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New Vietnamese leadership must urgently rehabilitate country's appalling human rights record

With the news that [incumbent Nguyễn Phú Trọng is poised to continue as General Secretary of the Viet Nam Communist Party](#), following a secretive leadership race with outgoing Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng, he must urgently move to rehabilitate the country's longstanding appalling human rights record.

Viet Nam is increasingly trying to project itself as a responsible member of the international community – it holds a seat on the UN Human Rights Council and has recently ratified the Convention against Torture. But you don't have to scratch far beneath the surface for a very different picture to emerge. Human rights violations in the country continue unabated. The reality is, the same secrecy that characterized the leadership race, shields Viet Nam's human rights record from scrutiny and allows the government to avoid the scorn of the international community.

The [case of Lê Văn Mạnh](#) illustrates this point well. He was convicted of the 2005 rape and murder of a 12-year-old girl, but always maintained his innocence and says that he was tortured into a "confession". Lê Văn Mạnh was scheduled to be executed in October last year. Normally the authorities keep a tight lid on any information on death penalty cases until executions have been carried out, but in this case, Lê Văn Mạnh managed to get information about his impending death to the outside world. [Following an international outcry](#), state media [reported the execution had been postponed just a day before Lê Văn Mạnh was to be put to death](#), and that the Supreme Court would "re-examine" his case.

But since the postponement, there has been a blackout on information. Despite repeated requests for further information to the authorities, Mạnh's mother is still being kept in the dark about what will happen to her son. The legal and judicial system has closed ranks, refusing to disclose information and shielding itself from assessment and accountability.

In order to move the country forward, the General Secretary must initiate inclusive reforms and ensure an end to the repressive tendencies of his previous administration.

In March last year, [the Ministry of Public Security reported that 226 people died in police custody in a three year period ending in September 2014](#) but claimed that most deaths were the result of illness or natural causes. [The ministry also claimed it had arrested and dealt with 1,410 cases involving 2,680 people who had "violated national security"](#) - a term which in Viet Nam is often used to in reference to those promoting human rights - and shut down 60 "illegal" opposition groups.

Little information clarifying the meaning of these figures has been made available to the public. The numbers presumably do not include the physical assaults on human rights defenders and government critics which have become routine throughout the country. In 2015, [69 men and women are known to have been targeted in 36 violent attacks](#), perpetrated by police or men in plain-clothes, widely believed to be working for, or with, the police.

A prominent example is [the December beating of lawyer and prominent human rights advocate Nguyễn Văn Đài](#). In December, Đài was brutally assaulted along with three colleagues after they had delivered a human rights training event to a rural community in the north of the country. Ten days later, he was arrested on his way to a human rights dialogue with European Union delegates. [He has since been charged, along with colleague Lê Thu Hà](#), with spreading propaganda against the state, an offence which could leave them languishing in jail for 20 years.

Viet Nam's human rights journey follows a well-established pattern; where there appears to be one step forward, there are often a number of steps back. In October 2015, it was involved in the discussions leading to the conclusion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade agreement which will require signatory countries such as Viet Nam to allow independent unions, something hitherto unknown to the Southeast Asian nation. However, since the conclusion of the text of the agreement in October, attacks against workers' rights advocates have continued. In November, [Đỗ Thị Minh Hạnh and Trương Minh Đức](#) – two labour activists and former prisoners of conscience - [were beaten by men in plainclothes before being detained by uniformed police](#).

If Viet Nam wants to portray itself as a responsible member of the international community, this pattern of abuses will have to be broken. Root and branch reforms are required across the country's various branches of government in order for the government to deliver on its human rights promises and international legal obligations. This must be the priority of Nguyễn Phú Trọng's new administration.

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