

Vietnam's clampdown on academic freedom

13 February 2019

Under new rule, Vietnam is discrediting critics of the one-party state. **Alexandre Sisophon** reports from Hanoi on the academics and students resisting this campaign.

In the late afternoon of October 24 2018, on Nguyen Xi street in Hanoi, at the corner of Trang Tien plaza, a few hundred meters away from the iconic Hoan Kiem lake, a man in his 40s was tidying up his book stall. Among the many books he had on display were Vietnamese translations of John Dewey's Democracy and Education and Noam Chomsky's Understanding Power.

A few days after, the books had been taken off sale, stored away inside a cupboard.

Professor Chu Hao, a retired academic and head of the books' publishing house was informed he was to face a disciplinary procedure, under a Vietnamese Communist Party's (VCP) Central Committee decision.

Chu Hao was born in 1940. He is a former Vice-Minister of Science and Technology (from 1996 until 2005) and a well-known intellectual, famous for his contribution as Head of the National Center for Technology as well as for his commitment for the enhancement of education in the country. He worked at that publishing house since his retirement from politics in 2005. When informed he was likely to be expelled from the VCP, he decided to give back his party membership card.

In a press release mentioning Chu Hao's case published on October 25, the VCP's Central Committee expressed a concern about the 'recession of political thinking' in the country.

An open letter was signed by more than 200 VCP members and 81 International academics on Vietnamese Studies, including Vietnamese-American novelist and 2016's Pulitzer Prize for fiction laureate Viet Thanh Nguyen, petitioned to express 'their profound disagreement with accusations directed at Chu Hao'.

In November, Chu Hao's expulsion became official. The VCP's general secretary and President, Nguyen Phu Trong, said on November 24 that it was worth 'punishing a few in order to save thousands'. Chu Hao is a scapegoat: the VCP wanted to send a warning sign to the intellectual elites.

Power in Hanoi

Internal purges within the Communist Party has long been a strategy in Ba Dinh's square, where the Presidential Palace and the party's headquarters are both situated, next to Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum.

It is certainly one of the reasons for the VCP's continuous grip on power since the 1945 August Revolution, along with its systematic crackdown on political opponents. There are indeed at least 97 prisoners of conscience in the country, according to Amnesty International's last report.

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Nguyen Phu Trong, a former editor of 'Tap Chi Cong San' (Communism Review), the party's ideological journal, was elected General Secretary in 2011. He made an alliance with Tran Dai Quang, then Minister of Public Security, to oust former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung during the Party's Congress in 2016. Tran Dai Quang became President, but he passed away in September 2018. Nguyen Phu Trong seized this opportunity to merge the two Vietnamese seats of power (President and Party's General Secretary), just as Xi Jinping did in China before him.

He is now arguably the most powerful Premier since wartime leader Le Duan or even Ho Chi Minh himself. His hands are now free to implement his political vision: restoring the party and the state's authority in a country undermined by rampant corruption.

Since Trong took office, control on intellectual life has tightened. An orthodox Marxist and prolific reader of Lenin's works, his early work on the party journal has certainly impacted his current governance style. Publications which produce non-orthodox views on national history, literature or even philosophy have inevitably come under fire. Concepts like 'multipartyism', 'peaceful evolution' or 'electoral democracy' have been removed from the national discourse. Hence the sensitivity of Chu Hao's publishing activities.

A difficult resistance

Facing this harsh repressive agenda and the threat of being imprisoned, Vietnamese intellectuals have often managed to find strategies of resistance. They play with the system, sometimes even from the inside. However, they often get reminded that there is a line that should not be crossed.

In 2010, writer Nha Thuyen defended a master's dissertation in literature at Hanoi University of Pedagogy on a southern poetry collective active in the early 2000s who called themselves 'Mo Mieng' (Open the mouth). This group, led by Ly Doi and Bui Chat, had various influences, among which Alexander Soljenitsyne and the French literary movement 'Oulipo' [Georges Pérec, Raymond Queneau, etc.]. Nha Thuyen considered this poetry of the margins had a place within the academia. But the problem was that some Mo Mieng's works were openly 'anti-communist'.

In April 2013, Public Security [police] investigators started to show an interest in Nha Thuyen's dissertation. At that time, a campaign led in the official press described her work as 'reactionary', 'anti-cultural' or even 'garbage disguised as academic work'.

Hanoi University of Pedagogy then decided to withdraw her degree in March 2014. Her academic supervisor, Mrs. Binh, was even pushed into early retirement. After an

uproar in the spring of 2014 which included public support by more than 100 Vietnamese academic personalities, Nha Thuyen was given another master's degree in May.

This case left a scar within the academic community in Hanoi. In the meanwhile, in Ho Chi Minh City, the country's biggest city and economic capital, it is Mrs. Bui Tran Phuong's struggle with the local authorities that made the headlines.

Mrs. Bui Tran Phuong is a historian born in 1950 who specialized in the History of Vietnamese Women. In 1991, after having led an academic career, she founded a school called Hoa Sen (Lotus Flower). Initially designed as a technical school, Hoa Sen turned into a proper University in 2006.

Therein lies the rub. Her will to transmit 'critical thinking' to the students was not quite appreciated by the local authorities. Caught in an administrative imbroglio that lasted for years with the Ministry of Education and the City's People's Committee, she eventually lost the Presidency of her University in January 2017. Still, her institution stands in down-town Ho Chi Minh City and she has been a role model for several generations of Vietnamese students.

The risk of anti-intellectualism

The Vietnamese leader Nguyen Phu Trong seems afraid that academic freedom would threaten the base on which the VCP's grip on power is built. He is trying to prevent any questioning of the Party's legitimacy and will no longer tolerate alternative views on what the nation's history and culture are. Somehow, he is thus reproducing the wartime totalitarian reflexes that prevailed for decades in Vietnam.

A new wave of anti-intellectualism is being pursued in a country where the Intelligentsia has often been left atrophied by censorship and repression. The problem is that Vietnam is not at war anymore, but undergoing a massive cultural change through rapid development. This change produces a feeling of anomie among its citizens. The gap between the elite and the common people is getting bigger and the country's modernity appears yet to be defined.

If the VCP and his leader don't find support within the intellectual elites to bridge that gap but keep bullying them instead, there is a possibility that their efforts for restoring the Party's authority in a country undermined by corruption might be at most a castle in the sand.

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