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World Report - Vietnam

- Area: 331,690 sq km
- Population: 90,549,390
- Language : Vietnamese
- Head of State : Truong Tân Sang, since July 2011

In January 2011, the 11th Communist Party Congress, which ended with the election of Nguyen Phu Trong as the head of the sole party, brought no changes. Recently, arrests and harassment of pro-democracy supporters have been on the rise. Today, Vietnam has the second largest number of netizens in prison of any country, with 19 currently in detention. Worried about the possible spread of protest movements shaking the Arab world, the Hanoi government has silenced citizens' voices and has stepped up Internet censorship. Apart from some dissident publications, there is no independent media in the country. Print media, television and radio are all controlled by the Hanoi authorities.

In January 2011, the government passed a decree restricting the activities of journalists and bloggers and providing for fines of up to 40 million dong (about 2,000 dollars). In a country where the average monthly salary is 100 dollars, the law, couched in deliberately vague terms, allows the Vietnamese government to increase its arrests of journalists and bloggers.

The authorities have been particularly severe in their response to criticism from members of the Bloc 8406 network, a coalition that calls for democratic reforms. Despite a serious deterioration in his state of health, Catholic priest **Nguyen Van Ly**, a human rights campaigner who publishes the dissident magazine *Tu do Ngon luan*, is once again behind bars for his online journalism activities. The terms of his detention, including no visiting rights, lack of medical care and irregular meals, could be construed as a form of psychological and physical torture.

Allegations such as "defaming the party", "anti-state propaganda" or "endangering national security" are used regularly by the authorities to intimidate or stifle dissidents. Among recent examples are cyber-dissident **Le Cong Dinh**, a noted lawyer, who was sentenced to five years in prison on 20 January 2010, and **Nguyen Tien Trung**, a blogger and pro-democracy activist who received a seven-year prison sentence. **Nguyen Dan Que**, 69, an independent journalist and cyber-dissident accused of anti-government propaganda, could face prison over his call for demonstrations, inspired by pro-democracy movements in the Middle East.

In some cases the police use "people's tribunals" to intimidate dissidents. Neighbourhood residents are invited to address the court to inform on and convict a defendant.

Despite the unrelenting battle waged by the political police against opposition groups and dissident publications, editorial staffs are being strengthened and competition is increasing. Media organizations nevertheless remain under the authority of their supervisory institutions -- the Communist Party, the army, the official news agency or local councils, as the case may be.

However, journalists, especially those who are younger and increasingly better-trained, sometimes depart from the ruling party's editorial guidelines. The media outlet enjoying the greatest freedom is undoubtedly the website *VietnamNet* which regularly raises embarrassing questions.

Besides official organs such as the party newspaper *Nhan Dan*, there are more than 600 titles. However, they are all open to sanctions for "serious breaches of press law", as was the case of the Magazine *Du Lich*, published by the department of tourism. It was suspended for three months in 2009 for having printed articles about the Paracel and Spratly Islands, which are at the centre of a serious territorial dispute with China.

The national radio, controlled by the prime minister's office and the Communist Party Central Committee, has a wide audience, as have the Vietnamese-language services of international broadcasters such as the *BBC* and *RFI*. Unfortunately, these can only be received on AM or short wave because the government refuses to grant them FM licences, clearly as a means of restricting listener numbers.

Vietnam is on the Reporters Without Borders' list of Internet Enemies. Since the 11th Communist Party Congress, the government has stepped up its harassment of bloggers and censorship of the Internet. Legislation restricting bloggers and Internet cafes has been tightened. Many sites are blocked and cyber-attacks are on the increase. Netizens also exercise self-censorship, fearing action by the authorities in the form of threats, court summonses or imprisonment, such as that suffered by **Pham Minh Hoang** and **Lu Van Bay**.

Hoang, a Franco-Vietnamese blogger, was sentenced to three months in prison and three years' house arrest on 10 August 2011 for attempting to overthrow the government. Bay was sentenced to four years' imprisonment and three years' house arrest on 22 August 2011 after a summary trial on charges of "anti-government propaganda" under the country's criminal code.

Despite such crackdowns, the influence of blogs has continued to grow, tackling subjects ignored by the traditional press such as territorial disputes, corruption, property disputes and even freedom of expression. Internet access has risen considerably in recent years and more than a third of the population is now on line.

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