)

Specifically, the “democratic regime” consists of:

**Parliament:** includes the Senate and the House of Representatives. The House is elected directly by the people and has the power to draft and enact the constitution and laws. The Senate is not elected by the people but works with the House to elect the president and cabinet to manage finances.

“Once elected, they are called deputies. The fate of the country lies in the hands of this assembly. This assembly holds sovereign power to enact laws. There is also a Senate, which is not elected by the people but consists of recognized individuals with a role in state affairs, overseeing finances.” (Phan Châu Trinh, 2005c, p. 282)

**President and Cabinet:** The president is the head of the executive branch, elected by the parliament for a seven-year term, by majority vote. Upon taking office, the president swears to uphold the democratic constitution, act impartially, and if failing, can be immediately removed by the people.

The cabinet is elected by parliament, with the majority party organizing the government. Ministers have heavy responsibilities in their fields and must be accountable to the people, unlike feudal mandarins who were idle. In the House, two parties—left and right—critique each other, making abuse of power difficult.

“The government is formed by the two houses, and the party with the majority organizes the cabinet. If something displeases the people, criticism is inevitable. Since there are left and right parties, the ruling party is constantly checked, so wrongdoing is hard to occur.” (Phan Châu Trinh, 2005c, p. 282)

**Judiciary:** an independent judicial body managing courts and legal proceedings, staffed by legally trained judges who can try cases involving both government officials and citizens. This differs from late 19th to early 20th century Vietnam, where officials often held multiple roles including judicial.

“Judicial power is given to judges who are well-trained in law, capable of judging if a case violates the law or not... The judiciary is independent from other state organs and must act according to conscience, constitution, and law.” (Phan Châu Trinh, 2005c, p. 283)

Phan Châu Trinh emphasized the rule of law, saying “democracy means rule of law.” A democratic legal system must clearly define citizens' rights and duties. All

citizens, regardless of ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, status, or background, are equal before the law. Anyone who violates the law must be treated equally.

“The rights and duties of everyone in the country, whether a state official or an ordinary citizen, are clearly defined by law. There is a set path; within that path, people can freely move forward without obstruction, except when infringing on others’ rights.” (Phan Châu Trinh, 2005c, p. 283)

He believed the political system plays a crucial role in building and promoting democracy. A progressive political system brings freedom and happiness to the people; a backward one hinders development and deprives people of freedom. The quality of politics depends largely on how people are appointed.

“The people's happiness depends on the political system; a good political system uses just and capable people, ensuring talents are developed and tasks fulfilled; a selfish system breeds corruption and disorder.” (Phan Châu Trinh, 2005b, p. 275)

Thus, although Phan Châu Trinh supported bourgeois democracy, he believed the choice between monarchy and democracy belonged to the people. His consistent view on democracy was for the benefit of the nation and its people. After the failure of the Đông Du movement, his thought was to abolish monarchy and build a republican democracy with three independent houses elected by the people on a majority principle. He valued governance by law and constitution, seeing law as the most effective tool to manage society and limit absolute monarchy.

“If a country is ruled by one person or a dynasty, it is like a flock of sheep, happy or miserable depending on the shepherd’s generosity. Under democracy, the people establish laws and institutions to manage common affairs. The people’s will is reflected, and although it may not be perfect, it prevents oppression.” (Phan Châu Trinh, 2005c, p. 283)

### **2.3 Third, Phan Châu Trinh’s method of implementing democracy**

According to Phan Châu Trinh, for the people to fully enjoy their civil and democratic rights, to fight against the autocratic monarchy, to expel French colonialists, and to make the country independent with people living in freedom and happiness, it is necessary to uphold the law. Law is the framework and standard that all citizens must

follow. A democratic society cannot exist without law. The law clearly defines the rights and duties of the people. Citizens have fundamental freedoms and democratic rights and participate in activities within the bounds of the law, without violating it. If a person violates the law, they will be dealt with according to regulations. Phan Châu Trinh implied that all citizens, regardless of age, gender, or whether they are ordinary people or state officials, are equal before the law. He stated:

“Democracy means rule of law. The powers and duties of each person in the country, whether a government official or an ordinary citizen, are clearly stipulated by law, like a pre-drawn path. Within that path, people can freely move forward as much as they want, without anyone stopping them—except when infringing on the rights of others.” (Phan Châu Trinh, 2005c, p. 283)

Phan Châu Trinh believed that to save the country, one must first save the people. This is done by raising the banner of democracy and people's rights, exposing the rotten feudal monarchy of the Nguyễn dynasty, and demanding that the French colonialists change their colonial policy. He advocated building the spirit of self-reliance and self-strengthening among the people, awakening them so they could fight for their legitimate rights and duties in an independent nation. He aimed to build a “regime” with a complete legal system.

Phan Châu Trinh sought reforms in all aspects of society. He promoted saving the country by raising popular knowledge, abandoning the traditional Confucian examination system, teaching practical sciences, eradicating backward superstitions, expanding schools, teaching trades to the people, developing production, establishing trade associations, and expanding markets—thereby contributing to the enhancement of people's rights. His revolutionary path was to “save the people in order to save the country,” choosing a method of struggle that was “peaceful” and non-violent.

### 3 CONCLUSION

Phan Châu Trinh's idea of “dân trị” (people's governance) is not only an important contribution to the history of Vietnamese political thought in the early 20th century but also demonstrates a profound, progressive, and enlightening vision of a modern state model based on the rule of law and democracy. With the viewpoint that “people's governance means rule of law,” he laid the foundation for the ideal of building a state by

the people and for the people, governed through law, where all powers are limited and controlled by a clear and transparent legal system.

In the current context, if we continue to inherit and absorb the valuable aspects while overcoming and filtering out the limitations in Phan Châu Trinh's idea of dân trị, his system of views still holds relevant value as Vietnam continues the cause of building a socialist rule-of-law state, promoting institutional reforms, improving national governance efficiency, and enhancing people's mastery. Reaffirming the value of Phan Châu Trinh's thought is also a contribution to awakening important spiritual resources in the sustainable development process of Vietnam today and in the future.

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### Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

### Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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