

Election Watch for the Digital Age

Vietnam

Preelection assessment

Legislative elections set for May 2021

Vietnam is a one-party state ruled by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), where elections serve as a ritual reaffirmation of the CPV's decades-old political monopoly. The upcoming National Assembly election will determine the 500 members of Vietnam's legislative body. The National Assembly is largely subservient to the CPV, following the party lead on the legislative agenda and in appointing government officials. At the CPV's Party Congress in January, Nguyễn Phú Trọng was reelected as CPV general secretary, defying the party's two-term leadership rule.

Elections are carefully orchestrated by the CPV to ensure regime stability and the absence of popular participation. Candidates on the CPV list are handpicked by the party and made public only weeks before the vote. No other parties are authorized to take part. Independent candidates must be vetted by the CPV, which resulted in the disqualification of over 100 individuals—including prominent members of civil society—during the 2016 election. The CPV won 473 out of 500 seats. The vote-counting process is closed to the public and independent observers.

Freedom House has identified the following as key digital interference issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Arrests and prosecutions:** Authorities use numerous vaguely worded decrees and articles to bring charges against activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens for their online activities. In January 2021, Phạm Chí Dũng, founder of the Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam (IJAVN), was sentenced to 15 years in prison on charges of creating and disseminating anti-state propaganda in part for articles he published online. Authorities convicted two fellow journalists for the online publication on similar charges, handing them 11-year prison sentences. The crackdown was seen by civil society as an attempt to squash debate on the country's leadership ahead of the CPV's 13th Party Congress that month. Heightened repression is likely during the electoral period in order to maintain the CPV's domination over the political narrative.
- **Influence operations:** The Vietnamese government manipulates the online information space and public discourse through an electronic army of paid commentators. A unit of approximately 10,000 people hired by the government, known as Force 47, disseminates propaganda, harasses dissidents, and attacks opposition figures on social media, notably Facebook and YouTube. Separately, "public opinion shapers" engage in similar tactics on a voluntary basis. These two cyber forces significantly expand authorities' capacity to disrupt and distort the online information landscape ahead of the National Assembly elections beyond more traditional forms of media manipulation, which are also prevalent in the country.
- **Forced deletion of content:** Government officials routinely pressure social media companies, content hosts, online publications, and individual users themselves to remove content that the

state deems critical or “toxic.” In April 2020, full access to Facebook’s local servers was restored reportedly only after the company agreed to remove significantly more “anti-state” content. Separately, Force 47 is believed to mass report anti-state content to social media companies for removal. The forced removal of content deemed unsavory by the government further restricts the already severely curtailed ability of civil society, independent news platforms, and ordinary people to create online space for informed debate.

Vietnam has a score of 18 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House’s Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The score reflects a monopolized political sphere, a punitive online media environment, and severely restricted space for civil society. The country is rated **Not Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020*, with a score of 20 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties and **Not Free** in *Freedom on the Net 2020*, with an internet freedom score of 22 out of 100. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Vietnam country reports in [Freedom in the World](#) and [Freedom on the Net](#).