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Revisiting the Role of Social Media in the Dong Tam Land Dispute

*Mai Thanh Truong**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In April 2017, following the first protest by Dong Tam villagers against local authorities' decision to reclaim their land, the Hanoi government gave unprecedented concessions.
- Observers attributed this development to the growing role of social media in empowering ordinary citizens in Vietnam.
- The 9 January 2020 clash in Dong Tam which left three policemen and one villager dead raised questions about the earlier optimism.
- This long-standing land dispute in Vietnam shows that social media enhances the central government's ability to monitor local grievances and allows it to respond to land disputes with strategic flexibility.

** Guest writer Mai Thanh Truong is a doctoral candidate at the University of Arizona.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media has dramatically transformed the political landscape in Vietnam. Scholars argue that it empowers ordinary Vietnamese by providing an avenue for political participation, public discussion and social activism.¹ However, because social media is introduced and controlled by governmental actors, there is reason to believe that the government can use this technology in its own favour. This article analyses how social media supports the Vietnamese government in dealing with the Dong Tam land dispute, calling for a more circumspect perspective on the impact of social media on politics in contemporary Vietnam.

On 9 January 2020, a clash between protesters and the police over a longstanding land dispute in Dong Tam commune in suburban Hanoi resulted in the death of three police officers and Le Dinh Kinh, the lead protester.² This violence is in stark contrast to how the first clash between Dong Tam villagers and the police ended in 2017. In April 2017, when Dong Tam villagers first protested against the government's decision to recover their land for a commercial project, they were able to secure significant concessions from the Hanoi government.³ On 22 April 2017, seven days after the clash, the Chairman of Hanoi People's Committee, Nguyen Duc Chung, signed an agreement with protesters that made three important promises. First, Chung would not file criminal charges against the villagers. Second, he would investigate the land management issue in Dong Tam. Finally, he would investigate the police's treatment of protest leader Le Dinh Kinh.

Many Vietnamese netizens and observers were optimistic that this unprecedented agreement signalled the positive role that social media could play in empowering and advancing villagers' interests. For example, John Gillespie, a professor at Australia's Monash University, contended that social media played a critical role in mobilising public support for Dong Tam protests in 2017.⁴ Similarly, Toan Le, a lecturer at the same university, praised social media for shaping public opinion and undermining anti-protester messages perpetuated by state media.⁵ Others believed that the government was forced to pursue peaceful solutions because of strong pressure from the cyber world.⁶ Implicit in these arguments is that social media empowers Vietnamese people while weakening the central government's control of society.

Over the past two years, however, that optimism has gradually faded as the government went back on its word and opted to repress the villagers. The government's determination to force Dong Tam villagers out of the disputed land in early January 2020 has made many realise that social media pressures have been insufficient to direct the government away from repressive strategies.

This article revisits the role of social media and the internet in the Dong Tam land dispute, and analyses how the government of Vietnam utilises social media to its advantage. It argues

that social media has, counterintuitively, strengthened the capacity of the Vietnamese government to monitor local grievances and to respond to land disputes with strategic flexibility. First, thanks to social media, national leaders are better informed of grievances over land issues at the local level, instead of being reliant on inadequate reports from local officials. Second, social media undeniably helped Dong Tam villagers overcome the challenge of horizontal coordination by spreading news of local authorities' abuse of power in 2017, and the strong but spontaneous pressure encouraged the central government to strategically take peaceful measures to quickly defuse tensions. Finally, the central government's determination to evict Dong Tam villagers from the disputed land in early January 2020 shows its tremendous capacity to mobilise all available means at its disposal, including online platforms, social media and coercive means, to pursue its goals.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MEANS TO MONITOR LAND MANAGEMENT

With restricted freedom of the press, the central government depends largely on the local government's reporting system to acquire information about local affairs. However, one of the flaws in this system is that local authorities often misreport or provide false information, and this can keep the central government in the dark about important local grievances. Indeed, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has strongly emphasised the importance of enhancing the reporting system and establishing alternative monitoring means to strengthen its supervision over local governments.⁷ The CPV even considered the option of "establishing the central government's representative organisations at the local level" in order to be better informed of local affairs.⁸ The inefficiency of the reporting system makes it extremely challenging for the CPV to manage and monitor a variety of local issues, especially in areas where central authorities are not embedded.

With such vague oversight, the central government may be unable to monitor how agricultural land is distributed, taxed, and recovered. Indeed, there is strong evidence that the lack of direct monitoring from the central incentivised local authorities to distort the implementation of land policies in ways that benefit themselves. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is the large-scale protest that mobilised over 40,000 villagers throughout Thai Binh province in 1997. What united Thai Binh villagers was their unhappiness with the local authorities' abuse of power, which included illegal land grabs and excessive taxation that went against the central government's policies.⁹ The central government often became aware of land mismanagement only after disputes broke out. Such disputes were most visible when those directly affected made their grievances public through mass protests. Research in rural China suggests that protests serve as a signal to the central government about local problems.¹⁰ However, in the pre-internet age, protests could only fulfil their signalling function when they became (very) large.¹¹ With videos and pictures about protests now circulated widely on social media, new technology keeps the central government informed of rural issues immediately after the start of public

mobilisation, enabling it to intervene in the protests in a timely fashion to prevent them from developing into large-scale movements.¹²

With the help of social media, the Dong Tam villagers' first protest in 2017 brought their land dispute into prominence by drawing the central government's attention to how local authorities had mismanaged the dispute. Villagers who circulated videos and images about the protest via social media informed the CPV of the land dispute in real time. By appointing the chairman of Hanoi to negotiate with villagers, the CPV officially intervened in the land protest within just one week, much faster than would have been the case before the internet age.¹³ In 1997, for example, the party officially intervened in the Thai Binh unrest only after nearly seven months.¹⁴

A 2017 investigation into the land dispute conducted by the Hanoi Inspectorate and later confirmed by the Government Inspectorate suggests that although the disputed land officially belonged to the state, local authorities at the communal level allowed unlawful use of the land and illegally granted land-use certificates to households.¹⁵ Anecdotal evidence suggests that local authorities were bribed to provide these certificates to villagers. With the land use rights, villagers were led to believe that the land belonged to them, leading to resistance when the government decided to recover the land for Viettel, a military-run conglomerate. Such public resistance provided the party with first-hand information about the land issues at Dong Tam. Social media, closely monitored by the central government, enabled the authorities to quickly intervene to defuse the situation, thereby weakening the protesters' ability to sustain pressure on the government.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND “SHALLOW PROMISES”

Social media undeniably played a significant role in connecting Dong Tam villagers with outsiders, especially political activists, in 2017. Videos and images circulated through social media kept not only the central government but also the general public as well as activists of the protest informed in real time. In the 2017 dispute, many activists even travelled to Dong Tam to report live on the protest, which helped shape the protesters' online narrative.¹⁶ However, while villagers attempted to mobilise public support by arguing that the land dispute was rooted in local authorities' corruption and abuse of power, activists tended to portray the CPV's policies as the root cause of the protest. During the 2017 protest, villagers hung a red banner at the village gate that said: “We completely believe in the Communist Party's policies and guidance.” Certainly, whether this statement truly reflects villagers' belief is debatable. However, by doing so, villagers tried to minimize tensions with the central government. On the other hand, activists' narratives directly attacked the party's legitimacy by attributing the root cause of the protests to the weaknesses of current land laws and the lack of a strong civil society.¹⁷

These anti-government messages had unintended consequences. First, they triggered an immediate intervention from the central government to undermine protesters' ability to sustain pressure on the government. The CPV mobilised state media to counteract the anti-regime messages circulated by dissidents almost immediately after the protest broke out¹⁸. Because state media still serves as a major news source for most Vietnamese,¹⁹ the CPV might have been successful in undermining anti-regime messages by activists. Second, because the online anti-government narrative negatively affected the party's legitimacy, central authorities were under pressure to quickly de-escalate the dispute. While social media support of the dispute was intense, it was spontaneous and ad hoc, which likely led to the central government's strategy to peacefully negotiate with the villagers. Seven days after the protest in April 2017, the chairman of Hanoi was directed to hold dialogues with Dong Tam villagers, resulting in an agreement in which Hanoi promised not to file criminal charges against protesters. This move helped defuse the explosive situation by breaking up the protest and calming down online debate over the issue.²⁰

At the same time, the CPV was able to go back on its promises and investigate the land dispute without facing further collective threats from villagers. On 13 June 2017, less than two months after the protest, the Hanoi government filed criminal charges against the people of Dong Tam who took police officers hostage during the incident.²¹ On 13 October 2017, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc called on villagers who participated in the protest to turn themselves in.²² While the CPV clearly broke its promises, no threats of collective action from villagers were visible. Research shows that grievances expressed on social media motivated quick intervention from the government, thereby undermining protesters' organisational and leadership capacity, which is essential in sustaining long-term pressure on the government.²³ In turn, the lack of collective action from villagers directed public attention away from the issue, creating favourable conditions for the central government to resolve the land dispute at its discretion. Over the past two years, the central government dominantly controlled the narrative of the dispute. While anti-government narratives supporting villagers did not disappear, they were weak and confined to urban populations. Most articles critical of the central government came from the international media, which is inaccessible to most Vietnamese citizens. Without collective action from villagers, activists were unable to promote their anti-government messages in ways that could draw as much public attention as had been the case.

TIGHT CONTROL ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The central government's use of social media to its advantage is clearly illustrated in the deadly clash in early January 2020, after the central government started to construct a wall around the area reserved for the Mieu Mon military airport, including the disputed land.²⁴ Determined to force villagers out of the area, the central government emphasised that the land, which was illegally granted to villagers by local authorities, must be returned to the

state. Perhaps, by repressing villagers, the government also wished to signal its willingness to punish both the protesters and local authorities involved in land mismanagement, thus asserting its power over local governments. The decision did not garner much attention from the public until the clash between villagers and police occurred.

Perhaps from the central government's perspective, social media was no longer needed as a monitoring tool in early 2020, which likely led to their strategy to shut down internet access in Dong Tam to implement the construction work. Consequently, unlike the first protest in 2017, almost no videos and pictures on the clash could be circulated by the villagers on social media.²⁵ This helped the government dominate the narrative on the event in both social and state media.

On 9 January 2020, state media reported that the protesters led by Le Dinh Kinh used grenades, firebombs, and spears to kill three policemen who were on duty during the construction of the fence.²⁶ State media consistently portrayed villagers who participated in the attack as "extremists" and "terrorists" backed by foreign anti-government forces.²⁷ On 13 January 2020, the government filed criminal charges against villagers involved.²⁸ In addition to shutting down the internet, the government deployed police forces to the commune to stop outsiders from reporting on the event.²⁹ Consequently, anti-government narratives were suppressed. While non-state and international media suggested that it was the government that provoked violence by deploying 3,000 security officers to arrest villagers who resisted the construction of the fence,³⁰ the overwhelming reach of official narratives, the government's strong arm tactics and limited direct evidence from villagers themselves undermined activists' side of the story. Indeed, until now, many questions remain unresolved as to what led to the death of the three police officers and the protest leader, and how many people were involved in the clash.³¹ Unlike the protest in 2017, there is a deep polarisation among Vietnamese internet users regarding this clash.³²

CONCLUSION

The Dong Tam protests exemplify how the Vietnamese government, in addition to the use of other coercive measures, utilised social media to its advantage to resolve land disputes. First, the 2017 protest, publicized by social media, enhanced central government's awareness of land mismanagement issues at Dong Tam. Second, while social media helped connect Dong Tam villagers with external allies, especially political activists, such a connection also led the central government to make quick but "shallow promises" in an effort to defuse the situation and weaken the villagers' ability to mount sustained pressure on the government. Third, the central government has been skillful in putting across its own narrative via social media to shift public opinion about the dispute.

Finally, the conventional argument that social media can empower the weak and powerless has to be tempered following the case of the Dong Tam dispute where the CPV and central government remain very much in control.

¹ Thiem Bui. (2016). The Influence of Social Media in Vietnam's Elite Politics. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35(2), 89-111; Andrew Wells-Dang. (2014), The Political Influence of Civil Society in Vietnam, in Jonathan London (ed.), *Politics in Contemporary Vietnam*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 162–183.

² The land dispute in Dong Tam dates back to 1980 when then Prime Minister Pham Van Dong issued Decision No 113/TTg to allocate 208 hectares of land in Dong Tam commune, including 47.4 hectares of agricultural land, for the construction of the Mieu Mon army airport. However, because the project was later cancelled, management of the agricultural land was returned to the Dong Tam Commune People's Committee. In 2015, the Ministry of National Defence decided to grant 50.03 hectares of reserved land for the Mieu Mon airport project, including the 47.4 hectares of disputed agricultural land, to Viettel Group – a military-run telecommunication corporation. In April 2017, Dong Tam villagers took police and local authorities hostage to protest against what they regarded as the expropriation of agricultural land. In early January 2020, the government decided to construct a wall around the land which was reserved for the Mieu Mon airport project, leading to a deadly clash between villagers and police.

³ Zing.vn, “3 cam kết của ông Nguyễn Đức Chung với người dân Đồng Tâm”, 22 April 2017. (<https://news.zing.vn/3-cam-ket-cua-ong-nguyen-duc-chung-voi-nguoi-dan-dong-tam-post740007.html>)

⁴ Rina Chandran, “Deadly Land Dispute in Vietnam Sparks Crackdown on ‘Critical’ Social Media”, Reuters, 16 January 2020 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-landrights-socialmedia/deadly-land-dispute-in-vietnam-sparks-crackdown-on-critical-social-media-idUSKBN1ZF0YR>).

⁵ Toan Le, “Lessons Learned From Vietnam’s Dong Tam Standoff”, *The Diplomat*, 24 April 2017 (<https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/lessons-learned-from-vietnams-dong-tam-standoff/>).

⁶ Mike Ives, “Villagers Hold Officials Hostage in Vietnam Land Dispute”, *The New York Times*, 21 April 2017 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/21/world/asia/vietnam-hostages-protest-land-dispute-eviction.html>).

⁷ Vu Thu, “Kiểm soát của Chính quyền Trung ương đối với Chính quyền Địa phương ở nước ta hiện nay”, 10 March 2018 (http://tcnn.vn/news/detail/41218/Kiem_soat_cua_chinh_quyen_Trung_uong_doi_voi_chinh_quyen_dia_phuong_o_nuoc_ta_hien_nayall.html).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hai Hong Nguyen. (2017). Political dynamics of grassroots democracy in Vietnam. Springer.

¹⁰ Peter Lorentzen. "Designing Contentious Politics in Post-1989 China." *Modern China* 43, no. 5 (2017): 459-493.

¹¹ Research suggests that rural protests were more likely to escalate into large-scaled social movements in the pre-Internet age because the local government attempted to hide information about protests in early phases.

¹² Paul Schuler and Mai Truong. (2019). Connected Countryside: The Inhibiting Effect of Social Media on Rural Social Movements. *Comparative Politics*.

¹³ “Ông Nguyễn Đức Chung Đối thoại với Người dân Thôn Hoàn”, *thanhnien.vn*, 22 April 2017 (<https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/ong-nguyen-duc-chung-doi-thoi-voi-nguoi-dan-thon-hoanh-828378.html>).

- ¹⁴ Paul Schuler and Mai Truong. (2019). Connected Countryside: The Inhibiting Effect of Social Media on Rural Social Movements. *Comparative Politics*.
- ¹⁵ Hoang Dan, “Thanh tra Hà Nội: Không có “Đất nông nghiệp Xứ Đồng Sinh” như Kiến nghị của Người dân Đồng Tâm, 2017 (<http://ttvn.vn/doi-song/thanh-tra-ha-noi-khong-co-dat-nong-nghiep-xu-dong-senh-nhu-kien-nghi-cua-nguoi-dan-dong-tam-8201777101853105.htm>); “Trial Held on Violations of Land Management Law in Dong Tam Commune”, *Vietnamplus.vn*, 08 August 2017 (<https://en.vietnamplus.vn/trial-held-on-violations-of-land-management-law-in-dong-tam-commune/116004.vnp>); Nguyen Thang-Van Canh, “Nhìn lại Vụ việc ở Đồng Tâm: Bài 3- Bài học Đất giá từ sự Buông lỏng Quản lý về Đất đai”, 14 January 2020 (<https://bnews.vn/nhin-lai-vu-viec-o-dong-tam-bai-3-bai-hoc-dat-gia-tu-su-buong-long-quan-ly-ve-dat-dai/145063.html>).
- ¹⁶ Toan Le, “Lessons Learned From Vietnam’s Dong Tam Standoff”, *The Diplomat*, 24 April 2017 (<https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/lessons-learned-from-vietnams-dong-tam-standoff/>).
- ¹⁷ BBC News, “Đồng Tâm ‘Cần Trung gian của Xã hội Dân sự’”, 22 April 2017 (<https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam-39673223>); BBC News, “Chính sách Đất đai và Câu chuyện Đồng Tâm”, 21 April 2017 (<https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam-39671333>); BBC News, “Vụ Đồng Tâm Thu hút Dư luận trong Nước”, 18 April 2017 (<https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam-39623226>).
- ¹⁸ For example, on 18 April 2017, through state media, the party warned people not to believe comments on social media by lawyers, experts and pro-democratic activists which attributed the Dong Tam land dispute to the land law and the central government’s “predatory” nature. (<https://hanoimoi.com.vn/Tin-tuc/Xa-hoi/866972/lat-mat-nhung-luan-dieu-sai-trai-loi-dung-su-viec-xay-ra-o-xa-dong-tam-huyen-my-duc>).
- ¹⁹ Focus group discussions with Northerners and Southerners suggest that even students largely depend on state media for their news.
- ²⁰ Vietnamnet, “Chủ tịch Nguyễn Đức Chung về Đồng Tâm đối thoại với bà con”, 22 April 2017 (<https://vietnamnet.vn/vn/thoi-su/chu-tich-nguyen-duc-chung-ve-dong-tam-doi-thoi-voi-ba-con-368005.html>).
- ²¹ Ba Chiem and Thang Quang, “Khởi tố vụ án bắt giữ 38 cán bộ ở Đồng Tâm”, *news.zing.vn*, 13 June 2017 (<https://news.zing.vn/khoi-to-vu-an-bat-giu-38-can-bo-o-dong-tam-post754580.html>).
- ²² Diem Luong, “Hanoi Police Urge Protesters Implicated in Dramatic Land Dispute to Turn Themselves in”, *vnexpress.vn*, 14 October 2017 (<https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/hanoi-police-urge-protesters-implicated-in-dramatic-land-dispute-to-turn-themselves-in-3655562.html>).
- ²³ Paul Schuler and Mai Truong. (2019). Connected Countryside: The Inhibiting Effect of Social Media on Rural Social Movements. *Comparative Politics*.
- ²⁴ “Khởi công xây tường rào bảo vệ sân bay Miếu Môn”, *Hà Nội Mới*, 2020 (<http://www.hanoimoi.com.vn/ban-in/Xa-hoi/954354/khoi-cong-xay-tuong-rao-bao-ve-san-bay-mieu-mon>).
- ²⁵ South China Morning Post, “At Vietnam’s ‘Dong Tam Massacre’, Activists Claim Government Attacked its Own Citizens”, 15 January 2020. (<https://today.line.me/id/pc/article/At+Vietnam+s+Dong+Tam+Massacre+activists+claim+government+attacked+its+own+citizens-wwLwkr>)
- ²⁶ VnExpress, “Ba cảnh sát hi sinh trong vụ đụng độ ở Đồng Tâm”, 09 January 2020 (<https://vnexpress.net/thoi-su/ba-canh-sat-hy-sinh-trong-vu-dung-do-o-dong-tam-4039593.html>).
- ²⁷ Minh An, “Hành vi chống người thi hành công vụ ở Đồng Tâm là rất nghiêm trọng”, *zing.vn*, 11 January 2020 (<https://news.zing.vn/hanh-vi-chong-nguoi-thi-hanh-cong-vu-o-dong-tam-la-rat-nghiem-trong-post1034642.html>)
- ²⁸ Tuổi Trẻ Online, “Khởi tố 22 bị can trong vụ án làm 3 chiến sĩ công an hi sinh tại xã Đồng Tâm”, 13 January 2020 (<https://tuoitre.vn/khoi-to-22-bi-can-trong-vu-an-lam-3-chien-si-cong-an-hi-sinh-tai-xa-dong-tam-20200113190457766.htm>).

²⁹ Duy Hoang, “Vietnam’s Deadly Land Clash Leaves Questions Unanswered”, The Diplomat, 15 January 2020 (<https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/vietnams-deadly-land-clash-leaves-questions-unanswered/>).

³⁰ BBC News, “Dong Tam Village: Anger in Vietnam over Deadly ‘Land Grab’ Raid”, 16 January 2020 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51105808>).

³¹ Nguyen Tien Trung, “Đồng Tâm: Nhà nước hãy dừng dùng bạo lực với dân trước đã”, BBC News, 24 January 2020 (<https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/forum-51231943>).

³² Radio Free Asia, “Kêu gọi noi gương 3 công an chết ở Đồng Tâm là mị dân”, 16 January 2020 (https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in_depth/following-the-example-of-three-killed-officers-in-dong-tam-is-disgrace-armed-forces-01162020134412.html).

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