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# Facebook touts free speech. In Vietnam, it's aiding in censorship

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SINGAPORE — For months, Bui Van Thuan, a chemistry teacher turned crusading blogger in Vietnam, published one scathing Facebook post after another on a land dispute between villagers and the communist government.

In a country with no independent media, Facebook provides the only platform where Vietnamese can read about contentious topics such as Dong Tam, a village outside Hanoi where residents were fighting authorities' plans to seize farmland to build a factory.

Believing a confrontation was inevitable, the 40-year-old Thuan condemned the country's leaders in a Jan. 7 post. "Your crimes will be engraved on my mind," he wrote. "I know you — the land robbers — will do everything, however cruel it is, to grab the people's land."

Facebook blocked his account the next day at the government's insistence, preventing 60 million Vietnamese users from seeing his posts.

One day later, as Thuan had warned, police stormed Dong Tam with tear gas and grenades. A village leader and three officers were killed.

For three months, Thuan's Facebook account remained suspended. Then the company told him the ban would be permanent.

"We have confirmed that you are not eligible to use Facebook," the message read in Vietnamese.

Thuan's blacklisting, which the Menlo Park-based social media giant now calls a "mistake," illustrates how willingly the company has acquiesced to censorship demands from an authoritarian government.

Facebook and its founder, Mark Zuckerberg, say the platform protects free expression except in narrow circumstances, such as when it incites violence. But in countries including Cuba, India, Israel, Morocco, Pakistan and Turkey, Facebook routinely restricts posts that governments deem sensitive or off-limits.

Facebook, whose site was translated into Vietnamese in 2008, now counts more than half the country's people among its account holders. The popular platform has enabled government critics and pro-democracy activists — in both Vietnam and the United States — to bypass the communist system's strict controls on the media.

But in the last several years, the company has repeatedly censored dissent in Vietnam, trying to placate a repressive government that has threatened to shut Facebook down if it does not comply, The Times found.

In interviews, dozens of Vietnamese activists, human rights advocates and former Facebook officials say the company has blocked posts by hundreds of users, often with little explanation.

Facebook has also barred Hanoi's critics — including a Southern California-based opposition group — from buying ads to boost readership and has failed to stop pro-government trolls from swamping the platform to get dissidents' posts removed.

Instead of using its leverage as Vietnam's biggest media platform to hold the line against censorship, Facebook has, in effect, become an accomplice in the government's intensifying repression of pro-democracy voices, critics say.

"I think for Zuckerberg the calculus with Vietnam is clear: It's to maintain service in a country that has a huge population and in which Facebook dominates the consumer internet market, or else a competitor may step in," said Dipayan Ghosh, a former public policy advisor at Facebook who co-directs the Digital Platforms & Democracy Project at Harvard's Kennedy School.

"The thought process for the company is not about maintaining service for free speech. It's about maintaining service for the revenue."

Executives at the company said they have little choice but to comply with Hanoi's escalating demands if they want to keep the platform available, adding that they push back when authorities press too hard.

In some cases, Vietnam's government forces users to disable their own accounts without involving the company, Facebook said.

Several Facebook officials agreed to be interviewed about the company's Vietnam operations, but only if they were not quoted by name. The company also provided answers to written questions.

"We don't always see eye to eye with governments in countries where we operate, including Vietnam," Facebook said in a statement. "We will continue to do everything that we can to ensure that our services remain available to people in Vietnam who rely on them every day."

With a young population and one of Asia's fastest growing economies before the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnam represents a key growth market for Facebook. The company controls more than 40% of Vietnam's $760-million digital advertising market despite having no office or full-time employees in the country.

Hanoi's pressure on Facebook to restrict posts surged after public protests in Ho Chi Minh City in 2016 over how the government responded to toxic discharges from a steel plant blamed for massive fish kills. Authorities arrested 300 protesters and temporarily shut down Facebook,

which organizers had used to coordinate the protests and post pictures of sign-waving demonstrators.

In April 2017, Vietnamese officials told a senior Facebook executive, Monika Bickert, in a meeting in Hanoi that the company must cooperate "more actively and effectively" with government requests to remove content, according to reports in state media.

The company set up an online channel through which the government could report users accused of posting illegal content, a Facebook official said.

Facebook usually restricts posts and users for one of two reasons — violations of its "community standards," which are rules the company says apply to users worldwide, or "local laws." Posts in the latter category are blocked in the country where they are illegal but remain accessible elsewhere.

In August 2019, Vietnam's information minister, Nguyen Manh Hung, told the parliament that Facebook was complying with "70-75%" of the government's requests to remove content, up from about 30% previously. The minister did not provide details, and his office did not respond to interview requests.

This month, the minister told lawmakers that Facebook had raised its compliance rate to 95%. Social media companies' compliance with government requests has "reached the highest level ever," he said.

Facebook refused to comment on Vietnam's statistics, but acknowledged that the company has stepped up its censorship.

"We want to preserve our ability to operate in Vietnam," the Facebook official said, "so we lean in the direction of complying with their requests."

THE VILLAGE

The company's free-speech claims and its inclination to comply with Hanoi's demands collided in Dong Tam, about 20 miles southwest of Hanoi. Starting in 2017, villagers' protests and clashes with police drew the attention of Vietnamese bloggers and activists who used Facebook to document the rare acts of resistance, racking up tens of thousands of likes and shares.

Before dawn on Jan. 9 this year, police and soldiers in riot gear burst into the village, firing tear gas and rubber bullets as they moved through narrow alleys toward the home of the 84-year-old protest leader, Le Dinh Kinh.

Officers dragged his wife and children into the street before shooting and killing the wispy-bearded Kinh, claiming they found him clutching a grenade. More than two dozen residents were arrested. In September, a court sentenced two of Kinh's sons to death and 27 other villagers to lengthy prison terms.

Even before the police moved in, the government sought to wipe away independent accounts. State-run media quoted an Information Ministry official who scolded Facebook for "reacting very slowly and bureaucratically" to government requests to restrict posts about the incident.

Among the government's targets was Thuan, a former supporter of the ruling Communist Party who said the arrival of the internet in Vietnam in 1997 "allowed me to read documents online that opened my eyes." He began a slow transformation from unquestioning loyalist to relentless critic.

He started writing short articles on his Facebook page in 2016, focused on government corruption and internal party politics, sometimes daring to criticize government officials by name.

As his following expanded, so did the attention from security forces. He left his job after police pressured the private tutoring center in Hanoi where he worked as a science teacher to sack him, Thuan said.

Police showed up at his apartment, harassed his daughter and pressured his landlord to evict him, according to Thuan and other activists familiar with his case. He and his family faced the same tactics wherever they went, forcing a series of hurried relocations. They eventually took refuge in his wife's village in Hoa Binh province, southwest of the capital.

But he continued to write, reaching more than 20,000 Facebook followers last year.

As the Dong Tam standoff deepened in late 2019, Facebook began blocking his posts, including one on Dec. 31 asserting that Hanoi's mayor, a former police official, was linked to the land seizure. The day before the police raid, Thuan received a message from Facebook saying it had blocked his account in Vietnam "due to legal requirements in your country."

His appeals to Facebook went unanswered. An intermediary he asked to talk to company executives was told that Vietnam's Public Security and Information ministries "had put him on a blacklist."

In desperation, Thuan sent an email to Alex Warofka, a Facebook official based in Singapore who specializes in human rights, asking for an explanation. Warofka never replied, Thuan said. A company official said Warofka did not recall receiving the message.

After months of silence, Facebook abruptly reinstated his account Sept. 19, after pressure from Vietnamese activists and human rights group and inquiries from The Times.

The decision to block his page was a "mistake," said the Facebook official, blaming a "member of the team" who took the action, thinking they were "approving the blocking of a specific piece of content — not an entire account."

Since the block was lifted, Thuan said, his account has only been accessible "off and on." Readership on his page, which can still be accessed outside Vietnam, has dropped to the low thousands.

'THE PARTY'S DEVILS'

Other prominent bloggers also found themselves facing simultaneous action from the government and Facebook.

Hours after the Dong Tam raid began, Phan Van Bach, who had posted often about the village to his Facebook following of 23,000, walked down from his fourth-floor apartment in Hanoi and saw a handful of officers outside.

Believing they were there to keep an eye on him, the 45-year-old taxi driver posted a picture to his Facebook page with the caption: "The party's devils are outside my house."

Within moments, his account was restricted for violating community standards — the third time his account was blocked this year, he said. Facebook did not respond to questions about Bach.

Like other activists, he saw his posts on Dong Tam inundated with crude comments from pro-government trolls — including many using newly created accounts under false names — who portrayed the villagers as terrorists.

In a 2019 report, researchers at the University of Oxford labeled Vietnam one of the leading state sponsors of social-media manipulation, identifying a 10,000-strong army of "cybertroops" that spread propaganda and troll dissidents. Some are employed directly by the military and security agencies; others are known as du luan vien, or "public opinion shapers," who are recruited from universities and elsewhere, according to a 2016 document published by the Communist Party.

By swamping Facebook's automated complaint system, they get posts critical of the government purged. Facebook officials say that they are working on identifying this so-called coordinated inauthentic behavior and that decisions to take down content are not based on how many users report it, but on whether the content violates standards or local laws.

But Bach said pro-government trolls are so numerous that they often report his account within moments of his posting.

"It's happened to me so many times with posts related to Vietnamese authorities," he said. "I know that Facebook has compromised with Vietnam to protect the dictatorship."

Others who wrote on Dong Tam joined the growing ranks of Facebook users jailed for their posts.

Trinh Ba Phuong, a land-rights activist and the son of two former political prisoners, saw plainclothes police surround his house and prevent him from attending Kinh's funeral after he

posted about Dong Tam to his 50,000 Facebook followers. On Feb. 6, Phuong visited the U.S. Embassy at the invitation of a senior political officer, Michele Roulbet, and asked her to press for an independent investigation into the raid.

Told that state-run media had blamed Phuong for "inciting" Dong Tam villagers, Roulbet said the U.S. would "do all we can to help" if he were arrested, the activist's father said in an interview. The U.S. Embassy declined to comment.

On June 24, Phuong, his mother and his younger brother were arrested and charged with spreading anti-state material. Phuong faces up to 20 years in prison, according to advocacy groups.

His 62-year-old father, Trinh Ba Khiem, said he has not been able to speak with his wife or sons since they were arrested. His other son, Trinh Ba Tu, began a hunger strike in August in the detention camp where he was being held. When the father visited the camp, guards said his son's health was "normal" and turned him away.

Shortly after he was detained, Trinh Ba Phuong's Facebook page went offline. His father, who grows pomelos on a small farm south of Hanoi, believes police used the son's phone to log into Facebook and forced him to deactivate the account.

A Facebook official said the company had not acted to close Phuong's account.

Even prominent bloggers who have left Vietnam to escape the government found they could not elude the crackdown.

Nguyen Van Hai, a widely read exile living in Garden Grove, posted video in January of Le Dinh Kinh's bloody body. The post was attacked by Vietnamese trolls and quickly blocked with a message saying it violated Facebook's prohibition on violent content.

After repeated attempts to post the video, he received an automated message, saying he was at risk of having his account shut down because of repeated violations. The Facebook official said that the video was taken down because it violated content guidelines.

"It's very easy for a dictatorial government to abuse Facebook's policies," Hai said. "They pay these people to report my posts, saying I'm spreading hate."

SERVER ATTACK

In April, Hanoi dialed up the pressure on Facebook.

It took offline some of the dozens of servers the company rents in Vietnam to route traffic to and from its platform, according to company executives and an activist who discussed the matter on condition of anonymity. Facebook took emergency action to reroute traffic to servers outside Vietnam to keep the service running.

Hanoi's action sent an unmistakable message: Comply with more censorship requests or your platform faces a dire future, the Facebook official said.

Facebook decided to increase compliance with Hanoi's requests, despite concerns within the company that many of the government demands did not meet the company's standards for taking down posts, the official said.

Before disclosing the decision, which was first reported by Reuters, the company sought to stave off criticism by calling human rights activists who work on Vietnam. One said that Facebook told him the company was going to restrict "significantly" more content.

Hung, Vietnam's information minister, told lawmakers this month that Facebook blocked or restricted more than 2,000 posts in 2020 — five times as many as last year — and had agreed to block "reactionary and terrorist organizations" from purchasing ads on the platform that would widen the reach of their posts.

The minister acknowledged that banning platforms such as Facebook and YouTube would provoke a "public outcry" — a view shared by targets of Hanoi's censorship, who argue that Facebook has become such a fixture in commerce, government and society in Vietnam that it can afford to push back harder.

"Facebook acts as if the Vietnamese government is doing them a favor by letting them into Vietnam," said Duy Hoang, a U.S.-based spokesman for Viet Tan, a pro-democracy opposition group banned by Hanoi that was barred from buying Facebook ads.

Facebook's income from Vietnam is "a minuscule part of the company's overall revenue," Hoang said. "In fact, Vietnam as a country benefits far more from having Facebook than Facebook does from being there."

Digital rights advocates add that the company has set a dangerous precedent by not publicly explaining how it decides what content stays online.
"Facebook's opaque handling of content moderation requests from repressive governments leaves users highly vulnerable to arbitrary censorship without recourse to appropriate remedy," said Michael Kleinman, director of Amnesty International's Silicon Valley Initiative.

Facebook says some posts are taken down automatically by the site's content-monitoring algorithm or by Vietnamese-speaking contractors the company hires to police the platform.

Posts that are flagged for violating local laws go through an internal review before any action is taken, a second Facebook official said. The company declined to share examples of the reviews.

Access Now, a digital rights group that assists users who believe their Facebook access has been improperly restricted, said the company rarely explains its decisions to block or restore accounts — except to say they violated community standards.

In some cases, Facebook removes or restricts access to posts that do not appear to violate its standards or Vietnamese laws.

Viet Tan, which has a large following in Southern California's Vietnamese community, saw dozens of its posts removed this year. One of them, about a Vietnamese judge accused of sexual assault, was said to violate Facebook policies against bullying and harassment. Another about unemployment in China was cited for violating Facebook's policies against hate speech.

Both posts were restored months later after Viet Tan appealed, the organization said. Facebook did not respond to questions about Viet Tan.

Facebook also suspended 10 members of the group from posting to the organization's page, citing repeated violations of the site's community standards. Six of the suspensions came in August. Minh Pham, a Viet Tan member who lives in Germany, was permanently banned.

"The Vietnamese authorities are afraid of influential Facebook pages like Viet Tan's because we provide an alternative view," Hoang said. "They want Facebook to censor content — not because the content is inaccurate — but fundamentally because it's true."

Yet activists say there are few alternatives to Facebook.

Trinh Huu Long, a Hanoi critic who lives in Taiwan and runs a nonprofit online magazine called Luat Khoa, said he began exploring other modes of distribution after Facebook repeatedly blocked articles that had nothing to do with Vietnam. But he determined that abandoning the platform would drastically shrink his readership.

"Facebook is the king in Vietnam," he said. "Content has to go through Facebook to reach an audience. So, much as I dislike Facebook, I have to stick with them."

*Cloud reported from Washington and Bengali from Singapore. Times staff writer Suhauna Hussain in Los Angeles contributed to this report.*