

Thayer Consultancy
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Background Briefing:

Vietnam: Explaining Uptick in Arrests of Activists & Bloggers

Carlyle A. Thayer

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We have never seen so many activists arrested and sentenced in such a short period of time as presently taking place in Vietnam over the past month. How do you explain this situation?

Do you think there has been a trend of intensified crackdown on activists recently because the U.S President Trump does not pay attention to human right issues in Vietnam?

Do you think the decision to withdraw from TPP by President Trump makes Vietnam feel more confident that it can crackdown on activists/dissidents without being concerned about its commitment to the TPP?

Are there any domestic factors influencing to the decision on intensifying the crackdown on pro-democracy activists?

Do you agree that the intensified crackdown on dissidents gives Vietnam a very bad image in the international community?

ASSESSMENT: There are at least five factors that explain the recent arrests and trials of activists and bloggers in Vietnam.

The first factor is the bureaucratic routine of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS). All of those arrested were well known to the MPS. Its bureaucratic routine would have been to open a file and systematically gather information on what an individual has said in public, including posts on blogs and Facebook, as well as a list of associates. The MPS then would have approached family members, friends and work colleagues to advise them that the person under suspicion was a bad person and they should dissuade him/her to stop anti-state activities. The MPS would have called in the person of concern to interrogate them in an attempt to intimidate. If the activist or blogger continued the person's file would be set up the chain of command for action.

The second factor is that Vietnam will be hosting the APEC Summit at the end of the year and the MPS does not want a repeat of 2006 when Vietnam last hosted an APEC Summit. At that time Block 8406 (8 April 2006) emerged calling for democracy and human rights. On the eve of the summit Block 8406 called on leaders who were attending to make protests to the Vietnamese government about human rights. The MPS cordoned off the streets where Block 8406 members lived to limit contact with foreigners. After the summit Block 8406 activists were arrested, tried and imprisoned.

The timing of the arrests and trials indicates the MPS is taking pre-emptive action far in advance of the APEC Summit to break up networks of troublemakers and to intimidate other would be activists from making public protests on the internet or in street demonstrations.

The third factor is a likely assessment by the MPS that the Trump Administration will make only routine protests about the arrest of activists and bloggers. This assessment would have been borne out by Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc's May meeting with President Trump at the White House. The only critical public comments by the U.S. have been remarks by outgoing Ambassador Ted Osius and a statement by the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi.

It should be recalled that human rights in Vietnam formed one part of nine cooperative areas listed in the 2013 joint statement on comprehensive partnership. There is an annual bilateral human rights dialogue and the U.S. is providing Vietnam legal assistance to bring its domestic laws into conformity with its international obligations. Human rights also featured in the joint statement issued by President Trump and Prime Minister Phuc in late May this year. It is unlikely the two leaders addressed this issue in depth or at all in their brief half hour meeting through an interpreter. The joint statement was hammered out in advance and it skated over human rights in a perfunctory matter. There was no apparent linkage between U.S. arms and military technology sales and human rights.

The TransPacific Partnership has little relevance for human rights; its most sensitive sections dealt with the right of workers to form their own associations and labor standards. Vietnam could easily have accommodated these requirements by ensuring that so-called independent labor associations only focused on the terms and conditions of workplace employment and not other politically sensitive issues.

The fourth factor is the timing of these preemptive arrests and trials. The MPS has calculated that there is enough time for this issue to die down or there is enough time to take action to mitigate the consequences, such as releasing one or more activists in advance of the APEC Summit. Vietnam can say it is doing so on health grounds or as a result of good behavior of the prisoner. It is conceivable that the security authorities would allow a former prisoner to leave Vietnam into exile in the U.S. or elsewhere.

The fifth factor is related to Vietnam's relations with China. Several years ago, as a result of public demonstrations and a war of words on the internet by Vietnamese and Chinese netizens, the leaders of the two countries agreed "to steer public opinion." Many of the recent arrests have included bloggers who have been critical about Chinese behavior in the South China Sea and the response by the Vietnamese government. Chinese Embassy officials in Hanoi, from the Ambassador on down, would have lost no time in urging Vietnam to take action against those who "hurt the Chinese people" or affect China's interests.

All of this predates the current Repsol case which has made public protests about China and the Vietnamese government response even more sensitive. By cracking down on anti-China activists and bloggers Hanoi is signaling to Beijing that Vietnam is committed to maintain workmanlike bilateral relations. Even more sensitive, is the challenge public protests have on the Vietnamese government and how it handles

relations with China. It is obvious that there has been a news blackout in Vietnam on this issue.

A minor theme revolves around the Formosa Plastics dead fish issue and its impact on relations with Taiwan. The Hanoi government, having secured compensation, has every reason to keep a lid on this issue because of the importance of economic relations with Taiwan under a new government.

All five factors interact with one another at the strategic level and set the context for explaining the current upsurge in arrests, trials and imprisonment of Vietnamese activists and bloggers.

Vietnam's actions against activists have been condemned by the United Nations. Vietnam's human right record could also feature in discussions between Vietnam and the European Union on a free trade agreement. Conceivably, several U.S. legislators could raise human rights issues on the floor of Congress. The bottom line is that Vietnam's recent spate of arrests, trials and imprisonment of activists and bloggers is unlikely to cause irreparable damage to Vietnam's bilateral relations with the United States, EU members, Japan or Australia.

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