

Vietnam - Annual report 2008

Legislative elections in May 2007 served as an occasion for the sole party to remind the opposition that it had no right to exist. In some districts of Ho Chi Minh City, the turnout reached 100% and no independent candidate was elected. The press was forced to show enthusiasm for these elections at which everything was decided in advance.

President Nguyen Minh Triet, replying in May to a question about human rights from a European journalist, said: "Perhaps it is hard for you to understand the love that we have for the people and the love that we have for human rights. But people who break the law must be punished." A few weeks earlier, Father Nguyen Van Ly, who runs the dissident review *Tu do Ngôn luan* (Freedom of Expression) published in Hue, central Vietnam, and four of his contributors were given harsh prison sentences at the end of a summary trial after being found guilty of "propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam".

Stalinist trials against dissidents

The trial of Father Nguyen Van Ly and his four co-accused lasted just over three hours. Weakened by a hunger strike, the priest refused to get up to give his name to the judge at the people's court in Hue. After hearing his sentence of eight years in prison, he shouted out, "Down with the Communist Party!" His colleague Nguyen Phong said in front of the judge, "For the Vietnamese nation, I will continue to fight for the values of freedom and democracy." Nguyen Binh Thanh, who was sentenced to five years, said in his defence that he had only acted in obedience to "international laws". Hoang Thi Anh Dao and Le Thi Le Hang received suspended 18-month sentences.

Father Ly was arrested in February and during the year two other managers of the review, Father Chan Tin and Father Phan Van Loi were placed under house arrest. The magazine continued to be clandestinely distributed in Vietnam and abroad.

Return of the "popular courts"

The authorities reactivated the "popular courts" to intimidate dissidents. Residents are invited to speak to the court to denounce and condemn an accused person. Nguyen Khac Toan, deputy editor of a dissident publication *Tu Do Dân Chủ* (Freedom and Democracy) was tried before one of these courts in Hanoi in August. A dozen party cadres and police officers accused him of having incited peasants to demonstrate, before recommending that he be sent to a re-education camp to "remove him from society". The trial was held in tandem with a press campaign against him in which he was accused of being an "unmasked political opportunist".

A lawyer who represented several jailed dissidents, Nguyen Van Dai, was brought before one of these courts in the Bach Khoa area in February and accused of "betraying his country". The "popular court" ruled that he should lose the right to work as a lawyer and his office should be closed.

The authorities went well beyond the recommendations of the people and in March, Nguyen Van Dai, who also runs the blog *nguyenvandai.rsfblog.org*, and another lawyer Le Thi Cong Nhan, were both arrested in Hanoi. After their arrests prompted criticism abroad, the security forces told their families not to speak publicly, particularly in foreign media. Both lawyers were sentenced in May to five and four years in jail respectively under Article 88 of the criminal code.

Other dissidents, a doctor, Le Nguyen Sang, journalist Huynh Nguyen Dao, and Nguyen Bac Truyen, all members of the banned People's Democratic Party were also sent to prison, by a court in Ho Chi Minh-City. They were accused of publishing articles hostile to the regime on the Internet. Tran Quoc Hien, spokesman for the United Workers-Farmers Organization (illegal), was arrested in January for "propaganda against the

regime" after posting numerous news items online about the plight of Vietnamese workers.

A French journalist detained for "terrorism"

Vietnamese-born French national Nguyen Thi Thanh Van, an opposition journalist, was arrested and held in custody in Ho Chi Minh-City from 17 November to 12 December. After her release she had this to say about her ordeal, "Between four walls, I was distraught because I could not imagine how I was going to get out of this situation. There was no violence against me, but police officers interrogated me for one or two hours every day, except Sunday. They were trying to weaken me. It was a form of moral terror". She had come to Vietnam to promote radio *Chan Troi Moi* (New Horizon), close to the opposition party Viet Tan, and to conduct interviews with dissidents.

This case demonstrated the open hostility of the authorities towards international radio stations that broadcast in Vietnamese. Four trade unionists were thrown in prison in December for having sent news to *Radio Free Asia* while the Vietnamese embassy on several occasions threatened journalists from *Radio France International* and denied visas to one of them.

A press under supervision

Liberal newspapers, such as *Tuoi Tre* (Youth) tried to push against the limits of official censorship but the government used repressive legislation to bring the most daring to heel. A law passed in 2006 provides for fines and suspensions of licences for media and journalists who defame and attack the "prestige of the state".

The official media, which comprises more than 100 radio and television stations, as many websites and nearly 600 publications did not in 2007 make use of the space for debate opened up ahead of the 2006 Communist Party Congress. On the contrary, the media, including the party newspaper and police newspapers campaigned against "agitators" and "terrorists" from inside and outside the country. Some foreign governments and international organisations like Reporters Without Borders were accused of supporting enemies of the regime.

Vietnam marks ten years on the Internet

The country experienced its biggest crackdown since 2002 when, in the space of one week, six cyber-dissidents were sentenced to prison terms of three to five years. Since Vietnam became the 150th member of the World Trade Organisation, it has behaved very differently from the way it presented itself to the international community to get itself admitted. It is one of the world's most authoritarian countries and closely follows the Chinese model when it comes to violations of freedom of expression online. Eight cyber-dissidents are in prison for having exercised freedom of expression on the Web.

Police and the culture ministry in September ordered the closure of the online newsletter *Intellasia.com* which is run by an Australian and specialises in financial news as well as posting political articles about Vietnam.

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