# The Power and Limits of Digitalized Authoritarian Deliberation: Insights from Vietnam

# (work-in-progress)

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## Abstract

In the post- Cold War period, the one-party state of Vietnam has transitioned from a governance model built primarily on coercion to one infused with elements of deliberative democracy. This combination of command-based power and state-led deliberative influence has helped strengthen the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP)'s authoritarian rule despite its strong Western linkage and a rising middle class. However, since the early 2010s, this approach to maintaining authoritarian resilience has faced increased challenges. The majority of Vietnam's population has moved online, creating a digital public sphere beyond the state's full control. In response to these emerging threats, the Vietnamese one-party state has adopted a dual strategy. It combines coercive measures, such as selectively punishing dissenters, with deliberative practices. These include setting the public discourse agenda, fostering discussions on topics within its control, and aggressively implementing performative policy actions to demonstrate its goodwill. This article delves into the Vietnamese model of "digitalized authoritarian deliberation," exploring its effectiveness, limitations, and the public's response to these developments.

## Introduction

In early 2024, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's economic hub, announced its plan to deploy 'social listening software' to monitor and manage 22 million social media accounts within its vicinity. Lam Dinh Thang, the Director of the city's Department of Information and Communication, stated,

> "The software manages and shapes public opinion…especially the activities of hostile entities that undermine, exploit social media and Internet platforms to incite, call for protests against the government and its policies and strategies."

> (Thao Le 2024)

This initiative is not Vietnam's first attempt to navigate its social media landscape, which has been evolving since the late 2000s with the emergence of platforms like Yahoo 360, followed by Facebook and others (Giang 2015). Initially, the state's interaction with social media was either indifferent or strictly punitive towards any perceived threats to its authority (Abuza 2015). However, after the Arab Spring in 2011, the Vietnamese state came to realize that they could not

control social media discourse only by force. Though limited, it started to employ co-optation tactics by hiring opinion-influencers and online commentators to influence online deliberation (Bui 2016).

By 2024, with 70 million internet users and an equal number of social media users among its approximately 100 million population, Vietnam has transitioned to an almost fully online society. This makes it one of the world's most significant social media markets (Kemp 2024). The state has thus evolved from a passive observer to an active participant in the digital public sphere, employing a range of tactics that extend beyond repression. These include the creation of government platforms for policy dialogue on social media, fostering citizen participation in policy debates, selectively allowing independent online groups, and promoting state media as a key information source. Together, these strategies have redefined state-society relations into what is now termed "authoritarian deliberation 2.0" (Stockmann and Luo 2019).

This article aims to address several key questions arising from these developments. Firstly, it evaluates the effectiveness of Vietnam's "authoritarian deliberation 2.0" in maintaining regime resilience. Drawing from Baogang He and Mark Warren's seminal 2011 paper, it explores whether the incorporation of deliberative practices strengthens authoritarian governance or inadvertently paves the way for democratization. Secondly, it examines the response of Vietnam's burgeoning middle class and highly connected populace to this new form of governance. This includes analyzing how counter-publics, such as pro-democracy activists, react and potentially mobilize against it. Third, the study investigates how profit-oriented social media platforms, including Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube, navigate their relationships with the Vietnamese state, balancing business interests, Western pressures, and user grievances.

To provide insights into these dynamics, this study process traces the development of Vietnam's digital public sphere from 2016 to 2023, using in-depth interviews and textual analysis to understand the narratives of its key stakeholders. Theoretically, the research aims to transpose He and Warren's "authoritarian deliberation" concept to the digital realm. It also seeks to adapt traditionally democratic notions like "agenda setting", "public sphere", and "counter-publics" to a digitally-oriented authoritarian environment connected to the global internet. Empirically, the study provides insight into the state of digitalized deliberation in Vietnam, the regimes' "authoritarian innovations" to capture public discourses (Curato and Fossati 2020), as well as the counter-strategy of its netizens. This research will also be valuable for scholars seeking to compare the evolution of public spheres across various Southeast Asian nations and among different authoritarian regimes.

The article is structured as follows: First, it revisits the concept of authoritarian deliberation in the age of social media. Next, it presents Vietnam as a case study of digitalized authoritarian deliberation. It then examines the characteristics and implications of this phenomenon, focusing on the public and counter-publics' responses. Finally, it concludes with an overview of the findings and suggestions for future research.

## Authoritarian deliberation in the age of social media

After the hype at the 'end of history' as the Soviet Union collapse, the world has seen waves of autocratic revival in the past three decades (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Unlike their predecessors, these modern autocracies have adeptly integrated practices of "good governance," including deliberative processes, to reinforce their rule. This phenomenon, termed "authoritarian deliberation" by He and Warren (2011), represents a confluence of centralized power with communicative strategies that foster influence through the responsiveness of participants to claims and reasoning.

The concept of authoritarian deliberation, however, is inherently paradoxical. Deliberation implies a process where participants engage in reasoned consideration of each other's beliefs and preferences (Rosenberg 2007: 130), which contrasts starkly with authoritarianism's demand for obedience and conformity over diversity of opinion (Hinck, Hawthorne, and Hawthorne 2018: 8). However, as shown in He and Warren (2011)'s work, such a model is feasible, where autocrats allow for a degree of public discourse, providing spaces for citizens to engage in reasoned exchanges. Authoritarian deliberation is more or less dependent on the capacity of the state to control the population. Totalitarian regimes like North Korea needs no deliberation, but more open and pluralistic autocracies like China and Vietnam need to provide a "safe channel" for the population to express themselves, as well as to provide a feedback mechanism to improve their governance systems without the Western-style checks and balances systems. In this sense, authoritarian deliberation is seen as more a concession by autocratic rulers, particularly in a rapidly pluralizing power environment.

This poses an interesting case when, in the past decade since He and Warren's work, we have seen two interesting phenomena. First, as some of the "deliberative" authoritarian regimes, particularly Vietnam and China, have become increasingly a one-man rule with the paramount leaders (such as Chinese President Xi Jinping), will the initial concession of the regime to the citizens remain the same? Second, does the migration to online platforms facilitate or hinder deliberation? While the impact of the internet, particularly its Web 2.0 and 3.0 iterations, on democratic deliberation has been explored, its effect on authoritarian deliberation remains a significant research frontier. This transition from "authoritarian deliberation 1.0," characterized by physical presence and limited participation, to "authoritarian deliberation 2.0," defined by virtual engagement and widespread participation, signifies a shift from a top-down to a more horizontal approach, thanks to the inherent nature of the internet and social media.

This evolution introduces several unique features: an expanded potential participant base, broader reach, and enhanced visibility. However, it also challenges authoritarian regimes, whose hierarchical structures clash with the horizontal dynamics of digital communication. In Vietnam's case, this includes navigating a public sphere that encompasses uncontrollable elements such as dissidents and foreign media, diverging from the more controlled environment in China. The transition to "networked authoritarianism 2.0" shifts the focus from fear and friction to more nuanced strategies of flood and infiltration. The nature of coercion evolves, with authoritarian states deploying innovative coercive tools alongside traditional tactics of harassment. (For example in China, these tools include banning dissents from using the internet, "cancelling" the

virtual life of violated individuals, making them *persona non grata* on the internet). This combines with conventional tactics of harassment (banning from leaving the country, forcing internet country to deny service, using thugs/undercover police to physically assault dissents).

The rise of artificial intelligence makes it much easier for autocrats to "flood" the already toxic level of mis and disinformation on the internet sphere: cheaper to create troll farms, spreading information, etc. More importantly, while it is extremely hard to get the public attention on crucial – but hard to consume – issues, it is much easier to create distraction (every time a sensitive topic draws public attention, there appears trivial online storms of leaked videos, prosecution of famous KOLs, or nonsensical discussions).

In addition, authoritarian deliberation 2.0 operates in a much more globalized world in terms of cyber-connectivity, while much more disconnected in terms of ideology, identity, and governance. Furthermore, contrasting to the previous problem of lack of information, netizens in autocracy faces the problem of too much information. Autocratic rulers also learn tactics from its peer to effectively control the cybersphere – such as the use of paid online trolls. For such a reason, many authoritarian regimes, particularly high-performing ones, have considerably improved their discourse power instead of diminishing it with the new communication technology. Modern versions of China's influence in mass media include self-censorship, news reporting/framing techniques, ideotainment, and government instruction on news reporting.

## Vietnam as a case of deliberative authoritarian regime

In the post- Cold War period, the one-party state of Vietnam has transitioned from a governance model built primarily on coercion to one infused with elements of deliberative democracy. Similar to China, it has provided deliberative tools to the citizens such as village-level elections, periodic meetings with elected members of National Assembly, public hearings, and access to the government's budgeting process, which allowed for limited yet controlled public deliberation.

Contrary to its macro-authoritarian structure, grass-roots democracy is still implemented in Vietnam, particularly after the Thai Binh unrest in 1998 where local officials were accused of abusing power to stifle citizens' complaints (Nguyen 2016). At the ward/commune level, citizens are grouped together and frequently discussed the commune's affairs. The autocrats' logic is to create a limited feedback mechanism as a "safety valve" of public pressures and information gathering for their policy-making process, while keeping a close control of the population's activities. Such tools, however, were monopolized by the state and when deliberation did not work, coercion would take control. This combination of command-based power and state-led deliberative influence has helped strengthen the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP)'s authoritarian rule despite its strong Western linkage and a rising middle class.

However, this strategy of authoritarian resilience has been much more difficult since the early 2010s, as the majority of the Vietnamese population went online, which created a digital public sphere where the state could not exert full control. The state's monopolized narrative has been challenged by the rise and spread of different "counter-publics" - alternative discursive arenas formed in opposition to the mainstream propaganda. While the majority of the discourses in these

counter-publics were confined within their own bubbles, some emerged in the common digital public sphere and transformed into collective actions that directly or indirectly challenged the agenda setting power of the one-party state. Examples included the anti-China protests in 2018, the environmental movements in 2015-2017, and the anti-death sentence movement in 2022-23.

Facing the new threats, the Vietnamese one-party state has been trying to tame the digital public sphere. It creates an atmosphere of fear by selectively punish dissenters, diluting and hijacking unwanted public discourses using a formidable troll army, and blocking critical contents by geo-censoring or putting pressure on social media providers. Additionally, the state has immersed itself into the digital public sphere by setting the agenda of public discourse, encouraging deliberation on topics it can have full control, and aggressively carrying performative policy actions to convince the populace of their benevolence. In so doing, it encourages the public to be passive spectators of anti-state discourses and an active audience of pro-state narratives.

Similar to China, the rise of authoritarian deliberation 2.0 in Vietnam cannot be viewed as a total breakaway from its past. It is an attempt by the communist party to strike a balance between preserving authority and citizen empowerment (He 2014). Yet, Vietnam faces arguably greater challenges than China in managing, moderating, and sanctioning digital platforms. Despite extensive government efforts to control social media, notably through the Cybersecurity Law of 2018, major platforms are foreign-owned and lack a physical presence in Vietnam, complicating state oversight. Moreover, Western platforms like Facebook and YouTube face pressure from Western governments and publics to uphold free speech, often resisting Vietnamese government requests.

## What's on the menu? Vietnam's tool of controlling online deliberation

In the first wave of social media in the late 2000s and early 2010s, the Vietnamese state struggled to tame and control public deliberation online. It resorted to the last resorts: unofficially banning Facebook and blogging platforms such as Blogspot and WordPress to alleviate the concerns over collective action, and severely punish anyone deemed dangerous to the state online. However, given the country's middle-power status and hugely dependent on Western democracies for export, it had to open the gate for Western social media platforms after complaints from the European Union and the United States (Nguyen 2022). This, nevertheless, did not open the genie of democratization for Vietnam. The one-party state has since improved its capability greatly, and waited patiently for the opportunity to strike back.

This opportunity arose in 2016, amid favorable domestic and international conditions. Domestically, the conservative faction triumphed at the 12th Party Congress, with communist stalwart Nguyen Phu Trong re-elected as the General Secretary of the VCP. Internationally, the intensifying rivalry between China and the U.S., especially with Donald Trump's election as President, elevated Vietnam's strategic importance to both the West and China, affording it greater freedom to implement more coercive domestic policies.

In 2016 and 2018, respectively, the VCP issued two resolutions, Resolution 04/2016 and Resolution 35/2018. The first resolution identified "abusing media and social media to talk

negatively about the Party and the regime" and "abusing democracy and human rights to divide the Party and the nation" as among the subversive actions that needed to be aggressively combated (Vietnamese Communist Party 2016). Resolution 35 on protecting the ideological foundation of the party directs all party members to "innovate content, methods, improve quality and effectiveness of propaganda" on Marxism and Leninism, with particular focus on the young generation, in a "proactive and attractive way" (Vietnamese Communist Party 2018). These two resolutions set the framework for the party-state apparatus to craft the new methods to control the public sphere.

First, the regime continues to selectively punish those who considered as the "leaders" or the most "vocal" against the state on the cybersphere. This is not new, but the new mean is the weaponisation of legal means, particularly tax evasion regulations. This not only brings the activists to the prison, but also delegitimize their discourse by showing that their arrests have nothing to do with their political activism. The punishment also extends to other "innovative" tools, such banning from leaving the country using obscure regulations, and forcing internet companies to deny services to the suspected activists. Apparently, the "fear" tactic cannot be applied very broadly, as only a few hundreds have been punished in the past decade, a tiny number given Vietnams' 70-plus million netizens. Although applied to a relatively small number, the "strike one to warn a hundred" strategy effectively deterred broader public engagement in online deliberation. In so doing, the state transforms the public into mere spectator of events, instead of being invested in understanding and making it better.

*Figure 1: Characteristics of a good deliberation practice. Source: Rosenberg (2007).*

Second, to enhance the state control over the vast cybersphere, the state employs a wide range of bottom-up approach. Committee 35, in response to Resolution 35, is established in every state agency from the departmental level to above, which is tasked for "combating and refuting incorrect and hostile viewpoints" online at their own social media circle. With every departmental agency required to form such a committee and appoint 5-10 cadres for the task, the regime effectively deployed hundreds of thousands of part-time monitors across the internet. Additionally, specialized agencies like Force 47, with at least 10,000 personnel as of 2017, were established to fight ideological battles online, creating a pervasive network of control. These forces, paid and unpaid, create a horizontal approach to help the party better control the cybersphere.

Third beyond targeting individuals, the state also created fan pages to propagate official viewpoints and counter dissents. One VCP theorist from the Academy of Public Security comments on the success of this new approach,

> "We have directly built and developed fan pages with the purpose of guiding public opinion, combating and refuting incorrect and hostile narratives about the work of prevention and combat against corruption on social media; use social media account nicknames to participate in forums, access the pages of subjects to write counter-attack articles in the form of comments. Through these activities, we have carried out many programs, columns, and articles to counterattack the propaganda narratives, distorting

incorrect and hostile viewpoints of the subjects. Thereby, it strengthens the people's trust in the government, always listening and understanding the thoughts and wishes of the people."

(Duong Dinh Tuan 2023)

Additionally, the regime also promotes and protects "red" fan pages built by regime sympathizers, who are not officially affiliated with the state but always echo the state's view. These channels are willing to attack any view they deemed as hostile to the state. I call this tactic "infiltration" as the party. This tactic is very useful because it is low cost, easy to apply, and very effective in sowing doubts to public deliberation.

The state propaganda has also been effective in sending sophisticated pro-state messages while satisfying Vietnamese netizens' interest in real-life stories and problems by creating "ideotainment" – propaganda which aims to send nationalistically inclined messages of persuasion" (Lagerkvist 2010: 169).

The case of Vietnam shows that while autocracies, particularly high-performing ones, continue to allow deliberation as a tool to gather public opinion and maintain their resilience, this form of deliberation remains limited. The reason is that autocrats' utmost goal is regime survival, as such they tend to ignore deliberative values of equality and inclusion while reasoning, and critical reflection and debate over policy is circumvented through ideographical or political charged images. In so doing, autocrats do not reason in good faith. Of nine criteria for good deliberation farmed by Rosenberg (2007) (Figure 1), perhaps authoritarian deliberation 2.0 in Vietnam only full meets the "Publicity" criteria. It is not that the state doesn't allow deliberation, but it only allows a type of deliberation which exacerbates its voice. In fact, the state employs anti-deliberative in the way that it treats citizens as more passive instruments in service of government policy (Hinck, Hawthorne, and Hawthorne 2018).

**From 1984 to a brave new world?**

In 2000, then U.S. President Bill Clinton, when describing the challenges authoritarian regimes like China might face with in the internet era, linked its attempt to control the internet as "nailing the jello to the wall". Three decades later, after unprecedented internet expansion and the remarkable adaptability of authoritarians worldwide—not just China—it's clear that the situation is more complex than Clinton anticipated. Most autocratic regimes have weathered the storm of internet 1.0 in the early 2000s (with Ukraine's Orange Revolution as a notable example), internet 2.0 in the early 2010s (the Arab Spring), and are navigating the new era of internet 3.0, marked by the boom in artificial intelligence, quite effectively.

However, the strategies high-performing autocracies employ to counter the internet's threats have evolved. Where rulers previously leaned on coercion to stifle internet activism, in the era of internet 3.0—with the majority of citizens online—the approach has shifted from sticks to more carrots. Deliberation is employed as one of these carrots. Yet, in authoritarian contexts, this use of deliberation stands in stark contrast to the ideals of deliberative democracy. It is often performative rather than sincere, characterized by deliberation without participation—a key aspect of

deliberative democracy (Curato et al. 2017). Authoritarian deliberation, then, tends to be a top-down effort that appeals to force over reason, aims for conformity over plurality, and serves state interests over accountability.

With new communicative technologies, authoritarian states like Vietnam have scaled back on coercion to enforce conformity in the cybersphere. Instead, they employ tactics designed to indoctrinate the populace, stir up nationalism, and thus secure conformity by will rather than force. In this light, performative deliberation parallels the soma drug from Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World."

Nonetheless, the repressed public retains the capacity to push back. The same technological advancements that aid the state also empower citizens to form alternative counter-publics, challenging the state's official narrative. These counter-publics range from private invitation-only groups to public forums led by administrators beyond the reach of state coercion, inadvertently fostering a space for pro-state groups to offer counterarguments. This dynamic, somewhat paradoxically, encourages the public use of reason within Vietnam's tightly controlled public sphere. It highlights the peculiar coexistence of an open internet within a closed society.

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