

## Down and alone

Will Nguyen



Will Nguyen taken away by *cong an* in Ho Chi Minh City, 10 June 2018.  
Photo: Facebook

The old woman quietly walked over and tapped me on the shoulder that sweltering June afternoon in Ho Chi Minh City. Hair grey, eyes squinting, gums slightly agape, she held up an open can and motioned for me to drink.

What she didn't know was I had seen her in the company of *cong an*, the Vietnamese public security forces, minutes earlier. I politely declined. And my co-protester, a young man in his twenties, whispered: "Be careful. *Cong an* might try to drug you. They're known to do that."

The police had pinned me as one of the leaders of the protest. I don't blame them. As the protests headed from Hoang Van Thu Park, near Tan Son Nhat International Airport, down Nam Ky Khoi Nghia, one of the main thoroughfares leading to the city centre, I moved from documenting the events on my Twitter feed to breaking chains.

At several of the intersections along Nam Ky Khoi Nghia, *cong an* were throwing up chains of uniformed officers armed with body-length shields. I moved through the crowds and stood right up against them, a phalanx of skinny young men, three to four layers deep. They appeared nervous and scared, and were holding the line only because their superiors were directly behind them, shouting orders. They were vastly outnumbered by the protesters, who were shouting:

"Our tax money paid for these streets! We have a right to walk on them!"

“You young people should be joining us!”

“We are marching for our country!”

“Why are you opposing the people?!”

The protesters were agitated but equally scared. They were well aware of the vast and punishing security apparatus that figuratively lay behind those shields. From above, it probably looked like a dam was about to burst. I knew that, with the numbers on our side, a simple puncture would break the line, so I pushed through. And I did so at least at three intersections. It was a calculated decision.

By the time we reached the corner of Nam Ky Khoi Nghia and Ly Chinh Thang Streets, a few blocks away from Independence Palace, the police had it figured out. They parked a row of trucks across the intersection.

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I walked up to the front once more and asked the police to move their trucks. They refused. I climbed onto the bed of one of the trucks and began helping the protesters to surmount the barrier. I would clasp many hands that day, pulling young and old up and over on to the other side.

The protesters on motorbikes were still impeded, however, so I began searching for a path for them. The trucks were parked across the road, but on the footpath, police motorbikes were used to block the path of the protesters. A few of the protesters and I began lifting them out of the way, and as we did, police and protesters clashed once again.

They demanded that we not touch the bikes, but we screamed back that we weren't damaging them in any way, that we were merely moving them. As protesters on motorbikes began trickling through the open footpath, it became harder for the police to stop. Cheers went up through the crowd. A group of protesters linked arms to form a barrier between the police and the motorbikes.

Unfortunately, it would not be peaceful for very long.

“You need to merge back into the crowd as quickly as possible,” a young woman pulled me aside and tried her best to make the tip-off look casual. She frantically whispered, “They’re singling you out for arrest. I just heard them.”

I thanked her and began moving backwards towards a heavy section of the crowd, careful to keep my eyes on the police, who were metres behind the young woman.

But before I could make it, a group of plain-clothes officers descended upon me, putting me in a headlock and tearing open my backpack. Several of the protesters tried to rescue me, grabbing my arms. I tried with all my might to pull towards them. For a few precious seconds, we seemed to be winning.

Then, a shower of blows rained on me, fists and batons slamming me across my head and jaw. As I fell to the ground, my last words to them were “*Toi la nguoi yeu nuoc! Tai sao danh toi?*” [I’m a patriot! Why are you hitting me?]

I have little recollection of what happened next. In my mind, the movement from ground to truck was a smooth one. I remember lying on the bed of that truck, looking up at the sky and accepting defeat.

Videos of the beating reveal the journey was anything but smooth. I fought against and fell from my captors' grip repeatedly. They had to subdue me by putting an orange burlap sack over my head. When they placed me on the bed of the truck, I stood up, head dripping with blood, and waved to the protesters.

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Vietnamese people do not need your help," the older man acerbically retorted. I was sitting on a metal chair facing him, both of my feet shackled to a rusted metal bar. He sat behind his desk, wearing glasses, a stern but wily expression on his face. He could pass for one of my uncles, I thought to myself.

He interrogated me about my motives, my supposed sources of funding and my links with organisations. Seething with barely disguised anger, he could not bring himself to believe, or rather did not want to believe, that I acted alone, of my own free will.

He said he believed in communism — one of the few party members I have met who openly said so — and asked me if I had ever read Marx and Lenin. I said I had, and we had a short conversation about Marx's stages of development. He said that this capitalist stage Vietnam was currently in was temporary, that the country was on the path to something much greater.

My interrogators were being rotated on an hourly basis. Their questions were meant to trick me and trap me. One man, in his twenties, was probably the fourth or fifth person that night. It was well past midnight when his turn came. He closed the door, despite his colleagues' objection. His body language told me he had no intention of doing the job assigned to him. He pulled up a chair in front of me, and we proceeded to have a heart to heart.

"It's funny, in Vietnam, if you believe in something progressive, you are labelled reactionary," he began. Then he said that he sympathised with what I did, that any Vietnamese person would understand why I did it. I didn't know whether this was a trick.

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On the morning of my trial, one of my cellmates — a young Filipino who was once a chef and a barber — offered to cut my hair. We used the prison buzzer to shave the sides, leaving the top long. It was how my hair was cut before I entered prison. As forty days of hair gently fell to the prison floor that morning, it felt like a spiritual shedding.

In court, I admitted to disturbing public order. The prosecutors recommended immediate deportation. The judge read out my sentence; I remember the words "*truc xuất ngay lap tuc khoi Viet Nam*" [immediate deportation from Vietnam]. In my final statement, I told the court that I wanted nothing more than to return to Vietnam in the future to help in its development.

I was escorted out of the Ho Chi Minh City Supreme People's Courthouse, but this time I was free of handcuffs and free to walk away from my uniformed keepers. The walk down the steps with *cong an* escorting me to my motorcade, chauffeur-style, has become a meme on social media.

Inside the SUV, we all breathed a sigh of relief, *cong an* included. One put his hand on my knee, smiled and said “It’s over”. And as we reached Chi Hoa Prison, an old French-era prison located in the heart of the southern capital, I realised I would not be brought back to my cell to collect my things. Free people were not allowed back in Chi Hoa.

My belongings were sent for, including a sewing needle carved from bone and two keychain-sized fish woven from plastic thread. These were souvenirs from my cellmates, who anticipated that I was not long for their world.

Indeed, I was not long for Vietnam. By sundown, I was in the air, bound for the United States. And as I sat on the plane and watched Ho Chi Minh City slowly fade into the distance, it felt like 30 April 1975 all over again: at once, a liberation and an exile