



# REAL TIME ONLINE CENSORSHIP IN VIETNAM

As To Lam Pitches Open Dialogue  
with World Leaders and Tech Companies

**October 2, 2024**

viettan.org |  
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*The Vietnamese government billed To Lam’s talk at Columbia University as a “policy speech” but feared commentary on the policy*

## INTRODUCTION

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The Vietnamese government stepped up its online censorship as To Lam — general secretary and president of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam — traveled to New York from September 21 to 25, 2024 to address the United Nations Summit of the Future. The former Minister of Public Security also met with world leaders, business groups, and students and faculty at Columbia University, often stressing the importance of adhering to international law to maintain peace and stability.

As To Lam was promoting the idea of open dialogue and cooperation, Meta restricted Facebookers in Vietnam from accessing content about his trip at the behest of Vietnamese authorities.

For example, a political cartoon depicting To Lam holding onto a tightrope between flags representing the United States and China was made unavailable in Vietnam because of a legal request from Hanoi’s Ministry of Information and Communications. According to a notification from Facebook to the admin of Viet Tan’s page: “We complied with the request after conducting a legal and human rights assessment. Your content can still be seen by people in other locations.”



Sep 25, 2024

## Your post is unavailable in Vietnam

### Why this happened

Because of a legal request from Vietnam Ministry of Information and Communications we have to restrict access to your post.



Việt Tân

Created by

· Sep 20, 2024

Diễn viên đoàn xiếc Tô Lâm

Ảnh: Việt Tân Úc Châu

Shared on Việt Tân



This request is based on local laws.



Where this happened



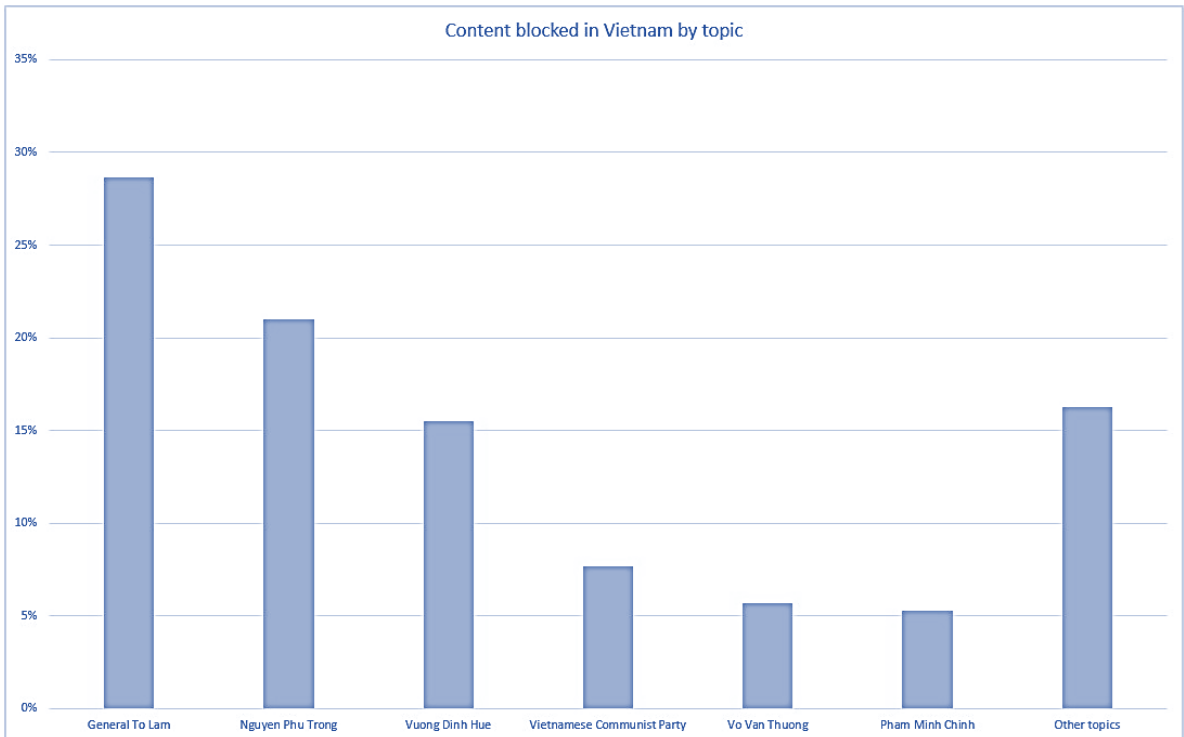
*“Secretary-President To on the Tightrope”. Source: Viet Tan’s Facebook Page*

Ironically, this cartoon reflected the foreign policy position that Hanoi officials have branded as its bamboo diplomacy. During the [Columbia World Leaders Forum](#) on September 23, 2024, Tô Lâm gave a cautious, muddled answer to a question on how the United States should deal with the People’s Republic of China.

In the week around Tô Lâm’s visit to the United States, over 100 pieces of content on the Viet Tan Facebook page were blocked in Vietnam. Based on our analysis, Meta also restricted content of numerous other Facebook accounts operated by Vietnamese citizen journalists and human rights defenders during this time.

Meta seems to have increasingly complied with the censorship requests of the Vietnamese government. From January to September 2024, approximately 1,000 posts and videos on Viet Tan’s Facebook page were restricted in Vietnam. Analyzing the content of the blocked posts reveals the topics that the Vietnamese government attempts to control.

Over 80% of the blocked posts were about the top leaders in the Vietnamese Communist Party. In particular, discussion about the declining health of Nguyễn Phú Trọng, who died in July, had the most frequent government takedown requests. Viet Tan’s Facebook page was also restricted from posting about Vương Đình Huệ and Phạm Minh Chính. Vương Đình Huệ was the Chair of the National Assembly until he was forced to resign on April 26 amid a corruption probe. Phạm Minh Chính is the current Prime Minister, one of the four most powerful positions in Vietnam politics, and also facing corruption allegations.



*Content blocked in Vietnam due to local law (data from Viet Tan’s Facebook page, January - June 2024)*

The Vietnamese communist leadership has undergone an unprecedented power struggle. With the 14th Party Congress approaching in early 2026 to determine the next leaders, there has been a jostling for the top political positions, which was reported on both [state](#) media and [international](#) outlets. Nearly all of these developments were initially discussed on social media. Moreover, many of the posts deemed as violating local law were later confirmed to be true and even covered by state media — such as the resignation of Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong on March 20 and the confirmation of Public Security Minister To Lam as the new president two months later.

The Washington Post [previously reported](#) that Meta had adopted an internal list of Vietnamese Communist Party officials who should not be criticized on Facebook. Although Meta has not disclosed this “do not criticize” list, the content restrictions experienced by Viet Tan’s Facebook page suggests that Meta will comply with Vietnamese government censorship requests involving the current and prospective holders of the top four positions (party general secretary, state president, prime minister, National Assembly chair).

## | DEFENDING VIETNAM'S DIGITAL FUTURE

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To Lam [declared](#) at the UN Summit of the Future that scientific and technological achievements should promote cooperation instead of being tools against peace, development, and justice. With this messaging, he hoped to whitewash his image as a police general [responsible](#) for grave human rights abuses and to entice leading tech companies such as Meta, Google, and SpaceX to invest in Vietnam's digital future.

However, the Hanoi government continues to control technology to protect its power. While the business meetings in New York were happening, the Vietnamese authorities infringed on the right of Vietnamese citizens to receive and impart information. International investors should be wary of the promises that Vietnamese authorities make when policies such as the 2019 Cybersecurity Law require companies to open data centers and abide by content control requests of the government.

In terms of Meta's responsibilities, it describes a commitment to [upholding human rights](#) and using a due diligence assessment to ensure international human rights standards even if local laws counter such values. However, the blocking of political content in Vietnam, as experienced by Viet Tan's Facebook page, does not match Meta's commitments as a member of the Global Network Initiative or its Corporate Human Rights Policy.

It is worth noting that Vietnam is an outlier in Southeast Asia. Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam are among the [top ten countries](#) with the largest number of Facebook users. According to Meta's 2023 transparency report, the [Vietnam government](#) submitted the least requests for restriction out of the other Southeast Asian nations, but, the majority of the content controlled was allegedly "information which distorts, slanders, or insults the reputation of an organization or the honor and dignity of an individual." In comparison, the majority of content restriction requests from [Indonesia](#) and the [Philippines](#) were about gambling, consumer policy, and employment fraud. The majority of content taken down in [Thailand](#) also revolved around consumer products, and just 6% of the cases involved the lèse-majesté law, where it is illegal to "defame, insult, or threaten the monarch of Thailand."

The line between repressing freedom of expression and restricting content based on insulting political leaders can be quite artificial. Many of the posts restricted on Viet Tan's Facebook page in 2024 were about current events covered to some extent by Vietnamese state media.

Another challenge to the Facebook platform in Vietnam is content moderation. As detailed in a previous Viet Tan paper (see [Censorship by other means](#)), malicious online networks falsely report content for violating Meta's community standards. The posts get completely taken down and the Facebook account or page experiences a drastic slow down in overall viewership — which immobilizes pages advocating for human rights when sharing time-sensitive information is a means to combat state abuse.

## | RECOMMENDATIONS

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Open access to information is a benefit for everyone with a stake in Vietnam’s future, including its own people and foreign investors.

Since the Vietnamese government considers all content by activists groups as “sensitive” and potentially violating local law, Meta needs to better articulate how it determines when content should be censored for local users. For example, will an informal request from Vietnam’s Ministry of Information and Communications be sufficient? Or should the request also be accompanied by a court order? And what if the underlying content merely expresses a widely held political opinion?

Furthermore, the lack of means to appeal the content restriction is a challenge for Facebook users. In the latest series of content restrictions in Vietnam, the Facebook notification recommends the page’s admin to “contact the Vietnam Ministry of Information and Communications.” But this becomes a moot suggestion as Vietnam’s political structure preserves authoritarian power rather than tolerates political participation and dialogue.

Transparency is clearly an important practice in protecting freedom of expression. The [latest Meta transparency report on Vietnam](#) for content restrictions based on local law dates back to the last half of 2023. With Meta’s technological capacity, this data should better reflect real time instances. Providing the latest information on the type of content restricted would raise awareness about the topics that concern the Vietnamese authorities. Greater transparency would help Meta maintain its commitment to giving people a voice to build community and hold the Vietnam state accountable to its human rights commitments.



# BLOCKED IN VIETNAM



## 1/ "IS TO LAM FACING INCREASING INTERNAL OPPOSITION?"

Wednesday, September 25, 2024 at 11:14 AM

People in Vietnam won't see your post

This is because we received a [legal request](#) from Vietnam Ministry of Information and Communications to restrict access to your post for going against local law.

We complied with the request after conducting a legal and human rights assessment.

Your content can still be seen by people in other locations.



Việt Tân

Published by

September 23 at 9:00 PM

Thế chề tre của Tô Lâm bị chặn đứng, lực lượng chống Tô đang lớn mạnh?  
23/09/2024

Kể từ khi thành công triệt hạ Võ Văn Thường, Vương Đình Huệ và Trương Thị Mai, sau đó là cái chết của ông Nguyễn Phú Trọng, thì thế của Tô Lâm thắng "như chề tre". Lúc đó, dường như không có thế lực nào có thể ngăn cản được ông.... See more



Làn sóng **chống đối**  
Tô Lâm ngày càng gia tăng  
trong **nội bộ?**

## 2/ SENIOR VIETNAMESE LEADERS HAVING TO RELY ON THEIR NOTES

Thursday, September 26, 2024 at 11:17 PM

People in Vietnam won't see your post

This is because we received a [legal request](#) from Vietnam Ministry of Information and Communications to restrict access to your post for going against local law.

We complied with the request after conducting a legal and human rights assessment.

Your content can still be seen by people in other locations.



Việt Tân

Published by

September 25 at 9:00 AM

Võ Văn Thường sử dụng "PHAO" khi chép sổ tang.  
Tô Lâm lật tài liệu đã soạn sẵn khi được phỏng vấn. Hóa ra ông nào cũng dùng "PHAO"



**NGÁN NGẮM  
LÃNH ĐẠO CẤP CAO  
VIỆT NAM**

## 3/ SIX NGOS CALLED ON PRESIDENT BIDEN TO SANCTION TO LAM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

Thursday, September 26, 2024 at 11:17 PM

People in Vietnam won't see your post

This is because we received a [legal request](#) from Vietnam Ministry of Information and Communications to restrict access to your post for going against local law.

We complied with the request after conducting a legal and human rights assessment.

Your content can still be seen by people in other locations.



Việt Tân

Published by

September 25 at 3:29 AM

Sáu tổ chức phi chính phủ gửi  
thư ngỏ tới Tổng thống Mỹ Joe  
Biden, cùng lãnh đạo các nước  
phương Tây khác, đề nghị điều  
tra và có biện pháp cấm vận đối  
với tướng Công an Tô Lâm

## 4/ "ANOTHER PROMISE FROM THE PRIME MINISTER!"

Wednesday, September 25, 2024 at 4:22 PM

People in Vietnam won't see your post

This is because we received a [legal request](#) from Vietnam Ministry of Information and Communications to restrict access to your post for going against local law.

We complied with the request after conducting a legal and human rights assessment.

Your content can still be seen by people in other locations.



Việt Tân

Published by

September 24 at 3:05 AM

THỦ TƯỚNG LẠI CAM KẾT!

Phát biểu trước các doanh nghiệp tư nhân lớn, Thủ tướng nhấn mạnh: Chính phủ cam kết luôn đồng hành, bảo vệ quyền và lợi ích hợp pháp, chính đáng của doanh nghiệp trong bất cứ hoàn cảnh nào; không hình sự hóa các quan hệ kinh tế; nghiên cứu, bãi bỏ các giấy phép con. (theo [VOV.VN](#))

Nhìn mấy cái BOT khi chưa làm thì bảo dân có quyền lựa chọn, bảo hoàn thành thu phí xong trả về cho nhà nước rồi dân đi miễn phí. Giờ trả về xong lại nói không có tiền bả.... See more





## 5/ SALT BAE HAS 5 RESTAURANTS IN THE U.S., INCLUDING IN NEW YORK WHERE TO LAM WILL ATTEND THE UNGA

Thursday, September 26, 2024 at 11:10 PM

### People in Vietnam won't see your post

This is because we received a [legal request](#) from Vietnam Ministry of Information and Communications to restrict access to your post for going against local law.

We complied with the request after conducting a legal and human rights assessment.

Your content can still be seen by people in other locations.



## 6/ TO LAM CALLED ON THE WORLD TO SHARE TECHNOLOGY WITH VIETNAM BUT WHAT HAS VIETNAM CONTRIBUTED?

Today at 3:52 PM

### People in Vietnam won't see your post

This is because we received a [legal request](#) from Vietnam Ministry of Public Security to restrict access to your post for going against local law.

We complied with the request after conducting a legal and human rights assessment.

Your content can still be seen by people in other locations.



## 7/ TO LAM READING HIS PREPARED ANSWERS

Thursday, September 26, 2024 at 11:18 PM

### People in Vietnam won't see your post

This is because we received a [legal request](#) from Vietnam Ministry of Information and Communications to restrict access to your post for going against local law.

We complied with the request after conducting a legal and human rights assessment.

Your content can still be seen by people in other locations.



## 8/ THE MISDEEDS OF TO LAM

Wednesday, September 25, 2024 at 5:14 PM

### People in Vietnam won't see your post

This is because we received a [legal request](#) from Vietnam Ministry of Information and Communications to restrict access to your post for going against local law.

We complied with the request after conducting a legal and human rights assessment.

Your content can still be seen by people in other locations.



# ABOUT VIET TAN


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## Internet Freedom Campaign


The internet has helped open up Vietnamese society and connect the country with the world. In the absence of a free press, citizens have turned to social media to follow the news and debate national issues. The online political space has also nurtured the development of civil society offline.

As part of Viet Tan's Internet Freedom Campaign, we are working with international stakeholders and Vietnamese activists to:

- Challenge arbitrary legal statutes and content takedowns restricting freedom of expression
- Urge big tech companies to ensure a safe and open online environment by addressing adversarial harmful networks and other social harms
- Support citizen journalists and imprisoned cyber activists

 [facebook.com/viettan](https://facebook.com/viettan)

 [@viettan](https://twitter.com/viettan)

 [@dangviettan](https://instagram.com/dangviettan)

[viettan.org](https://viettan.org)

[media@viettan.org](mailto:media@viettan.org)

