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Internet Ennemies

Viet Nam

- Français - Information - Ennemis d'Internet -

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Reporters Sans Frontières

Domain name : .vn

Population : 88 578 758

Internet-users : 21 963 117

Average charge for one hour's connection at a cyber-café : about 2,7 US\$ for tourists. But cheaper for nationals.

Average monthly salary : about 68 US\$

Number of imprisoned netizens : 17

The progress made by Vietnam in the domain of human rights, which allowed the country to become a member of the World Trade Organization in 2007, is nothing but a distant memory. As the 2011 Communist Party Congress draws nearer, the regime is muffling dissident views on the Internet, and its first target is critics of the country's policy toward China.

Too popular for its own good

In the last ten years, the Internet's growth has soared, as has the country's economic integration. The Web has been a great success with Vietnam's young population. In November 2009, the social network *Facebook* boasted a million users, as compared to only 50,000 early in that year.

Cybercafés are still the main means of Internet access. Managers rarely ask their customers to present their IDs, but they are required to record in detail what connections they make. Some arrests involving customers who consult prohibited websites have been noted in the past.

A citizen journalism network has developed. Websites such as *Vietnam Net* and *Vietnam News* discuss subjects like corruption, social issues, and the country's political situation. Blogger conduct actual on-site investigations that could not be reported by the traditional state-owned media. Thanks to the Internet and the discussion and information-sharing forums that it offers, a virtual civil society has emerged in which pro-democracy activists can find refuge - a fact that unnerves the authorities.

After having paved the way for it in 2008, in 2009 the regime initiated a takeover of the Internet. In October 2008, the government set up a new administrative entity, the Department of Radio, Television and Electronic Information under the Ministry of Information and Communications. This Ministry passed an order in December 2008 that reinforces government control of the Internet. Web users who disseminate information "hostile" toward the government may be subject to sanctions. Since January 2009, new measures have been implemented to regulate Vietnamese blogs. In a document intitled "Circular no. 7," the authorities required that blogs only provide strictly personal information (Art. 1). For example, Internet users are not permitted to disseminate press articles, literary works, or other publications prohibited under the Press Law (Art. 2). Further, every six months, or at the authorities' request, the host companies must produce a report on their customers' activities that mentions the number of blogs they manage and their statistics, as well as any data relating to blogs that have violated the host company's regulations (Art. 6). The Ministry of Public Security is also implicated in Web surveillance.

Excessive censorship

Even though the country claims to filter only content that is obscene or endangers national security, censorship also affects opposition websites or those that are in any way critical of the regime. One subject that is growing more and more taboo is territorial disputes between Vietnam and China in the China Sea. Censorship primarily involves blocking website addresses, and particularly concerns sites in Vietnamese. The various Internet service providers enforce these rules unevenly.

The number of cyber-attacks is growing. Hackers - especially in January 2010 - have zeroed in on sites that "push the envelope" of freedom of expression on the Internet: www.bauxitevietnam.info and www.blogosin.org. Although they take a moderate tone, these sites have proven to be critical of the authorities' policies with regard to Beijing. The "*Bauxite VietNam*" website was created by three intellectuals in 2008 to relay a campaign objecting to the operating plan of a Chinese company's bauxite mining project in Vietnam's Central Highland region, approved by the Vietnam government despite the unfavorable opinion of scientists and environmental activists. This website has been turned into a sort of forum for the free exchange of ideas on controversial subjects such as corruption, democracy, and particularly Sino-Vietnamese relations. Its editor, **Nguyen Hue Chi**, has been summoned several times by the police.

Pressure is being placed on editors of unauthorized online newspaper websites like *To Quoc* (the Homeland) in an attempt to force them to shut down. Teacher **Nguyen Thuong Long**, *To Quoc*'s associate editor was summoned by police in February 2010. As for **Nguyen Thanh Giang**, one of this newspaper's co-founders, on one occasion police surrounded his house.

There has been limited access to *Facebook* since November 2009. Blocking has occurred on occasion, but is not yet permanent. According to the *Associated Press*, a technician from Vietnam Data Corp. had confirmed in November 2009 that the government had ordered Internet service providers to block the social network. Some enforced the order, while others were less zealous. This measure was implemented when *Facebook* was being used by pro-democracy groups to denounce arrests of activists like **Nguyen Tien Trung**. But Web surfers are still using *Facebook* - they have simply decided to use proxy servers more often.

In 2008, the regime had announced its desire to require foreign companies to collaborate, mainly on blog platforms. Some Web users who were worried about their personal data migrated from *Yahoo!* 360plus to platforms like *WordPress*, *Blogspot* and *Multiply*, after the U.S. company decided to transfer its servers from Singapore to Vietnam.

Massive arrests and convictions

Vietnam is the world's second biggest prison for netizens: it now has seventeen of them behind bars. The government shows zero tolerance toward websites and netizens thought to be jeopardizing the government's stability. Most of them are prosecuted - and convicted - for "subversion" or "attempting to overthrow the people's government." They invoke Articles 79 and 88 of the Penal Code.

The latest wave of crackdowns began in September 2009, with the arrest of nine dissidents in Hanoi and Hai Phong. They are paying the price for the "internal cleanup" now underway in anticipation of the next Communist Party Congress. Some very harsh prison sentences have been meted out to pro-democracy activists who appealed for multipartism on the Internet. The authorities are promoting the theory of a foreign-based plot and point out the destabilizing effect of proliferating Western values.

The well-known lawyer **Le Cong Dinh** was sentenced on January 20, 2010 to a five-year prison term without parole, and pro-democracy activists **Nguyen Tien Trung**, **Le Thang Long** and **Tran Huynh Duy Thuc** received prison sentences of seven years, five years, and sixteen years, respectively, by virtue of Article 79 of the Vietnamese Penal Code. To these sentences were added three years of house arrest (to be served after their release from prison) for all of them except **Tran Huynh Duy Thuc**, who was sentenced to five years behind bars. The four activists were found guilty of "endangering national security," by "organizing campaigns in collusion with reactionary organizations based abroad," designed to "overthrow the people's government (...) with the help of the Internet." Eight bloggers were also given prison sentences in October 2009.

At the end of a completely trumped-up trial, writer and human rights activist **Tran Khai Thanh Thuy** was sentenced

to three and one-half years in prison for "assault" even though she was the one assaulted. Her writings on the Internet were very popular in both Viet Nam and abroad.

Journalist and blogger **Nguyen Van Dai**, better known as **Dieu Cay**, is still behind bars. Arrested in 2008 a few days before the Olympic torch was due to pass through Ho Chi Minh City, he was sentenced in December 2008 to serve two and one-half years in prison for "tax fraud" - a totally fabricated charge. According to his own son's testimony, Dieu Cay had been closely watched since participating, in early 2008, in demonstrations in Ho Chi Minh City protesting against China's policy in the Paracels and Spratley archipelagos.

Those arrests and convictions are compelling arguments for self-censorship. Blogger **Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh**, a.k.a. **Me Nam**, was released in September 2009, but ultimately yielding to police pressure, she decided to close down her blog.

International pressures?

In December 2009, Western donor countries had warned Hanoi against imposing restrictions on the Internet, a step which would be liable to slow down the country's economic development. The Ambassador of the United States - Vietnam's biggest export market - asserted in February 2010 that these convictions of dissidents "were affecting bilateral relations."

Reporters Without Borders called upon the European Union to suspend any dialog with Vietnam on the subject of human rights as long as its netizens and jailed journalists remain in custody.

Links:

<http://clbnbtd.com/> : news website of the "free journalists' club" founded by cyber-dissident Dieu Cay (in Vietnamese).

<http://english.vietnamnet.vn/> : official daily (English)

<http://www.bkav.com.vn/> : website of the Bach Khoa Centre (Vietnamese)

<http://www.rfa.org/english/vietnamese> : Radio Free Asia, Vietnamese section <http://www.intellasia.com> : Financial news website about the Vietnamese economy (English).