

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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CENSORS HIT THE BRAKES

Lifting of the embargo brings
bad news to Vietnamese media

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Dear Peter,

Somewhere in HoChiMinh City three journalists are waiting for permits to travel to the United States. They have been waiting for weeks now. A Hanoi colleague of theirs received all her papers to attend the same journalism program and she is set to go. But her colleagues are not. They are caught in the throes of an unexpected attack of a very Vietnamese illness called "fear of peaceful evolution." And they are not the only ones.

Three weeks ago, just after I mailed my media newsletter trumpeting "censors in the back seat of the media economic boom", a seminar to be held in Hanoi by the American-funded Freedom Forum was postponed, some say "canceled for security reasons." A few days later, authorities confiscated a western journalist notebooks at the airport. The censors may be in the "back seat" - to quote my previous newsletter - but they know how to hit the brakes.

"Something changed in the political climate earlier this year," explain a Vietnamese official speaking on condition of anonymity. "No one understands all the factors at play. There was the mid-party conference where conservative elements vented their fear that the country was opening too fast. Then the American embargo was lifted. Insecurity mounted within the police and the military. A lot of it focused on America and on the mass media. Some conservatives believe the West is using the media to foment what they call peaceful evolution, an undermining of communism that would lead to the introduction of Western-style democracy."

According to the same official, the "psychological shift in the political climate" is temporary. In a few months, warmer winds will blow again. What is "unacceptable" will become "acceptable" again.

Take the seminar for example. Organized by the Asian Center of the Freedom Forum, an American non-profit organization whose motto is

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

"free press, free speech, free spirit," the seminar was to bring to Vietnam some well-known journalists such as Barry Wain of the Asian Wall Street Journal to discuss various aspects of journalism. According to the Far Eastern Economic Review, the seminar was canceled for "security reasons", the Vietnamese authorities fearing that some of the guest speakers would speak too openly about democracy, human rights and the multiparty system. "The journalists invited would have called a political prisoner a political prisoner," says one of the magazine's correspondents.

Organizers of the event disagree. "The seminar has been postponed, not canceled," says Nguyen Quang Dy, director of the Hanoi-based Media Cooperation and Development Center, a new government organization under the umbrella of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "In six months, it might be OK to hold that seminar. Two months ago it would have been fine. But not now. The timing is bad."

Another Vietnamese official involved in journalism training says the seminar would have encountered fewer problems had it been organized by Germans, Australians or the Japanese. Anyone but Americans. "I know it sounds illogical to you," says a foreign affairs official whom I will call Tran. "But try to step in their shoes, try to think of where those people come from, what they have been through, how isolated they have been, what America has meant to them. And think of recent events too."

The Vietnamese authorities have reasons to be wary of winds blowing from America, especially from elements in its large Vietnamese-American community. Last year, a group of Vietnamese-Americans, members of an extremist organization, came to HCMCity with plans to dynamite the city's administrative centers. They were caught before they could use the explosives they had bought. All have been sentenced to long jail terms. In 1992, another Vietnamese-American hijacked a plane and threw leaflets over HCMCity. The leaflets called for an armed rebellion against the communist regime. "These people are crazy," says a HCMCity journalist. "They have no idea what today's Vietnam is like. They think they fight for freedom. In fact, they slow reforms and close doors instead of opening them."

In Hanoi, Tran knows how fragile the new openness can be. "We do not understand what triggers the clamp down," he says, agreeing only reluctantly to talk to me. "Small details sometimes unleash a reaction while major changes go unnoticed. There is no logic to it. Right now, you can do something unacceptable if you know how to do it and how to do it at the right time."

We are sipping orange juice on the terrace of an isolated Hanoi cafe. Tran speaks in a deep and low voice, his hands moving relentlessly over the table as he describes a complex political scene where ignorance and misunderstanding play as important roles as ideology. "Foreigners have no idea of the kind of difficulties we face," he says. "A high-ranking party official once asked me why I associated with anarchists. At first, I did not understand. Then it became clear. You see, in Vietnamese, the word for a non-governmental organization [*phi chính phủ*] is almost the same as the one for anarchist [*vo chính phủ*]." (Some of Tran's projects involve funding from non-governmental organizations)

Tran is wary of foreign journalists. "We stick our neck out to bring progress to our country and some journalists recklessly put us at risk," he complains. "Our only asset is our credibility within the system. In one stroke of a pen you can not only hurt us, but destroy our capacity to bring about useful change."

Tran is a survivor in a land where heaven and earth often change places. If Vietnamese generals were famous for never entering into battle when overpowered, believing the best victories were those won without a fight, Tran is one of their proud grandsons. "This is a developing country with an old leadership," he explains. "Their experience of the world is very different from reality. You must never forget that. We must close that gap in understanding between their experience of the world and the real world. If we do not, there will be no real change within this generation."

THE THREAT OF "PEACEFUL EVOLUTION"

The old guard is not opposed to economic reforms. What they are opposed to is called "peaceful evolution." The best definition I have heard of the concept comes from Barry Wain of the Asian Wall Street Journal (March 25-26, 1994). Peaceful evolution, he wrote, "seems to cover anything and everything the Vietnamese do not like, wrapped into a single devious plot to unseat them."

In a February broadcast, the state-controlled radio network Voice of Vietnam (VOV), described peaceful evolution as "a trick of imperialism to eradicate socialism." According to VOV, proponents of peaceful evolution use "wise and sophisticated tricks" to bring about "internal anarchy and finally a swift and quiet crumbling." In a mid-February edition of the police newspaper Cong An, former interior minister My Tho, member of the Politburo in 1991, warned against "peaceful evolution." According to My Tho the war with America did not end in 1975. It is still being fought "using the modern mass media to topple the Vietnamese government from within."

According to local analysts, My Tho's fears, shared by other officials with backgrounds in the armed forces or the security services, have considerable influence within the party and the administration. "The Communists watch their own party members much more than they watch me now," says Nguyen Ngoc Bich, a South-Vietnamese lawyer who spent 12 years in reeducation camp and was released in 1988. Bich, who presently advises foreign investors, easily receives authorization to travel abroad when communist officials often suffer long procedures. "The authorities treat me very nicely," he says smiling. "I am one of the good guys now. The bad guys are their own party members."

The confusion is not lost on anyone. "The people do not know what to think anymore," says a HCMCity journalist. "In 1986, we were told to tell the truth. The media went in a frenzy of investigative journalism and some people used that for personal vendettas. The authorities clamped down to restore order." In the process, honest critics, such as writer Duong Thu Huong, were also arrested.

No journalists I meet advocate total freedom of the press. In Hanoi, director of Media Development Center Dy believes the country needs order if it is to travel the path to development. He wants the media to serve as educator and developer. Dy despairs when some

Vietnamese reporters abuse the margin of freedom they have recently won. A few weeks ago, for example, some journalists went on a trip to Haiphong and, for fun, took with them a Canadian of Vietnamese origin. They were going to show him "how they make money". The journalists first called on a State-owned enterprise they knew was bankrupt. The enterprise wined and dined them. Envelopes containing 200,000 dong came with the meal. That day, the group made a few other house-calls and collected more envelopes.

Well-trained journalists are still hard to come by. The Media Development Center has no budget for training. Not a single dong. The Center hopes to obtain foreign assistance to send journalists on short and long-term training programs. "We are looking first at training programs in the region. These are often more cost effective because we spend less on travel. We are also looking for training in countries where experiences are closer to ours." Dy is also applying for a license to launch an advertising agency. "This way," he says, "we can make some money for the Center."

Increasing the flow of information - both in and out of Vietnam - is another aim of the center. Dy, who worked at the Vietnamese embassy in Bangkok and studied at Harvard on a Nieman fellowship, dreams of an electronic library. "Our journalists could then have access to so much information," he says.

Dy understands foreigners' interest in supporting the development of journalism departments but feels it is too early. To bring in foreign professors or change the curriculum, universities would need authorization from the Department of Ideology. And this may not be easy. "Your chances would be 50-50," he says. "But who knows? It may be worth a try."

Another Vietnamese official calls the world of journalism a "moving mine field". "You need good nerves to survive. You must monitor the situation constantly." The game is tricky. "In Canada, you have the law to protect you," says a northern journalist. "Here we work in the twilight zone." Nowhere is it said, for example, that Vietnamese journalists are forbidden to write for foreign publications. Few risk it though. "They could use one law or another to say you have misrepresented the socialist motherland," says one journalist. Foreign free-lancers are not allowed in Vietnam. Many are tolerated.

In HCMCity, three journalists are still waiting for exit permits. In the past, four of their Hanoi colleagues have been allowed to take part in that program offered by the New-York based Institute of International Education (IIE). Hoping to break the deadlock, IIE has postponed the training for a month. Negotiations continue.

As for the foreign journalist whose notebooks were seized - I swore not to tell who he was - some say it is the work of a zealous officer misunderstanding directives. There are 13 foreign press bureaus in Hanoi, half of them Japanese, and none have before encountered such problems. Some say the move was an "official sign of displeasure". Welcome to the twilight zone.



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Going for broke in the Mekong delta
How the next Southeast Asian war may be fought over water.

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Dear Peter,

French agronomists say this is where the next Southeast Asian war will begin. Not in the mediatized Spratley Islands, off the coast of Vietnam but here, in the sun-drenched sprawling flood plains of Vietnam's Mekong Delta, where children learn to swim before they can walk, where long narrow boats ferry goods and passengers along a maze of canals. "The next war will be with Thailand, and it will be over water," predicts French engineer Oliver Husson.

Husson talks about the soil of the delta the way others talk about an unpredictable lover. He has worked here for three years now, sent by France's *Centre national d'études agronomiques des régions chaudes* to attempt something experts had deemed impossible: increase food production in the Plain of Reeds, 8000 square km of marshlands and acidic soil where little grows, save one floating rice crop during the flood season. Today, after much soil improvement, some of that land produces two crops of rice. Ecologists warn that the ecosystem is suffering. "The water table is threatened," admits Husson. "We have said so but the authorities are determined to increase rice production, whatever the cost."

The cost is high. From the Plain of Reeds near the Cambodia border, to the point of Ca Mau, greed, hunger, population explosion and the powerful forces of development are changing the delta, Vietnam's rice-growing heartland. Here, on 12% of the country's land, 51% of the nation's rice was grown last year. Northern policy-makers want to discipline the waters of the Mekong to produce more food. Southern scientists fear a deterioration of the ecosystem. They lobby for a more taoist approach: working with the river instead of fighting it. Hanoi scientists are increasingly supporting them. But the clock is ticking fast. Other threats loom over the delta's 15 to 24 million people [The last census, in 1988, puts the figure at 15 million but estimates are higher]. China and Thailand are building dams and diverting rivers upstream, reducing the flow of water. As a result, more salt water intrudes on the delta. Farmers turn their rice field into shrimp ponds. Ecologists are worried.

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