

Will Vietnam Follow China's Model for Digital Dictatorship?

The US-China trade war may make Hanoi rethink its interest in promoting technology for both economic growth and political control.

By **Trien Vinh Le**
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Technological advancement including artificial intelligence (AI) has sparked debate for people and governments in developed countries where democratic systems shape the operation of institutional systems. Specifically, such systems have been driven by established universal values such as respect for human rights, property and privacy rights, and democracy, including freedom of expression, and political participation. In these systems, the advancement of technology has been deployed to enhance the efficiency of governments in providing public services while undergoing public scrutiny and institutional oversight. For example, many cities in developed democratic countries ban the use of facial recognition technology as an instrument of security efforts.

However, this may not be the case in developing countries in general and particularly in those undergoing long economic transitions without political liberalization, such as Vietnam and China. AI has been aggressively deployed by the Chinese government in many cities and supposedly nation-wide in the future to rate the activities and behaviors of the Chinese people based on a system of rewards and punishments imposed by the government. Under such circumstances, a fast internet system and the use of facial recognition technology facilitate the will of the government and strengthen its capabilities to suppress any dissent – and hence ensure the political survivability of the ruling party in a **digital authoritarian state**.

While in China technological advancement has obviously and increasingly been exploited in recent years by the government to enhance its ability to control and repress the Chinese people, similar maneuvers pose a political dilemma in Vietnam.

The Vietnamese government is at a crossroads in its efforts to follow the path of South Korea – e.g. forming chaebols by heavily supporting state-owned conglomerates (SOCs). In practice, these giant SOCs have turned into a substantial debt burden for the Vietnamese people due to lack of managerial capability and blatant governmental corruption. This has been damaging the legitimacy of the ruling Communist Party. Consequently, the government has pursued ways to regain their legitimacy through economic growth, while as the same time sustaining their control and repression apparatus. Amid such a plight, the last 20th century Chinese lesson of economic development without political change may have been reviewed and further reinforced in the new arena of technological advancement and AI application. Specifically, the Vietnamese Communist Party seems attracted to the Chinese strategy of developing and subsidizing huge state-supported information and technology corporations, thereby facilitating an economic growth on the one hand, while employing the resulting technological advances – AI, for instance – to monitor the people on the other hand.

As a consequent strategic move, Vietnam's government has turned its focus and communication support to big corporations after years of supporting their development. Recently, Viettel, a Vietnamese information and telecommunications corporation, **announced their own successful 5G development**, allowing Vietnam to detach itself from any involvement with China's Huawei. At a celebration marking the 30th anniversary of Viettel on June 1, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc **mentioned Huawei** in addition to other info-tech giants like Erikson, Google,



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and Facebook as role models for Viettel – notable in the wake of global accusations about Huawei spying and replicating technology.

Alongside the use of state propaganda to boost information and telecommunication companies, support for applying AI according to the Chinese practice seems to be evident across state media (though this has been somewhat downplayed during the recent China-U.S. trade war, as Chinese internet and communication corporations become the center of scrutiny). The adopting of a Chinese-style citizen monitoring system seems to be in the interest of the Vietnamese government to achieve better control of their people; it is also in the interest of the vested interest groups that have economically benefited from political status quo.

Many Vietnamese intellectuals, including some retired governmental officials studying and working in developed countries, have shown their support to the government in applying a look-alike Chinese digital monitoring system. Last March at the Vietnam Internet Forum 2019, Nguyen Anh Tuan, chairman of the Boston Global Forum in Washington D.C., **presented a controversial initiative** focused on rating and classifying citizens following an imposed system of ethical standards. Questionably, the initiative proposed for rating the Vietnamese people could not be found on the website of the forum in Washington DC.

In addition, the governments of some big cities have shown an interest in establishing facial recognition systems to monitor people's activities. The purpose of establishing such systems has been – whether intentionally or unintentionally – camouflaged by the idea of developing smart cities, supposedly to solve security issues and administrative clogs. With the enhancement of internet speed, the mass control of people is tantalizingly close to being realized.

However, the dubious strength of giant state-subsidized firm Huawei and other Chinese internet corporations when faced with the trade war has raised questions about the application of the Chinese model of supporting internet companies. Vietnam is therefore falling into a dilemma: It can either follow the China model and become trapped into an analogous game of counterfeiting competitors' technological know-how – with potentially the same devastating consequences now being felt by Chinese companies – or refrain from applying the model while finding it difficult to boost economic growth.

The trade war has sparked speculation about a more profound clash between two political-economic blocs. The China model supports the state subsidizing SOEs and vested interest groups by all means, including technology theft; it also supports using AI to control and suppress political freedom. The other bloc insists on economic fair competition and political freedom.

A critical implication for third countries impacted by the trade war is the need to reconsider their international relationships in terms of these blocs. Vietnam is not a communist country in the purely Marxist sense, but it is still in an alliance with China in practice in terms of a shared political ideology. Whether the communist government still retains its real power to put the interests of the people before those of itself and of rent-seeking interest groups will decide which side Vietnam takes in this war.

U.S. President Donald Trump started the trade war. Whether or not he intended it, he has forced countries like Vietnam to make a choice for future development. Will Vietnam's government seize this opportunity to forge a future universal values are respected, the people enjoy human rights, and the government is free from China's ideological influence?

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