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Hammer and fist

The Communist Party is reasserting control in Vietnam

American indifference has contributed to a crackdown on dissidents

NGUYEN CHI TUYEN, a human-rights activist, is used to government repression. Since 2011, when he took part in protests against Chinese military aggression in the South China Sea, he has been watched carefully by plainclothes policemen. Twice a year an official visits his office and talks to his boss. Sometimes, when foreign dignitaries are visiting, he is not allowed to leave his house. In 2015 he was brutally beaten up by a group of thugs. The authorities regularly break up the practice sessions of a football team that includes him and other dissidents. Yet even he is surprised by the recent crackdown on dissent, with around 25 people arrested or exiled this year alone. The government's "heavy campaign" is puzzling, he says.

Discussion of politics has long been heavily policed in Vietnam. But there used to be a little more leeway than in China, its northern neighbour and fellow Communist state. There is no equivalent of China's Great Firewall, so locals have access to foreign news and Western social media. Perhaps half of the country's 90m people use Facebook. Public criticism of economic policy has been possible, and protesters have been able to gather over issues such as the South China Sea, even if they are subsequently monitored by the police.

Yet since early last year, when Nguyen Tan Dung, the prime minister, was forced to retire, the political landscape has shifted. A crackdown on dissidents and activists, already begun under Mr Dung, has been combined with a fierce anti-corruption drive. That has toppled high-ranking officials in places such as Ho Chi Minh City and Danang, where Donald Trump is attending a big regional summit this week. The result is a strengthening of the Communist Party and its secretary-general, Nguyen Phu Trong, at the expense of the bureaucracy. “The political mood in Vietnam has always been dour,” says Jonathan London, a Vietnam-watcher at the University of Leiden. “But these days it has a bit of a draconian edge to it.”

Under Mr Trong, the Communist Party has become more conservative. Unlike the freewheeling Mr Dung, who was pro-Western and pro-business, Mr Trong’s main concern seems to be the preservation of the Communist Party. This has led to a “more disciplinary style of rule”, says Mr London. In August Vietnamese agents appear to have kidnapped Trinh Xuan Thanh, a former head of PetroVietnam, a state-owned oil firm, in Germany, where he was seeking asylum. At any rate, he mysteriously surfaced in Hanoi, where state media reported that he had handed himself over to the police. A month later Nguyen Xuan Son, a former chairman of PetroVietnam, was sentenced to death on embezzlement charges.

Mr Trong and his allies are also cementing the party’s authority over the bureaucracy. A pilot scheme in Quang Ninh province has merged the positions of party secretary and chairman of the people’s committee—in effect handing executive authority to the party’s man. If successful it will be

rolled out in other provinces, says Le Hong Hiep of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore.

The crackdown on dissidents has also been carried to the provinces, points out Carlyle Thayer of the University of New South Wales. “It is an orchestrated, national movement,” he says. A lack of condemnation from abroad seems to be playing a part: according to Nguyen Anh Tuan, a dissident, security forces are “pretty straightforward” about stating that Mr Trump’s apparent lack of concern for human rights has emboldened them.

The crackdown seems mainly to be aimed at groups that might conceivably threaten the rule of the Party: many of those who have been targeted are associated with the Catholic church or civil-society groups such as the Brotherhood of Democracy. On October 25th Phan Kim Khanh, a 24-year-old student, was given a six-year prison sentence for “conducting propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam” and for having contacts with Viet Tan, California-based democracy advocates the government has branded terrorists. But prominent individuals have also been clobbered: Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh, a popular environmental blogger known as “Mother Mushroom”, was given a ten-year sentence in June.

Indeed, as wary as Vietnam is of China, it seems to be following its lead in shoring up the Party’s authority. The Ministry of Public Security has proposed a sweeping cyber-security law, which would further limit dissent. Yet Vietnam is a smaller, poorer economy than China, more reliant on foreign investment and trade. Even with a less demanding American administration, it has far more to lose.

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