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As a dissident press emerged in 2006, the liberal media pushed at the boundaries of censorship. The government initially adopted an illiberal law then, at the end of the year, threatened to bring the media nationwide to heel.

Everything seemed to be smiling on the Vietnamese press at the start of 2006. In April, a dissident publication *Tu Do Ngon Luan* began appearing in the big cities and online. In the aftermath of the founding of a new dissident movement, *Bloc 8406* (created on 8 April 2006), a second paper *Tu Do Dân Chu* (Freedom and Democracy) was launched in August. But police quickly summoned and placed under surveillance dissident journalists Hoang Tien, Nguyen Khac Toan, Nguyen Van Dai, Duong Thi Xuan and Bach Ngoc Duong. Two other publications - *To Quoc* (Fatherland) and *Dan Chu* (Democracy) - were produced online from within Vietnam. In defiance of the government, journalists and dissident bloggers even went so far as to rally to the Free Journalists Association, a first in Vietnam.

On the other hand, the officially sanctioned press (nearly 600 publications, around 100 radio and TV stations, around 100 websites) took advantage of the preparations for the communist party congress to raise the most sensitive issues. An article carried by a newspaper in Ho Chi Minh City implicitly challenged Article 4 of the Constitution which underscores the predominance of the party over the state. The conservatives immediately condemned this unwelcome drift in the official newspaper *Nhan Dan*, party ideologue Nguyen Duc Binh saying that, "open discussions are dangerous".

The liberal press, led by *Tuoi Tre* (Youth), also distinguished itself by its outspokenness during a scandal in which a transport minister was implicated in a corruption case. *Tuoi Tre*, whose reporter was assaulted while investigating this case in Hanoi, openly called for the minister to resign. The government reacted by bringing in a new law in July punishing media and journalists defaming and attacking the prestige of the state. This decree also targeted news which "violates cultural traditions, distorts historical reality, denies revolutionary achievements, and harms the nation, great men and national heroes." The law did not provide for prison sentences but for fines and suspensions. In October, the culture ministry used the law to temporarily shut down two publications and to sanction two others which had carried articles on a scandal linked to the release of new bank notes.

During the congress in April, Nong Duc Manh, predator of press freedom, was re-elected for five years as head of the communist party with 80% of the vote. Prime Minister Phan Van Khai was replaced by Nguyen Tan Dung, an orthodox communist nevertheless seen as an economic reformer. Conservatives still control the security services so as to prevent those contesting the sole party from doing any damage. In November, three Americans of Vietnamese origin and four vietnamese were sentenced to 15 months in prison for "terrorism". The seven, who were linked to a US-based radical group, were accused of illegally bringing broadcast equipment into the country with the aim of putting out anti-government messages. Elsewhere, foreign journalists are still denied free access to the country's mountainous centre, home to ethnic minorities whose rights are trampled on by the authorities.

Repression of dissident activities was stepped up in November, in the run-up to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Hanoi. Journalists working for independent publications *Tu Do Ngon Luan* and *Tu Do Dân Chu* were put under house arrest, with notices in front of their homes reading, "Security zone. No foreigners". Police deployed for several days in front of the home of Hoang Tien, while newly-released cyber-dissident Pham Hong Son was savagely beaten by police.

Once the foreign delegations had left Vietnam, the government launched its counter-attack. The foreign ministry spokesman, Le Dung, said it was unacceptable that people should abuse the "mask of democracy, with false, distorted and invented claims about the situation in Vietnam". The authorities gave a firm reminder that dissident publications were illegal.

In the face of this crackdown, Father Phan Van Loi, founder of *Tu Do Ngon Luan*, wrote to Reporters Without Borders: "We want to deliver a message to the party and the people: Only the truth frees!"

Reporters Without Borders defends imprisoned journalists and press freedom throughout the world. It has nine national sections (Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland). It has representatives in Bangkok, London, New York, Tokyo and Washington. And it has more than 120 correspondents worldwide.

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