

Vietnam completes online clampdown

By **Editorial Board** - 2019-01-02



Legislation requiring internet companies operating in Vietnam to remove content the one-party state regards as “toxic” has come into effect, in a move critics have called “totalitarian” information control.

The Hanoi government has clearly decided it is happy to bolster its grip on power at the expense of the freedom with which the internet is normally associated. But it remains to be seen if the heavy-handed approach will stifle investment in Vietnam’s large tech sector and stamp out the innovation that breeds best away from the censors.

Vietnam’s cybersecurity law has received [criticism](#) from Washington, the European Union and rights activists, who say it copies Chinese online censorship.

Facebook, Google and other tech firms will also have to hand over user data [requested](#) by the authorities, open offices inside the Communist state and store user data.

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The US Congress has made an appeal for US firms to be exempt from the law.

“The cybersecurity law does nothing to protect internet users,” the 17-member Congressional Vietnam Caucus announced. “Rather, it is a blatant effort by the Vietnamese government to crack down on online expression by enlisting the help of leading technology companies.”

The Ministry of Public Security (MPS) in November gave online companies a year to comply.

The powerful MPS said in October that the bill would address cyber-attacks and expose “hostile and reactionary forces” stirring up violence and dissent online.

A growing and youthful middle class in Vietnam is attracting digital companies along with the country’s formidable work ethic.

The World Bank says almost half of Vietnam’s 95-million-strong population uses the internet and it has more than 60 million Facebook users.

Political activists and dissidents who regularly use Facebook to discuss and share material on issues such as human rights and democracy now risk being arrested and charged with spreading anti-state propaganda.

A year ago, Vietnam deployed a 10,000-strong cyber police force to stamp out “wrong” views. Hanoi currently lacks Beijing’s technological sophistication that has seen the parallel government to the north so effectively muzzle the vast Chinese online space.

But Vietnam’s heavy-handed security apparatus will no doubt acquire these investigative skills.

And its population will probably accept these limits on freedom of expression as long as the economic growth continues.

But a major downturn might spark anger on the streets as people lack an online outlet for their discontent.

Facebook said it was committed to protecting the rights of its users and enabling them to express themselves freely and safely.

“We will remove content that violates standards when we are made aware of it,” Facebook stated. Numerous case studies around the world have shown Facebook is solely concerned with its own

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And Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc has said the policies were promoting innovation and connectivity, although almost all observers say they will do the opposite.

Critics say online freedom is being removed by the hardline administration that took power in 2016, since when numerous activists have been jailed.

Dissident artist Do Nguyen Mai Khoi **blamed** the internet giants rather than Vietnam's communist authorities.

"Facebook doesn't show what it's doing to protect freedom of expression. It has recently locked activists out of their accounts and deleted their posts," the 35-year-old singer-songwriter said. "YouTube has even removed my song, We Want, and now it can't be viewed inside Vietnam," she added.

Ten years ago Mai's hit song, Vietnam, won her accolades.

But then Mai stopped submitting her lyrics to Vietnam's censors and her performances were effectively banned as the police made it clear she had been blacklisted.

"The police intervened in Mai Khoi's concerts many times. They make it very hard for her to live and to make a living in Vietnam," said Long Trinh of Legal Initiatives for Vietnam, a magazine focussing on Vietnamese political and legal issues. "The government is very worried about her activities."

The Communist authorities will no doubt see sacrificing the career of a pop star as a small price to pay to retain a solid grip on power.

The Asia Internet Coalition (AIC) said the cyber law would undermine GDP and job growth.

"These provisions will result in severe limitations on Vietnam's digital economy, dampening the foreign investment climate and hurting opportunities for local businesses and SMEs to flourish inside and beyond Vietnam," AIC managing director Jeff Paine said. Both trade and foreign investment were critical components of the Vietnamese economy, he said.

The law has been seen as a copy of similar moves in China.

The "Great Fire Wall" of China protects the mainland's internet from the outside world, monitored by specially trained police who roam through online activity looking for dissident, critics of the government, supporters of Taiwanese and Tibetan separatism and adherents of religious groups seen as dangerous by the Chinese authorities.

Clare Algar of Amnesty International said the Vietnamese law's sweeping power had "potentially

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“This vote means there is now no safe place left for people to speak freely,” Algar said.

The key reason why the closed oligarchy of Communist leaders have been allowed to govern from Hanoi for so many decades without facing major movements to relinquish power is that the country has been relatively competently run.

By contrast, Myanmar’s generals are under constant pressure to relinquish power because they have done such a poor job since the 1962 coup.

In the event of a major economic downturn, Vietnam’s cyberlaw might force more citizens to take direct action against their government. The Hanoi government might well have overplayed its hand.

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