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## **Vietnam's ruling party dips its toe into the waters of accountability**

By Amy Kazmin

In the run-up to Vietnam's Communist party Congress which concluded last week, Vietnamnet, a popular, partly state-owned news and information website with more than 3m registered viewers, ran an extraordinary debate on the future of the Communist party.

In a rare gesture of openness, the party had invited public comment on its "political report", which is supposed to outline Vietnam's future economic, political and social development.

But the request for public feedback provoked a **far more vociferous response than expected**. State-owned newspapers and websites received a flurry of submissions, some raising pointed questions such as whether Vietnam really required a one-party state, whether official corruption meant the Communist party should forfeit its monopoly on power, and when would Vietnam be ready for multi-party democracy.

Hardline newspapers refused to publish such ideologically suspect sentiments, while some others were too afraid of any consequences. But Nguyen Anh Tuan, publisher of Vietnamnet and a party member, posted them all on his website, including some forwarded to him by other media outlets.

"We should listen to opinions from people, even different opinions," says Mr Tuan, an IT engineer. "Many people want to change the party very much, so there is more democracy, more innovation."

Vietnamnet reflects a fresh spirit among Vietnam's state-owned media outlets, which have long been caught between their role as arms of the ruling Communist party and their impulse to serve as watchdogs for public interest.

In recent months, several state newspapers have been bolder, in particular attacking a corruption scandal in the transport ministry, where senior officials embezzled at least \$7m in World Bank aid money destined for infrastructure projects.

As the scandal unfolded, Tuoi Tre, a daily newspaper owned by the Communist party's youth union, made an unprecedented call for the resignation of the transport minister, saying readers had sent hundreds of letters demanding ministerial responsibility. The minister stepped down days later.

But with the party Congress - and its attendant infighting and power struggles - now over, western diplomats wonder whether such feisty reporting will come to an end, as Communist authorities rein in journalists and deter them from probing too deeply into official actions.

"They have let the genie out of the bottle in the media, but they are probably going to have to stuff it back in again," said one western diplomat. "I don't think they can afford to let the media range over every corruption scandal, otherwise half the Politburo and their families would be compromised."

Vietnam has scores of newspapers and magazines, including seven major national dailies, but all are owned by state agencies and Communist party arms, like the army, police, youth movements, and labour unions.

The chief editors are all Communist party members and the party's Commission on Ideology and Culture lays out weekly guidelines on news coverage. While the party has given its tacit blessing to greater coverage of corruption and bureaucratic malfeasance, journalists who cross an "invisible line" risk losing their jobs or even facing criminal prosecution, as Tuoi Tre reporter Nguyen Thi Lan Anh discovered last year.

Ms Anh spent several months under house arrest on charges of "appropriating state secrets" after quoting a health ministry document recommending that a foreign drug company be investigated for manipulating drug prices, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, a US-based media freedom organisation.

Such controls on media ownership and content, and the dangers confronted by reporters, have led Reporters Sans Frontières, a Paris-based media freedom advocacy group, to rate Vietnam as one of the world's 10 worst countries for press freedom.

Yet in the intensifying competition for advertising dollars, some editors are growing more aggressive in their coverage.

"In government offices, there are some good people who want to fight corruption, so they release information to attack bad people," says Vietnamnet's Mr Tuan, who adds that he does not expect such leaks to disappear with the end of the party congress.

Mr Tuan has faced official wrath for some of the controversial items on Vietnamnet. But he argues that party leaders must be subject to criticism so they can improve their performance.

"The party's most dangerous enemy is the party itself - the lack of knowledge, vision, and corruption," he says. "If we don't improve, our party will collapse. I want to keep the party to run and lead the country. But we can only lead if we are a good party and have credibility with people."