

Why Did Vietnam Suspend a Popular Newspaper?

A closer look at the reasoning behind a move that has sparked headlines.

By David Hutt
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Earlier this month, one of Vietnam's most well-known online newspapers was **banned** from publishing content for three months and fined \$10,000. *Tuoi Tre*, run by the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, a state-aligned group, was accused of publishing false and “nationally divisive” content.

One article, titled “Vietnamese President agrees on issuing Demonstration Law,” allegedly misquoted President Tran Dai Quang to make him sound sympathetic to nationwide protests that erupted in Vietnam in early June, and to a possible Demonstration Law. This, the Party censors said, accounted to publishing false and “untrue” information. They also took exception to user comments being allowed to remain on the website. These, the authorities said, were “nationally divisive.”

At present, the newspaper is inactive and, though there is talk of a possible appeal against the decision, it's likely to remain closed for the next few months.

Now we get to conjecture and possible explanations. The most logical account is that *Tuoi Tre* was the latest victim in the ruling Communist Party's ongoing crackdown against free-speech. It has affected untold numbers of independent news outlets and political blogs, and now Hanoi's censorial impulses are directed on its own state-aligned or -owned publications.

After all, *Tuoi Tre* was certainly more investigatory and less prone to pure propaganda than Vietnam's other state-run newspapers. Many on the Communist Party's conservative wing thought it to be too liberal. Members of the growing reactionary movement known as “red flag groups,” who agitate online and in the streets for the Party to be more socialist, more disciplined, and stricter on liberal voices in society, certainly disliked *Tuoi Tre* and have spread rumors about it for months.

But *Tuoi Tre* was still a very popular news outlet (one of the most popular in Vietnam) that allowed the Party to broadcast its message to millions of people. It is difficult to see how the Party made any gains by temporarily closing the newspaper, if it was only motivated by the offending articles. After all, there are unconfirmed reports that in recent months *Tuoi Tre* took down other controversial articles after being asked to do so by the Ministry of Information and Communications. Whichever way one looks at it, the authorities could have simply asked for the two offending articles to be purged from the website and, afterwards, disciplined some staff members, rather than shutting down the entire online news outlet for three months.

Moreover, if this is meant to serve as a warning to other Vietnamese newspapers, it is a rather vague warning. Maybe other independent and state-run newspapers will now be more cautious in their reporting. But there hasn't been a proper investigation into whether *Tuoi Tre* actually misquoted the President or if he simply later regretted his comments, which would be divisive if true, and wanted to distance himself from them.

As for the user comment left on the website that was also used in the suspension case, it was rather mild and banal. It said something along the lines that northern Vietnam was still ruthlessly governing southern Vietnam, a



Russian President Vladimir Putin, right, and Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang attend a news conference following their meeting in the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia Thursday, June 29, 2017. (Natalia Kolesnikova/Pool Photo via AP)

Image Credit: AP Photo

sensitive matter for the Party and one it never likes talk of. But it is hardly any more offensive than the countless anti-communist messages posted on websites of other state-run news outlets.

Some commentators speculated that *Tuoi Tre* could have been suspended because, unlike some other party-aligned newspapers, it often reports on corruption cases. However, the Communist Party is in the midst of a monumental anti-corruption drive, part of the reason of which is to restore some legitimacy in the eyes of the public. So it is rather illogical for the Party to discipline *Tuoi Tre* for reporting on the corruption cases when the Party actually wants exposure of these cases.

In fact, such exposure seems to be working. This year's Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index, a report compiled by state and non-state actors, found that graft is now the Vietnamese people's second most-important concern, when it was previously their first. Although, most now think poverty is their main problem, so the "socialist" government wasn't too celebratory, one imagines.

Speculation has also surfaced about more political motives. It is possible, and, in some eyes, highly likely, that the decision to suspend *Tuoi Tre* was an act of revenge by Truong Minh Tuan, who was **dismissed** as Minister of Information and Communications this week and punished by the Party. He was accused of violating democratic centralism (in other words, for making decisions by himself) and for his role in the failed purchase by MobiFone, a state-run telecoms company, of a private TV company years ago. The deal was stopped but could have cost the government \$303 million in losses, the authorities claim. According to this theory, one of his last acts as Minister was to suspend *Tuoi Tre* because it was the first state-run publication to report on the anti-corruption inspectorate's investigation into him.

Other speculative angles have emerged as well with respect to the newspaper's closure. Irrespective of the exact reasoning behind it though, it is clear that it has represented yet another blow for freedom of expression in Vietnam.
