



## RIPPLE EFFECT

# How a Trump decision on trade became a setback for democracy in Vietnam

Vietnam had promised more workers' rights. Without the TPP, it has instead unleashed a crackdown.

By **Simon Denyer** and **David Nakamura** Oct. 11, 2018



*HANOI —*

It was one of President Trump’s very first acts: to pull out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a sweeping 12-nation trade agreement that had been the centerpiece of President Barack Obama’s strategic “rebalance” toward Asia.

Trump had charged that such deals hurt American manufacturing, and on Jan. 23, 2017, he signed the withdrawal order in the Oval Office.

“A great thing for the American worker, what we just did,” [Trump said](#).

With that, he set in motion a political and economic storm that is still reverberating here in Vietnam.

Freed from conditions imposed by the Obama administration to join the trade pact, Vietnam’s Communist government has scrapped plans to allow independent trade unions and unleashed its [most severe clampdown](#) on dissent in decades. Authorities have arrested scores of social activists, bloggers and democracy advocates, sentencing many to jail terms of 10 to 20 years.

Vietnam offers an example of the little-noticed fallout from some of Trump’s earliest decisions. The Trans-Pacific treaty, known as the TPP,

quickly faded from American headlines as Trump launched high-stakes trade battles with China, Europe, Mexico and Canada. But the abrupt policy change has had far-reaching ripple effects, according to diplomats and activists.

“As soon as America withdrew from the TPP, you saw a radical change in the way [the Vietnamese] government treated workers, labor activists and unions,” said Do Thi Minh Hanh, a 33-year-old labor activist, speaking in a cafe in Ho Chi Minh City. “A lot of people have been harassed, followed, imprisoned and threatened.”



Meet an activist in Vietnam feeling the pressure from TPP withdrawal

Activists in Vietnam say that President Trump’s decision to leave the Trans-Pacific Partnership has dealt a blow to labor reforms and human rights. (Jason Aldag, Simon Denyer, David Nakamura/The Washington Post)

Trump’s policy change wasn’t the only factor in the Vietnamese crackdown — hard-liners had become dominant in the Communist Party and were

concerned about a rise in social activism and protests. Nor is he solely responsible for the fate of the TPP.

Obama had failed to persuade a skeptical Congress and public of the merits of the deal before leaving office, with the result that his signature Asian foreign policy initiative was widely maligned. Indeed, such was the prevailing mood that candidate Hillary Clinton signaled her intent to pull out of an agreement she had once lauded as the “gold standard” of trade deals.

Asked about the TPP decision and crackdown in Vietnam, a spokesman for the National Security Council, Garrett Marquis, said trade treaties weren’t necessarily effective in achieving democratic reform. He pointed to [China’s accession to the World Trade Organization](#) in 2001, saying it “proved beyond all doubt that increasing international trade doesn’t always liberalize authoritarian single-party states. In fact, it may delay liberalization by making the ruling party stronger.”

The pros and cons of the trade pact are debatable. But some things are more certain.

The United States’ decision to construct and then exit from the TPP struck an enormous blow to its credibility in Asia, one that China was not shy about exploiting.

The decision also exacted a real human cost here in Vietnam, activists say.

As the TPP was being negotiated, a budding movement of Vietnamese activists used social media to spread ideas about workers’ rights,



transparency, accountability and even democracy. The U.S. government had engineered the trade agreement to also secure promises from Vietnam's leadership that it would permit independent trade unions, strengthen environmental controls and allow a free and open Internet.

When the TPP was scrapped, that dynamic was thrown into reverse.

Minh Hanh has seen fellow labor activists arrested and given long jail sentences. She has faced constant harassment, including being attacked by masked men hurling rocks and explosives when she was staying at her father's house.

Another activist, environmentalist Le Dinh Luong, was charged with subversion and [sentenced to 20 years](#) in jail. He has not been allowed contact with his wife, who fears his fragile health means he will die in prison.

“The TPP could have been some wind in the sails of Vietnamese activists, trade unionists and environmentalists,” said Brad Adams, executive director of the Asia division at Human Rights Watch. “Pulling out of the TPP has been a big setback.”





The U.S. government had used the negotiations over the Trans-Pacific Partnership to secure promises from Vietnam's leadership that it would allow more labor rights and other reforms, like a free Internet. But when the TPP was scrapped, that dynamic was thrown into reverse. (Linh Pham for The Washington Post)

## ‘DRIVING FORCE FOR REFORMS 2.0’

Obama had [billed the TPP](#) as a chance for the United States to write the rules of trade in the world's fastest-growing region and to raise labor and environmental standards so U.S. companies would not be undercut. But the deal was also a thinly disguised attempt to contain China's rise, by forming a regional rules-based order that excluded Beijing.

Liberalizers in Vietnam's Communist Party saw the TPP as the incentive the government needed to bring about change, with its offer of greater access to one of Vietnam's biggest export markets: the United States.

“The TPP is the driving force for Reforms 2.0. The business environment, anti-corruption, labor reforms,” said Tran Viet Thai, deputy general director of the Institute for Foreign Strategic Studies at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, a foreign ministry think tank.

Ripple Effect

This is the second in a two-part series looking at the global impact of a pair of

Vietnam pledged not only to allow independent trade unions but also to



executive orders signed by President Trump on Jan. 23, 2017, his first full weekday in office.

[READ PART ONE](#)

and open Internet.”

outlaw child labor and give private firms a greater chance to compete against the Communist-run state sector. Citizens were promised a “free

In February 2016, the United States and 11 other countries signed the treaty. It still needed to be ratified domestically in those nations. But for the first time since the Vietnam War, the United States had real leverage to force the Communist Party to give people greater political freedom.

Then, the Trump administration withdrew.

“It pulled the rug out from under the reformers,” said Ted Osius, then U.S. ambassador to Vietnam.



Vietnam, a nation of more than 95 million people, has a rapidly growing economy and counts the United States as one of its top export markets. The photo shows morning traffic on Tay Son street in Hanoi, Sept. 25, 2018. (Linh Pham for The Washington Post)

## ARRESTS OF ACTIVISTS

During TPP negotiations, Osius had constantly emphasized the need to get the trade pact ratified by Congress, and he would bring letters from members of Congress to the Vietnamese government underscoring the attention they paid to human rights.

“It was a very, very powerful message,” said Osius, a career diplomat appointed ambassador by Obama. “It didn’t mean they threw open all the prison doors, but they did consider American views when they made decisions. I don’t think that’s the case since we pulled out of TPP.”

But in Vietnam, other forces were at work.

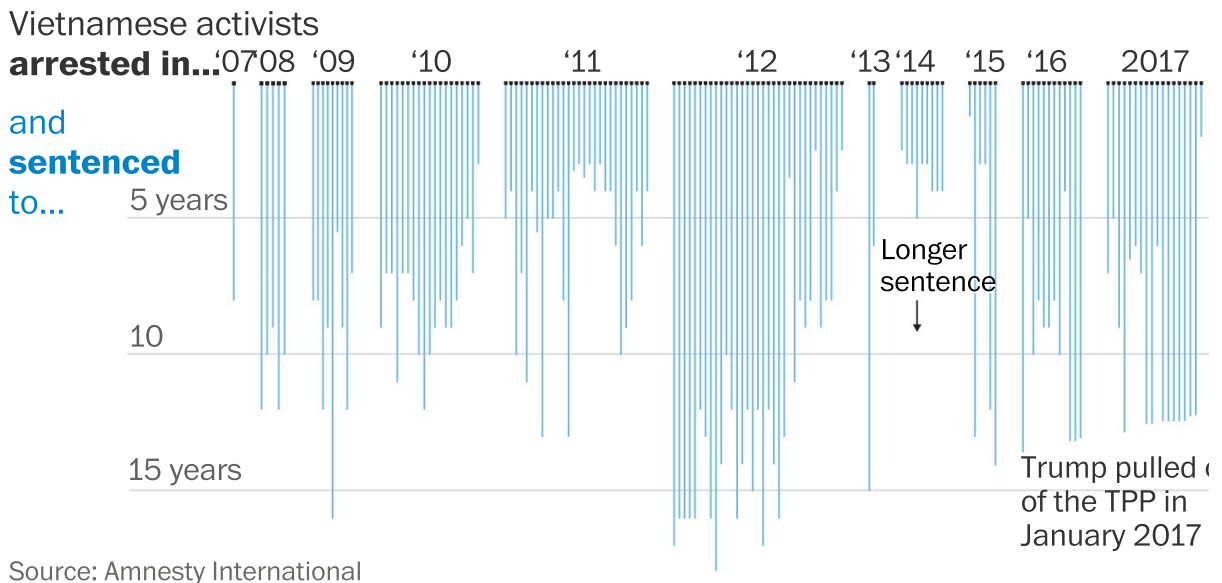
[Protests had erupted](#) in the spring of 2016 after a toxic spill caused the country’s worst environmental disaster, with marine life washing up dead along a huge swath of shoreline. The spill came from a plant operated by a Taiwanese company, but the anger was directed at the Vietnamese government for its slow response, lack of transparency and corruption.

It was the largest outpouring of anger in four decades of Communist Party rule.

Within Vietnam’s ruling Politburo, hard-line conservatives had gained the upper hand during a leadership transition in January 2016, while Obama was still in the White House. They were not about to tolerate an uprising.



The first hint of a crackdown came even before Trump won the presidential race, with the detention of the blogger known as Mother Mushroom in October 2016. But it wasn't until the summer of 2017 that the arrests of activists started coming thick and fast.



Mother Mushroom, whose real name is [Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh](#), had been arrested in the past, but this time was different, with a 10-year sentence handed down in June 2017 for “conducting propaganda against the socialist state.” She was one of at least [29 Vietnamese activists arrested in 2017](#) for their writings and advocacy on behalf of human rights, the environment and democracy, according to Amnesty International.

One month later, on the evening of July 24, 2017, environmental activist Luong was on his way home when a dozen plainclothes security officers stopped him, beat him and took him away, his wife said. Luong is a successful business executive turned community organizer and blogger.

“He wants to help others, the weak and the poor, to combat injustice,” his 53-year-old spouse, Nguyen Thi Quy, said in an interview in Hanoi. The couple’s son and daughter-in-law were beaten when they asked police about his whereabouts, she said.

Luong, who is 52 and suffers from gout, was sentenced to 20 years in prison for “carrying out activities aimed at overthrowing the people’s administration.”





Authorities in Vietnam have arrested scores of social activists, bloggers and democracy advocates, sentencing many to jail terms of 10 to 20 years. Nguyen Van Dai, a democracy activist, pictured above, was sentenced to 15 years in prison but later was sent into exile in Germany. Dai and his wife, Vu Minh Khanh, now live in a tiny home in Bad Nauheim, Germany. (Charlotte Schmitz/Le Journal for The Washington Post)

Nguyen Van Dai, a lawyer, founded the Brotherhood for Democracy in 2013 with several activists, and toured the country teaching others how to defend their rights.

On April 5, after a trial with five other leaders of the group, Dai [was sentenced to 15 years](#) in prison. Dai and one of his colleagues have since been sent into exile in Germany — partly on health grounds and partly thanks to international pressure, he said.

If the U.S. government had stayed in the TPP, “Vietnam would have had to make many commitments about improving human rights, about improving the situation for workers,” Dai said in an interview at his modest, two-room home outside Frankfurt. “It would have been a chance to change my country.”

Vietnam still intends to join a version of the TPP that will move forward without the United States. But that deal excludes many of the tough steps that Vietnam had committed to, including on workers' rights.



A shop in Hanoi sells T-shirts and other items with the design of the flag of Vietnam, a one-party Communist state that has one of the fastest-growing economies in Southeast Asia. (Linh Pham for The Washington Post)

## TWO PRESIDENTIAL STYLES

As the backlash has intensified, State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert has on several occasions said the administration is [“deeply troubled”](#) by the conviction and sentencing of Vietnamese activists, calling on the government to allow individuals to “express their views freely and assemble peacefully without fear of retribution.”



The Trump administration also presses Vietnam to respect religious freedom, said a senior White House aide, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to comment on the record. But the official acknowledged that Hanoi has largely ignored outside pressure.

“The situation’s bad,” the official said. “I think it is an impediment to an even closer partnership with Vietnam.”

Adams, at Human Rights Watch, says Communist authorities now largely discount the State Department’s appeals.

“When they look at Trump, they see a U.S. president who makes clear over and over again he doesn’t care about human rights and seems to like strongmen,” Adams said.

The story behind the United States’ flip-flop over the TPP is also one of two dramatically different presidential styles.

Despite long-standing concerns about Vietnam’s record on human rights, Obama decided that he wanted the country within the TPP, to draw it away from China.





Then-president Barack Obama meets at the White House on July 7, 2015 with Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, pictured second from left. Two translators are also present. (Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images)

In July 2015, Obama broke with precedent to meet the Vietnamese Communist Party's general secretary in Washington. The U.S. president had spent four hours prepping for the meeting and had a critical message to convey. The United States, he told Nguyen Phu Trong, "respects" different political systems, according to three people who attended.

Human rights and democratic freedoms still mattered, Obama said, but Washington wasn't looking to overthrow the Communist Party.

That meeting opened the way for a series of groundbreaking bilateral agreements, according to Evan Medeiros, then senior director for Asian affairs at the National Security Council.

They included the lifting of an arms embargo in 2016 and a [side letter](#) to the TPP agreement, in which Hanoi promised to amend its laws to allow independent trade unions.

"The basic premise under one-party rule is that the party controls everything," said Tom Malinowski, who served as assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor under Obama. "To set up

associations politically independent from the party would have been pretty revolutionary.”



Vietnam still intends to join a version of the TPP that will move forward without the United States. But that deal excludes many of the tough steps to which Vietnam had committed, including on workers’ rights. The photo shows commuters entering the center of Hanoi via the Long Bien bridge in late September. (Linh Pham for The Washington Post)

## TRUMP’S SIGNALS

Trump’s original objections to the TPP were that it would be a bad deal for American businesses, workers and taxpayers. In a Republican [presidential debate](#) in November 2015, he complained that it failed to address currency manipulation by China — even though Beijing was not part of the deal. He later tweeted that he meant China would “come in the back door at a later date.”

By the time Trump took office, withdrawal was a “foregone conclusion,” said Thomas Shannon, a longtime diplomat who was acting secretary of state at the time.

Trump “had made a clear evaluation that the TPP was dead on arrival in our Congress,” Shannon said. “Why was he going to invest his political capital supporting a deal that he hadn’t negotiated and had gotten a lot of political mileage [out of] by attacking as another example of foreign policy elites negotiating stuff largely secretly?”

The Trump administration’s approach to Vietnam has been similar to Obama’s in two ways: It has placed considerable emphasis on the growing military and security relationship, and it has given Vietnamese leaders access to the top levels of the U.S. government.

But in other ways, it has been very different.

In May 2017, Trump hosted Vietnam’s prime minister, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, at the White House. Then-national security adviser H.R. McMaster had only five minutes to brief Trump, said Osius, who was there. Some of that briefing was taken up with Trump telling an off-color joke, he said.

“It was quite clear the president didn’t know who was coming to meet him, didn’t know what the meeting was about and wasn’t even remotely interested,” Osius said.

White House officials denied that Trump was unprepared. The senior White House aide said the president is briefed on upcoming meetings with



foreign leaders in short, focused sessions over weeks. The preparation with McMaster was a final review, the aide said.



President Trump meets on Nov. 12, 2017, with Vietnam's then-president, Tran Dai Quang, in Hanoi during the U.S. leader's five-nation trip through Asia. (Hoang Dinh Nam/AFP/Getty Images)

In November 2017, Trump met then-President Tran Dai Quang in Hanoi as part of a five-nation tour of Asia. A joint statement mentioned that “the two leaders recognized the importance of protecting and promoting human rights.”

But it was clear Trump was focused elsewhere. Whereas Obama, on a trip to Vietnam in 2016, had met with civil society activists and young people, Trump emphasized reducing the trade deficit and selling American military equipment.

“We would like Vietnam to buy from us, and we have to get rid of the trade imbalance,” [Trump said](#). “Other than that, I think we’re going to have a fantastic relationship.”



Both President Trump and President Barack Obama visited Vietnam. Obama, on a trip in 2016, met with civil society activists and young people. Trump has emphasized reducing the trade deficit and selling American military equipment. (Linh Pham for The Washington Post)

## ‘NEVER GIVE UP’

Suspicion of China runs high in Vietnam, not least because the two countries fiercely contest islands in the South China Sea. Whoever is in the White House, Hanoi’s leaders will continue to look to the United States to balance Beijing’s influence.

In late July, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Southeast Asia touting the administration’s alternative to the TPP, an [“Indo-Pacific Economic Vision,”](#) promising greater economic engagement based on the principles of “freedom and openness,” and led by American companies.

Meanwhile in Vietnam, U.S. Embassy spokesman Pope Thrower said the U.S. government has maintained its “long-standing commitment to work with official and nongovernment partners to advance labor rights in Vietnam.”

But Minh Hanh, the labor activist, sees things a bit differently.

She is grateful for the U.S. support that helped free her halfway through a seven-year jail sentence in 2014 but now feels more alone.

“The fact that the United States pays less attention to trade unions makes my task as an activist a little harder,” she said. “But we activists will never pull back, never give up fighting, with or without American support.”

#### **About this story**

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