



A row of charred vehicles is seen at a fire and police station, Binh Thuan province, Vietnam, June 12, 2018 (AP photo).

Do Anti-Chinese Protests Pose a Threat to Vietnam's Authoritarian Rulers?

Elliot Waldman | Monday, Sept. 10, 2018

Will Nguyen doesn't remember much of what happened immediately after he was beaten by police officers at a mass demonstration in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's largest metropolis.

A fellow protester tipped him off that he was about to be arrested, but before he could escape into the crowd, half a dozen plainclothes officers descended on him, beating him with fists and clubs. What happened next is fuzzy. Video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0C5B7kTCtE>) subsequently posted online shows him being dragged to a police truck, where he had a bag placed over his head before being taken to jail, but Nguyen doesn't remember that. "When I was put on the truck, apparently I stood up with a bloody head and continued waving the protestors on," he says in an interview from Singapore, where he recently finished a master's degree at the National University of Singapore. "I don't have any memory of that, either."

Nguyen, a Vietnamese-American native of Houston, Texas, was planning a vacation in Vietnam when he heard about the June 10 rally and decided to attend. At first, he assumed the role of an observer, documenting the demonstration and posting photographs and video to his Twitter account (https://twitter.com/will_nguyen_?lang=en). Gradually, however, he became more actively involved with the

protesters, helping the throngs of people climb over barriers and push through police lines. That, he suspects, is what led authorities to single him out for arrest.

Protesters had gathered that day to express dismay at two recent government actions: a new cybersecurity law (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-socialmedia/vietnam-lawmakers-approve-cyber-law-clamping-down-on-tech-firms-dissent-idUSKBN1J80AE>) that restricts online communication and a proposed measure to establish three new special economic zones in order to attract foreign investment. That proposal—which would have offered generous regulatory and tax incentives to investors, as well as land leases of up to 99 years—was widely seen as a giveaway to Chinese business interests, provoking widespread anger in a country where anti-Chinese sentiment (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/25055/what-s-behind-vietnam-s-anti-china-protests>) is prevalent.

The protests quickly spread to other parts of the country and grew violent. In coastal Binh Thuan province, throngs of protesters fought back (<https://www.facebook.com/beerparty.vn/videos/945459185633179/>) against police lines, threw Molotov cocktails, burned vehicles, and eventually even stormed and occupied (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-44436019>) a local government building. It is no coincidence that Binh Thuan receives the country's largest share of Chinese foreign direct investment (<http://www.vietnam-briefing.com/news/vietnam-and-china-growing-economic-ties-despite-strains.html/>).

Vietnamese resentment of China can be traced back over two millennia, when the Han Dynasty conquered and subjugated what is now northern Vietnam. Major thoroughfares in Vietnamese cities still bear the name of two sisters who led a popular revolt against Chinese rule in the year 40 A.D. More recently, many Vietnamese remember a bloody border war the country fought with China in 1979. But for younger generations, China's aggressive tactics (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/23058/vietnam-looks-for-help-in-standing-up-to-beijing-in-the-south-china-sea>) in the South China Sea, where both countries claim sovereignty over the Spratly and Paracel island chains, is arguably the most contentious issue.

While Chinese investment in Vietnam has risen sharply in recent years, it still lags behind other regional powers such as Japan, South Korea and Singapore. However, a distinguishing feature of Chinese capital is that it tends to flow to projects that rely heavily (<https://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/business/152159/chinese-fdi-in-vietnam--it-is-time-to-tighten--experts-say.html>) on cheap labor and exploitation of natural resources. It is thus more likely to breed local resentment and pollute the environment. In 2016, a Taiwanese steel mill in northern Vietnam, built by Chinese contractors, caused an environmental catastrophe (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/24607/can-citizen-science-save-vietnam-s-environment-from-unchecked-economic-growth>) when it flushed toxic chemicals into the ocean, devastating fisheries along a 120-mile swath of Vietnam's coastline.

Given this backdrop, it was no surprise that even the perception of a bad deal with China sparked one of the largest public demonstrations in the nation's history in June. Explaining his decision to join the protest despite the danger of arrest, Nguyen says it was important to publicly oppose the government's repressive tactics, particularly the new cybersecurity law. Here, too, China's influence can be felt: As Reporters Without Borders noted (<https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-calls-repeal-vietnams-new-cybersecurity-law>) following the law's approval by the National Assembly, it "is largely a copy-and-paste version of the cybersecurity law that took effect in China" last year.

Anti-China protests in Vietnam are becoming difficult to distinguish from anti-government protests.

The law regarding special economic zones and the potential concessions to China were also a source of concern for Nguyen. "I think the issue of sovereignty for Vietnamese, especially in the face of a rising China, is worth defending," he says. "Every Vietnamese, whether you're born overseas or in the country, is taught from a very young age to look out for the country of your ancestors, to look out for the Vietnamese people. And this really did seem like a genuine threat to Vietnamese sovereignty."

After his arrest, Nguyen's case was expedited through Vietnam's torpid justice system, aided by high-profile media attention, a publicity campaign led by friends and family, and pressure (<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/us-lawmakers-call-for-release-of-american-citizen-detained-in-vietnam-06152018165948.html>) from all levels of the U.S. government. On July 20, he was convicted of disturbing public order, a crime that carries a prison sentence of up to seven years in prison, but the prosecutor recommended he be immediately deported instead. He flew out of the country that night, and is now in Singapore.

Protests motivated by resentment toward China pose a unique challenge for Vietnam's authoritarian rulers, in part because they threaten flows of Chinese investment, an important driver of economic growth. But more significantly, as Vietnam seeks closer economic ties with China, anti-China protests become difficult to distinguish from anti-government protests. It is only natural that reformers would seek to capitalize on such powerful and widespread anger toward the Communist Party. As Da Thanh Do Son wrote in an insightful essay (<http://chuangcn.org/2018/06/vn-sez-sinophobia/>) following the June 10 protests, "Vietnamese anti-China nationalism always borders on being anti-government and is thoroughly beset by anti-Communist, pro-democracy activists."

"The anti-China protests carry a double message for many protesters," says Murray Hiebert, senior

associate in the Southeast Asia program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in an email. “Yes, they are opposed to China gaining a dominant role in the country’s economy, but the subtle subtext is a question about whether the ruling party is doing enough to protect the country’s sovereignty.” As for the proposal on special economic zones that sparked the protests, consideration has now been postponed (<https://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/government/207456/na-to-postpone-consideration-of-special-economic-unit-bill.html>) again until next spring.

Given the potency of anti-Chinese nationalism as a political force in Vietnam, can such sentiment play a role in fostering a cohesive and viable challenge to the Vietnamese authorities? For now, that remains doubtful; if events of this summer have clarified anything, it is that the Communist Party of Vietnam will stop at nothing to maintain its ironclad grip on power. Even if pro-reform activists could somehow harness anti-Chinese sentiment toward broader political aims, a pro-democracy, pro-human rights message would likely be diluted by virulent nationalism and Sinophobia.

Nonetheless, there are flickers of optimism for Vietnam’s future. “With each generation, I think the Communist Party’s grip is weakening considerably,” says Nguyen. Ironically, he saw further signs of hope in jailhouse conversations he had with wardens and police investigators during his weeks behind bars. “Outside of their roles, they were genuinely good people, and they shared with me things about the system that they disagreed with, things that they don’t believe in anymore about the Communist Party,” he says. In the end, like so many other oppressive governments that have either reformed themselves or been removed from power, it may be that the regime’s final reckoning will come from within.

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