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Vietnam's divided dissidents no major threat to regime

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Vietnam's communist rulers ban and routinely punish political criticism, yet they have not been seriously challenged by a dissident movement that is divided by separate agendas, say analysts.

Disenchanted party members and former revolutionary soldiers, religious activists and cyber dissidents have all criticised the regime. Many have been harassed and jailed, only to continue their efforts once released.

Yet state repression and the isolation of, and differences between, the activists themselves have so far prevented them from speaking with one voice, even some of the regime's most prominent critics admit.

"Vietnam's political dissidents are more like a virtual network than a discernable group or movement," said Carl Thayer, a Vietnam expert with the Australian National Defence Academy.

"Generally (they) have acted alone or in small groups in publishing and circulating their reform proposals," he wrote in a recent paper.

Nguyen Van Ky, an independent Paris-based researcher, agreed.

"The lack of a (common) platform, of a structure that would channel legitimate and democratic demands, and the lack of united action deprive opponents of collective momentum," he said.

Vietnam, one of five remaining communist-ruled states, permits no rival parties or independent media.

This month it rejected a call from the US Congress to free cyber-dissident Pham Hong Son from a five-year jail term for translating and publishing online a US State Department article entitled "What is Democracy?"

In March, Paris-based media watchdog Reporters Without Borders said, police stormed a Hanoi cybercafe and arrested a person for chatting about democracy in the fourth such arrest in five months. Hanoi denied the report.

At this week's 10th party congress, General Secretary Nong Duc Manh accused "hostile forces" of a "conspiracy of peaceful evolution" -- euphemisms for what Hanoi sees as interference by the West and critics in the Vietnamese diaspora.

These hostile forces, he charged at the opening of the crucial five-yearly-event, were "using the words democracy, human rights, nation and religion in an effort to change the political system in our country."

London-based rights group Amnesty International in 2003 published a Vietnamese politburo directive ordering state agencies to remain vigilant against forces seeking the collapse of the government, lest Vietnam follow the path of former Soviet bloc regimes.

Amnesty criticised the "paranoia" of Vietnam's ruling elite -- but some observers say Hanoi has no reason to truly fear a movement that, despite its anger, wants to work within more than against the regime.

Vietnamese dissidents "invariably and naively concede a major role to the Vietnam Communist Party," said Thayer. "Generally Vietnam's political dissidents favour reform of the existing system, not its transformation or overthrow."

Thayer said that "perhaps the most trenchant criticism that can be levelled at Vietnam's political dissidents is that they have not articulated a programme of political reform."

"Much of the writing by intellectuals and cyber dissidents seems aimed at themselves, the overseas Vietnamese community or sympathetic foreign NGOs (non-government organisations) and their governments," he said.

Vo Van Ai, head of the Paris-based International Buddhist Information Bureau, one of Hanoi's fiercest critics, agreed that "dissidents in Vietnam have common aims, but no common agenda."

"They all talk about democracy but have very different perceptions about what democracy means."

He said Hanoi dissidents "themselves admit that they are beginners in this domain, having only very recently engaged in real debate of ideas."

"The anti-communists, on the other hand, both inside and outside Vietnam, use human rights and democracy as political tools in the struggle against the Hanoi regime rather than as a fundamental objective."