

'Calamitous Year' For Vietnamese Democracy

False hope of help from Trump



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By almost any measure, 2020 was a calamitous year for Vietnam's democracy movement. Already reduced by the Hanoi regime's increasingly efficient repression, now it was transfixed by Donald Trump's battle for a second term. Trump, it was said, would defend Vietnam against China. Oddly but somehow understandably, a majority of those who doubt the nation's single-party dictatorship came to view the American president as their hope for a brighter future.

Disillusionment with Vietnam's current regime, even despair, is understandable. Controls on what may be said don't sit all that well on a nation that's been opening to the global economy and sending its brightest abroad to study for a quarter century. Vietnam's democracy movement is, or at least it was, a loosely-organized network of citizens who have not

hesitated to call out the regime. The movement was empowered by the Internet, which for roughly a decade enabled dissident speech to be heard by Vietnam's citizens despite the regime's censorship of domestic media.

They're a mixed bag, these folks who've had enough passion to speak up and even act out their disillusionment with the party-state regime. For some, it's been frustration with what they perceive as Hanoi's limp posture vis-a-vis China, for others, it's been resentment of repression of non-orthodox religious practice or pushback against land grabs by business interests in cahoots with local officials. For a few, it's been disillusionment with the very idea of an omnipresent and all-powerful single party dictatorship.

Not so long ago, the government of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung tolerated a bit of criticism and an occasional demonstration, but in 2016 Dung was ousted for this and other heresies. With Dung sidelined and his allies running for cover, Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong had the whip hand. He deployed an ambitiously regressive agenda. One element was suppression of political activity outside Party institutions.

From 2017, the Hanoi regime cracked down on its visible critics. One by one, prominent dissidents were arrested, tried, jailed and sometimes allowed to emigrate. Provincial police units were encouraged to round up folks who persisted in posting and sharing anti-regime sentiment on social media. Semi-public groups like the Association of Independent Journalists and the Brotherhood for Democracy were busted and their members incarcerated. As 2020 drew to an end, the 88 Project, which keeps track of such things, counted 256 political prisoners in Vietnam's jails -- three times more than in 2016.

Cyberspace free no longer

In parallel, the Trong regime learned to police Vietnamese cyberspace. The Ministry of Public Security (MPS) launched an army of trolls to infest social media. It didn't take long for them to corrupt and weaponize Facebook's vaunted Community Standards. But that was small stuff, nothing compared to demonstrating that they could dry up advertising unless websites caved to the regime's demands to delete posts flagged by its trolls and ban obnoxious posters. Vietnam's online advertising market is now worth a billion US dollars annually, perhaps more.

Facebook and YouTube resisted Hanoi's pressure at first. In 2018 they tried to compromise, possibly reasoning that the regime might shrink from messing with two highly popular social media. It was no contest; by midway through 2020, the Vietnamese public's favorite chat platforms had capitulated entirely.

It has never been easy for net surfers in Vietnam to access offshore media that the regime has identified as toxic, unpoliced forums like the Vietnamese language services of the BBC, RFI, the VOA and Radio Free Asia, or dissident websites like Dan Lam Bao, Dan Luan or Tieng Dan. To link to these sites, knowledgeable netizens have relied on offshore servers. MPS can't emulate China -- it hasn't the brute technical strength to run a firewall -- but it has made it harder for its citizens to hear and spread real news.

A case in point: 2020 began with the suppression of agrarian protest in a village near Hanoi. A clash in which the leader of a band of aggrieved farmers and three police officers died was followed nine months later by a show trial. Though the regime's account of the incident was full of holes, public pushback was modest. It had become just too dangerous to speak out against the party-state.

Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad

Instead, as 2020 wore on, remnants of the democracy movement were transfixed by Donald Trump's battle for a second term as US President. Trump, it was said, would frustrate Beijing's schemes. He'd defend Vietnam against China.

Dissidents were deserting in droves from the online newswires they'd relied on, labelling them "left-wing media" and purveyors of fake news. By midyear, translations of stories from Breitbart, Newsmax and other alt-right US media began to be circulated widely on Facebook along with Falun Gong's suite of Vietnamese language publications.

The Trumpist heresy self-propagated with astonishing vigor throughout Vietnam's chattering class. Almost overnight, a majority of people who formerly identified as adherents of the democracy movement seem to have become prey to magical thinking. Nguyen Huu Vinh (aka Anh Ba Sam), who served five years in prison for writings deemed hostile to the State, is just one of many prominent bloggers who have crossed over to the dark side.

This stunning coup has been enabled in part by Facebook and YouTube. In the two years since Vietnam's cybersecurity law went into effect, the social media giants have become compliant servants of the regime. They are quick now to take down posts identified as 'toxic' by Vietnam's internet censors. Meanwhile, MPS trolls are freely able to promote pro-Trump posts.

As in the United States, Trump's defeat has not sobered his partisans in Vietnam. Their posts continue to paint him as a straight-talking leader unafraid of China, temporarily the tragic victim of 'voter fraud.' Joe Biden is consistently referred to as Bai-den -- in Vietnamese, 'stupid Joe.'

It is commonly explained that the regime has clamped down on independent media in anticipation of the Communist Party congress later this month, the implication being that after the new leadership is installed, controls will be relaxed. Don't bet on it. As long as the police and the regime's censors can manipulate social media at will, there's little reason to stop doing so, and under such circumstances, less reason to expect a revived democracy movement to arise from the present wreckage.

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