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Sudden Blackout Ends a Concert in Vietnam

Sometimes the party goes dark for no reason, especially if it's controversial

Our Correspondent



On 24 September, the ornate, colonial-era Hanoi Opera House was scheduled to host an unprecedented concert by its former citizen-celebrity: Singer Khánh Ly, who returned to Vietnam from the US to celebrate her 60-year singing career. The live show, titled “Nostalgia of Hanoi Autumn,” was slated as her farewell concert.

But just a day before her performance, to which she had invited other Vietnamese celebrities, her agency in charge of organizing the event received a letter from the Opera House, which is under the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, informing them that the concert would have to be canceled due to a compulsory blackout to check the quality of electricity for the whole district of Hoàn Kiếm. The leaders of the Opera House offered neither a further explanation nor an apology.

The proceeds from the concert were expected to partly be donated to charity. Coverage of the cancellation on domestic media outlets was removed immediately. Other following concerts in Huế, Hưng Yên, and Hải Phòng were called off as well.

Yet the 77-year-old diva could seek solace from the fact that she wasn't the only one who has had to deal with sudden yet not-so-strange power outages. Outages or similar excuses have been commonly used by local authorities to censor politically sensitive events or censure anybody that ruffles the feathers of the Communist Party.

The black sheep singer

Khánh Ly, whose real name is Nguyễn Thị Lệ Mai, had all it takes to be disliked and distrusted by the Hanoi regime. Born in Hanoi during the year that the Communist Party founded the Vietnam Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north, her family migrated to the south in 1954. After winning several teenage singing competitions, the Hanoian, with no proper musical training, started out her musical career in nightclubs in Đà Lạt city, 300-odd km. northeast of Ho Chi Minh City.



Khánh Ly in her youth

The chance encounter in 1967 with renowned songwriter Trịnh Công Sơn, who was immensely impressed by her soulful voice, turned out to be a watershed moment for both. The duo, who spent a few years performing for free around southern universities, shortly became a phenomenon. Khánh Ly shot to stardom in the non-Communist south between 1967 and 1975 with sentimental pre-war and love songs, while the music scene in the north was only confined to revolutionary lyrics. Her fans gave the Diva of Saigon the nickname "Barefoot queen" as the mezzo-alto singer performed barefoot on stage. Khánh Ly also represented South Vietnam in numerous international events.

As Sài Gòn fell to the Communists in 1975, Khánh Ly left as a refugee and settled in California. Yet, her fame did not fizzle out in the musical world both inside and outside Vietnam. The singer, who admitted to not being able to read any musical notes at all, was invited to perform in many countries around the world. Her interpretation of *Diễm Xưa* (Diễm of the Old Days) composed by Trịnh in both Vietnamese and Japanese became a top hit in Japan in the 1980s. A fervent Catholic and philanthropist, Khánh Ly is still remembered and loved in Vietnam, both in the north and south.

Grave mistake

Khánh Ly returned to Vietnam this June to pay tribute to her fans. At a concert in Đà Lạt, where her singing career started, she chose to perform a song written by Trịnh Công Sơn that has been banned for years by the Communist government: “Mother’s Legacy.” The song, which many believed was the reason behind the retaliation, along with some other anti-war songs of Trịnh Công Sơn, is still on the list of songs that can’t be sung in public in Vietnam.

Many suspected that the organizers might face charges for performing such a song. The first verse summarizes the turbulent history of Vietnam: *One thousand years enslaved by the Chinese/One hundred years dominated by the French/ Twenty years of civil war*

The agent that organized the event was reprimanded but wasn’t fined, according to domestic media. Asked for comment, the Opera House didn’t respond. The Department of Performing Arts explained only that she sang a song that was not on the pre-approved list of songs that authorities had reviewed for the live show, according to [regulations](#) prescribing penalties for administrative violations involving cultural and advertising activities. Also, if a song’s content distorts historical facts, harms national independence, sovereignty, or integrity, or denies Vietnam’s revolutionary accomplishments, a more hefty fine would be anticipated.

While the century-long domination of China and decade-long French colonization are known to Vietnamese, “20 years of civil war” might seem like a myth for most Vietnam-educated youths. In Vietnam, the period between 1955 and 1975 is officially depicted as the struggle against the American imperialists and its South Vietnamese puppet regime, following its war against the French colonizers. The Communist government has never recognized the Republican Southern Vietnamese government, founded by Ngô Đình Diệm.

In many historical books published in Vietnam, the South Vietnamese government is still referred to as the puppet state. The fall of Sài Gòn was seen as the liberation of the south. In the 1970s, while Trịnh Công Sơn was seen as anti-war and pro-Communist composer, he was deemed a patriot in North Vietnam. The song is seen by the state as triggering hostility in the country.

Also, in a country that often glorifies heroic Vietnamese mothers whose children sacrificed to defend the country from foreign invasion, mothers in Trịnh's song earnestly urged soldiers to come home and to be true to themselves. The Vietnam in Trịnh's song was not suffused with triumphalism, but rather imbued with sorrow:

Mother’s legacy, a jungle replete with dry human bones/Mother’s legacy, a mountain filled with graves/ Teach your children to speak the truth/Mother wishes for you to remember the color of your skin/Don’t forget the color of your skin, ancient Viet Nam/Mother wishes for you to hurry home/Mother wishes for all her children from far away/The children of one common father to forget your hatred

The government might not forget her former statement: As long as Vietnam is still under the Communist regime, the singer is not willing to come back.

Huy Đức, a prominent journalist and author of the widely acclaimed book “Bên Thắng cuộc” (“The Winning Side”) which offers a blow-by-blow account of the self-inflicted crisis following the conclusion of the Vietnam War that led to the far-reaching 1986 reforms, known as Đổi mới (renovation), commented on his Facebook page, followed by almost 350 000 people: “The licensing for her [Khánh Ly], letting her sell tickets, transporting her crew all the way from Saigon, and unilaterally canceling the concert just over 24 hours in advance looked more like gang-style gloating than a transparent state’s decision.”

Yet the scandal piqued the curiosity of those who had barely heard of the song.

“I did not know about the song until I heard of the scandal,” said Trang, a 31-year-old Hanoi professional.

No real nod from local authorities

In Vietnam, censorship is never transparent and outright. The Communist Party claims to champion free assembly and expression. The government was cautious enough not to make any outright move to the singer when it was being considered for the Human Rights council, which turned out to be a success. They needed objective reasons to block events deemed as inimical to the party.

In 2015, a public lecture organized by the EU Delegation to Vietnam on Vietnam-China relations was also canceled due to a sudden “blackout” at the Cầu Giấy Hotel.

Those working for the non-profit sector, in particular, are no stranger to abrupt blackouts. Securing local permission doesn’t guarantee the eventual implementation of an event with foreign factors.

Local authorities in Hanoi also used power outages as excuses to stop two restaurants from serving a meeting for members of Văn Việt, a literature forum founded by Vietnamese writers who advocated for the establishment of a Vietnam Independent Writers Association.

Nguyễn Thị Hạnh, a student at Hanoi University of Natural Sciences, recalled an event taking place in her hometown in Thái Bình City. Prior to organizing a workshop sponsored by the US Embassy in Hanoi on overseas opportunities for young people, she and her youth-led group successfully secured a written permit from local authorities.

However, to Hạnh's puzzlement, her plan backfired exactly on the day the program was supposed to begin. The owner returned Hạnh's payment, informing her that there would be an electricity cut.

Hạnh had little option but to cancel, only to receive an explanatory call from the owner a few days later, who told her that local police pressured them into shutting it down. Worrying that their business might be affected by refusal to obey, the owner had to renege on the promise with Hạnh’s team.

“They were afraid that my activity would disrupt the order of the neighborhood,” she said.