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Explaining the Extreme Paranoia of the Communist Party of Vietnam

The censorship of an article by a small Middle Eastern think tank offers insights into the party's greatest sensitivities.

By **Bill Hayton**

How paranoid is Vietnam's communist leadership? So paranoid, apparently, that any critical analysis of its performance and future prospects needs to be suppressed, no matter how obscure the source. This, at least, appears to be the best explanation of why Vietnam's Foreign Ministry pressed a small Middle Eastern think tank to take down one of my articles from its website. And the think tank's craven response to this pressure is an object lesson in the threats to academic freedom posed by authoritarian states.

The story began in June 2022 with an email from Trends Research, a think tank based in the United Arab Emirates, inviting me to write a 2,500-word article on current issues in Vietnam. I sent off a draft at the end of the month and received the publication agreement a few days later. Worryingly, Article 4-5 of this agreement gave Trends Research "the right to modify or rearrange some or all of the work... as it may deem appropriate without obtaining the consent of the Second Party in this respect." In other words, Trends Research would have the power to rewrite my article, but still attribute it to me. This is what the organization later tried to do.

Trends Research staff have told me that my article then went through "security screening" to make sure that it contained nothing that would harm the interests of the United Arab Emirates. Such "screening" is, apparently, normal for articles about Iran, Saudi Arabia, or other Middle Eastern states but unusual for a piece about Southeast Asia. No issues were raised but the publication process still took considerable time. My commentary finally went online in mid-August.

The article was an argument that Vietnamese politics is approaching an inflection point. The current general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), **Nguyen Phu Trong, is 78 and in poor health but has been unable to find a suitable successor. As a result, in January 2021, he was appointed to a third term in office, something that hasn't happened in Vietnam for decades. I argued that, behind the scenes, change is brewing; that Trong's brand of hardline politics is reaching the end of the road. I made a comparison between the current situation in Vietnam and the situation 20 years ago when a previous hardline general secretary, Le Kha Phieu, was replaced and Vietnamese politics made a sudden lurch towards openness.**

Along the way I pointed to reports of political sclerosis at the highest levels in Vietnam. **Trong's "anti-corruption" campaign has caused bureaucratic paralysis, with officials constantly watching their backs and avoiding making decisions. At the same time, despite the anti-corruption campaign, high-level corruption has reached eye-watering levels. To take one among many scandals,** Foreign Ministry officials stand accused of extorting \$200 million from Vietnamese citizens trying to return home during the COVID-19 pandemic. I also mentioned the leaked video footage of Vietnam's Minister of Public Security To Lam enjoying a goldleaf-covered steak at a London restaurant in November 2021. The steak cost \$2,000, several times his official monthly salary. I talked about allegations that **members of the CPV's Politburo and members of their families were taking large cuts of lucrative business deals.**

There was no public reaction to my article. It didn't go viral on social media, nor did it get the kneejerk slating from Vietnam's army of tankies that has become *de rigeur* in the past few years. It just sat on the Trends Research website. But apparently, some people noticed. James Crabtree of the International Institute for Strategic Studies tweeted that a few people had mentioned it to him during his trip to Vietnam in September.

Then, in early October, I was invited to lunch at the Vietnamese Embassy in London. We had a very pleasant conversation about current events. The meal concluded with a brief mention of my article, an inquiry about how it came to be published ("They asked for one, I wrote it.") and a polite admonition that while it was acceptable to talk about corruption in general terms, it was unacceptable to name names.

Then, in early November, I noticed that my article had disappeared from the Trends Research website. I asked the organization what had happened and was told that, "unfortunately, we were updating our website and we are currently facing some technical issues which we are trying to solve as soon as possible." Strangely, these technical issues only appeared to affect my article. I made further enquiries and discovered that Trends Research had come under pressure from Vietnamese diplomats in the UAE.

I was told that, after an initial contact through a journalist of the Vietnamese News Agency, a diplomat from the Vietnamese Embassy in the UAE made the 140-kilometer journey from Abu Dhabi to Dubai for a friendly chat with the staff of Trends Research. The diplomat complained about my article and Trends Research took it off the website. They did not inform me; it was only when I tried to refer someone to the article that discovered it had gone. It took the organization over a month to give me a substantive response.

On December 8, Ayesha al-Remeithi of the Research Department of Trends Research emailed to tell me, "Due to in-house editorial considerations, we have had to re-edit the insight slightly (as per Article 4-5 of the agreement). As you will see, only minor modifications have been made and the general content and aim of the insight have been preserved." These "minor modifications" tell us a great deal about the sensitivities of the CPV and also of the limits to intellectual freedom imposed by Trends Research.

Most crassly, Trends Research removed any reference to the Russian "invasion" of Ukraine. It would seem that, as far as the organization is concerned, Russia did not invade Ukraine; there was just a "war." Trends Research then made a series of farcical edits, including changing the phrase "the extent of high-level corruption in Vietnam" to "issues related to governance" and removing references to the involvement of Foreign Ministry officials in the COVID-19 repatriation scandal, even though these are now being freely discussed in Vietnamese state media. The crux of my argument, that a post-Trong CPV "will return to its previous path of caring more about making money and less about party discipline" was completely excised.

The censorship went on and on. Trends Research eviscerated the article, removing references to high-level corruption and anything that its staff thought might upset the Vietnamese side. They then presented me with the bowdlerized version, which they intended to publish. Fortunately, I had taken the precaution of changing a few words in the version of the publication agreement that I signed. This made it necessary for Trends Research to obtain my consent before publishing an edited version of my piece. I told them I would not consent to what they had done, and they said they would not publish it without the changes. As a result, my article will probably never be seen again on the Trends Research website.

If nothing else, this little episode gives us some good insights into what subjects and comments the CPV is most sensitive about. The biggest of these seems to be that members of the Politburo, those tasked with rooting out corruption, are themselves corrupt. It also appears that openly suggesting that the current leadership of the CPV is running out of ideas is taboo. The number of critical articles about Vietnamese politics published in English during 2022 was tiny, and mine would probably have languished in obscurity had it not been for the intervention and the censorship. There will be many people who will disagree with my argument, but it would be a small victory for academic freedom if the article, now shared on The Diplomat website, could get a wider circulation.

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