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Background Brief:

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Vietnam: Crackdown on Journalists and Social Media

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We are researching the pressure that Vietnam is putting on journalists, activists, and social media companies at the moment and whether this is related to the upcoming National Party Congress in January.

We request your analytical input into the following issues;

Q1. What is your assessment of Vietnam's clamp down on journalists, activists, and social media companies in recent months? There have been quite a few arrests related to Facebook in particular.

ANSWER: Since the Cyber Security Law came into force in January 2019, there has been a marked rise in the arrest and trial of Vietnamese who have gone online to express their views on a number of social issues, particularly corruption and the environment. Also, there has been a crackdown on individuals allegedly spreading misinformation related to the coronavirus, especially this year's outbreak in Da Nang. The majority of cases have been instigated by provincial security officials.

A sub-set of this year's arrests and trial cases represent a time lag due to prolonged detention and drawn out investigations of persons arrested in 2018-19, such as those associated with the Brotherhood of Democracy, the Hiến Pháp or Constitution group, land rights, or the Build Operate Transfer toll gates protests.

Q2. To what extent would you say this clamping down is related to the upcoming Congress in January? Do you think this action is all related to this political event or rather representative of a general shift in internet control following the cybersecurity law?

ANSWER: So far, most arrests are indirectly related to the forthcoming national party congress. In other words, the arrests are part of a continuing process of stamping out dissent on sensitive social issues and deterring others from following suit.

However, it is likely that there will be a spike in arrests in coming months as the congress draws near. A crucial Central Committee plenum will convene in October. Key draft party policy documents will be circulated among party officials and specially convened focus groups in coming months. Local party branches at district and provincial level will start holding their congresses to select local leaders as well as delegates to the national congress scheduled for early next year. Party policy

documents will be published on the eve of the national congress and the public will be asked to comment.

This party-orchestrated feedback loop often results in citizens availing themselves of this process to criticise the one-party state for shortcomings.

Since the Cyber Security Law came into effect in January 2019, there has been a marked rise in the arrests of online activists. In 2019, forty percent of arrests involved online activists, whereas in previous years the majority of those arrested were persons who took part in public protests or were involved with banned civil society groups.

It should be noted that the Cyber Security Law has not been invoked for arrests last year and this year. Security authorities cite provisions of the Penal Code, especially Article 117 that criminalises conducting propaganda against the state.

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