
VICE World News

Facebook Complicit in Censoring Posts in Vietnam, According to Amnesty International

A new Amnesty International report says that there's been a surge of people, including activists, jailed for their social media posts in recent years.



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SG

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PHOTO: BRETT JORDAN, UNSPLASH

Facebook is complicit in a dramatic increase in censorship on the platform in Vietnam, Amnesty International said Tuesday, in a new report detailing a surge in people jailed for their social media posts.

In the 78-page report, Amnesty compiled information from Facebook and Google as well as interviews with human rights activists. The organization found that Vietnam is currently holding 170 prisoners of conscience – the highest they’ve ever recorded. Of this, 69 were imprisoned for online activism. This includes those who criticized authorities' response to COVID-19 and shared independent information about human rights. These posts are seen to infringe upon the government’s interests, which could lead to imprisonment under Articles 117 or 331 of the Criminal Code.

“Amnesty International has documented the cases of 30 individuals charged and detained for online expression in 2018, all of whom have since been convicted and imprisoned,” the report says. “Twenty-four more were charged and detained in 2019, 21 of whom have been convicted and three of whom remain in pre-trial detention. A further 21 have been arrested in 2020 (as of November 2020), among whom two have been convicted and the rest remain in pre-trial detention.”

According to the report, human rights defenders have been increasingly facing harassment in recent years, receiving messages that include death threats, suspected to come from state-sponsored cyber troops like the Du Luan Vien, also known as “opinion shapers” who target Facebook activist pages.

Similarly, Force 47, a government-run cyberspace army believed to have 10,000 members, allegedly hacks anti-government websites and spreads pro-government messages online. All this to “fight against wrong views and distorted information on the internet.”

The existence of such measures has left many people in Vietnam in fear. Facebook remains the most widely-used social media platform in the country, a rare outlet in the one party state where the government heavily restricts and regulates its citizens’ internet use. In 2018, digital advertising revenue in Vietnam amounted to around \$550 million, of which 70 percent went to Facebook and Google, Reuters reported, citing Vietnam-based market researcher Ants.

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In the same year, the Vietnamese government passed a cybersecurity law that compels tech giants like Facebook and Google to store user data and censor content the government deems offensive. In April this year, Facebook agreed to censor posts in Vietnam after its local servers were taken offline, reportedly by actions from state-owned telecommunications companies. Facebook said it reluctantly complied with the government's request to "restrict access to content which it has deemed to be illegal." Most content restricted locally are still available outside Vietnam.

"Millions of people in Vietnam use our services every day to connect with family and friends and thousands of businesses rely on them to reach customers. We don't always see eye to eye with governments on issues like speech and expression, including in Vietnam, but we work hard to defend this right around the world," a Facebook spokesperson said in an emailed statement to VICE World News. "Over the past few months, we've faced additional pressure from the government of Vietnam to restrict more content, however, we will do everything we can to ensure that our services remain available so people can continue to express themselves."

The increased censorship worries human rights groups and organizations that address local politics and social issues.

"We have used Facebook since day one of our operation back in 2014. For the first four years, it was amazing. We were able to spread our message wide and far. But since 2018, our Facebook page's traffic has been reduced dramatically," Trinh Huu Long, co-founder of Legal Initiatives for Vietnam (LIV), an online magazine dedicated to discussing political and social issues in Vietnam told VICE World News.

...day, they are facing a fine of \$10,000.

Nearly two months ago, one of LIV's co-founders was arrested for “making, storing, disseminating or propagandising information, materials and products that aim to oppose the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.” She is currently facing 20 years in jail. Such moves have led the magazine to change the way they disseminate their content, including the use of newsletters and channels on mobile messaging app Telegram. They are also currently trying to develop an app for their website.

Ming Yu Hah, Deputy Regional Director for Campaigns at Amnesty International, told VICE World News that Facebook's agreement to these censorship demands are deeply alarming.

“In the past couple of decades, more and more companies have integrated human rights into their business model,” she said. “Facebook and Google can and should also ensure their operations in [Vietnam] and around the world respects the right to freedom of expression, rather than become tools for the Vietnamese authorities' censorship and repression of critical voices.”

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