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Profiles , Vietnam

The blogger

John Fuller

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Photograph: Linh Pham

Nguyen Chi Tuyen wears a purple plastic rain poncho as he points out the spots near his home where the secret police sit. Here, in the alley that leads to the main road, so they can stop him from leaving if they want. Here, on this wall outside his front door. And over there, when they are bored and tired of staring at his house, and slouch on their parked motorbikes and sweat in the sun.

Though this neighbourhood on the east side of Hanoi's Red River is just a fifteen-minute drive from the chaotic Old Quarter, it has a suburban feel. A neighbour maintains a vegetable garden along the small alley she shares with Nguyen, and a half-built house, separated from his by the narrow alley and a wall, boasts a large yard.

The house has sat unfinished for years. Rows of knotty logs gesture towards internal walls, and exposed wooden beams span the space where the ceiling

should be. The first-floor windows are merely holes in the wall, through which one has a perfect view of Nguyen's front door and bedroom window. During a three-month period in 2012 and 2013, a rotating cast of secret police made the house their home as they kept watch on Nguyen, who had recently begun attending protests and criticising the Vietnamese government through Facebook posts under his pen name, Anh Chi.

The police hauled in folding chairs and a table. At 4 or 5 in the morning, they rose with the sun and chatted over tea as they waited for Nguyen to leave for work or receive guests, whose presence at the home they noted. The neighbours saw them but did not ask questions. Sometimes the police listened to music on their phones, and Nguyen could hear the tinny sounds of contemporary songs drifting from poor quality speakers down into his living room. When Nguyen went to bed, he was no more than fifteen metres from the spies.

“At night they're lying up there, and even when they turn their bodies, I can [hear] the sounds,” he recalls.

On this rainy weekday afternoon in September, there are no police in the neighbourhood; Nguyen guesses that the government has concluded that twenty-four-hour surveillance is not cost effective. Still, these are tense days for the forty-three-year-old father of two and his fellow activists. The government is in the midst of a crackdown on dissent on a scale not seen in years. At least eleven dissidents — including the blogger known as Mother Mushroom, Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh — were arrested, charged or imprisoned this summer, the *Guardian* reports, and another was deported to France. Human Rights Watch called it “an all-out effort to repress criticism online in 2017”.

Nguyen, who works as a Vietnamese teacher, editor and translator, knows that he could be arrested and imprisoned at any time. His Facebook posts,

shared with more than 40,000 followers, routinely criticise the Communist Party. A recent post asked followers to help him think of anything good the ruling party could possibly do for Vietnam, because a foreign journalist had asked him and he'd had no answer. He was active in demonstrations in 2015 that ultimately halted a government plan to chop down nearly 7,000 trees in Hanoi, and in protests throughout 2016 responding to the fish kill on the central coast caused by the Taiwanese steel company Formosa.

He is also a founding member of No-U FC, a football club formed after the summer 2011 protests against Chinese aggression. (The name refers to the U-shaped demarcation line Beijing claims in the South China Sea.) At the time, Hanoi's dissidents tried to gather on Sundays at cafes, but police always arrived to break up any group larger than two. As they considered options inside a secret Facebook group, someone came up with the idea of a football team.

“When you play, you can raise [a] banner like ‘Paracels, Spratly belong to Vietnam’,” Nguyen recalls the group musing six years ago. “And we agreed, and discussed how we could form it. We established our own team, No-U FC, and now we still work and play every Sunday afternoon, and by that way we can keep the people in contact.”



Nguyen Chi Tuyen, on motorbike, being pulled over by the police in Long Bien, 16 May 2015.
Photograph: Facebook

Do the police come to your football games?

Yes, so many times we have been playing a game with them, like cat and mouse game. They follow every match, and if they find out where we play, they [put] pressure on the owner of the pitch. They print out our pictures and deliver them to every football pitch owner and they say, “That man, when they contact you, don’t let them play. If you let them play on your field, we will punish you”.

Once they deployed some policemen, both in uniform and in plain clothes, and they interfered by standing on the field. Just standing on the field. Now is a hard time for our team, so we must keep secret about the place we play. We must gather at the cafe one or two hours before the match starts so that

we have enough members to form two teams, and we rush to the place and we play and if they have no one following us, we at least play ten or fifteen minutes or even half an hour, and that's enough for us, and then we quarrel with them.

Have you ever interacted with the people following you off the football field?

Recently in a *bia hoi* [streetside beer joint] one security force said, “Hi, please sit here, I invite you for one glass of beer”. And he said, “I admire your work. I respect you.” And he introduced me to his friends. He said, “This is Nguyen Chi Tuyen, he's very famous! He's well known in Vietnam!” He said, “I admire your work and respect what you have done.” I looked directly into his eyes and I think it's true, not just mouthing the words. And I know some of them support me. Or at least they don't consider me an enemy because they know how I have sacrificed my energy, my time to work, not for my own interests, but for the whole country.

Facebook and Twitter are central to your public profile. Do you think you could do the kind of work that you do without social media?

Social media is a very important tool for us. We have only that tool to express our opinions, to exchange ideas, to connect each other ... without social media it would be a big challenge for us.

Now we have a live stream on Facebook, [which] can bring the news to everyone, not only in Vietnam but the world. This prevents [the authorities] from abusing their power. With live stream, we can keep a record [of] their crimes. So they're scared. For example, they're always afraid if one of us took pictures [of the police] watching us or beating someone and posted it on Facebook. The old generation of activists didn't have social media, so they

were killed easily without any notice or attention. But now ... Vietnam is not an isolated island any more.

In May 2015, Nguyen was driving home after dropping off his son at school. A bike carrying three men zoomed past, swerved suddenly and stopped in front of him. A second bike carrying two men followed. The five men beat Nguyen with hands, bricks and sticks until he was nearly unconscious. Eventually, morning commuters stopped to halt the attack, and the men drove off. Nguyen made it home, where his wife screamed when she saw the blood running down his face. He asked her to do three things. First, call his friends to let them know what had happened. Second, call a taxi to take him to the hospital. And third: “Take my phone and take my picture for evidence and put it on my Facebook account so that the news can spread all over Vietnam and even to the world.”

Fellow activists changed their Facebook profile pictures to the image of Nguyen, blood streaming down his face and spotting his grey-collared shirt, a bandage around his head as he looks straight at the camera, beaten but unbowed. Human Rights Watch and civil rights defenders condemned the attack. The human rights organisation Front Line Defenders printed an ID card that reads, “This is to certify that Nguyen Chi Tuyen is a Human Rights Defender and registered with Front Line Defenders”. He keeps it in his wallet.

Born in 1974, Nguyen was raised about sixty kilometres south-west of Hanoi in a town best known as the home of the Perfume Pagoda, which attracts pilgrims from all over the country every spring. His extended family included five uncles who fought in the North Vietnamese army during the American War. Two were lost and are presumed dead. Three returned home with stories of their long march through dense jungle to South Vietnam, under heavy bombardment by US planes and ravaged by malaria.

Nguyen says at an early age he resisted what he views as the Communist Party's efforts to turn his uncles' wartime experiences into evidence of the party's right to rule in perpetuity.

“They won the war and always, they're proud of that. Always they show the films and the news from the war era,” Nguyen says. “When I was a boy I was a curious boy. And I didn't trust any single story.”

This natural scepticism — the sense that every issue, every event is too complicated for any one entity to construct an accurate narrative — is intolerable to a single-party state. But Nguyen did not start out as a pro-democracy activist calling for wholesale political transformation. It was national pride that first led him to protest in 2011. In May of that year, Chinese patrol boats cut the cables of a Vietnamese ship surveying in the South China Sea. Like many Vietnamese, Nguyen was incensed. He read about demonstrations online and decided to join them. Then he was arrested and interrogated.

“At first I just wanted to raise my own voice, like a citizen, like a patriot, against the aggressive policy of our neighbour,” he recalls. “But we were insulted by the government. By the party.”

What happened after your first arrest in 2011?

They came to my office to demand to talk with my director. They also deployed a group of people to my house. First, they give advice, that we should stop doing such work, social work, and let the party and the government deal with such work, and should focus on our own work to earn a living and take care of the children, family members ... Second step, they pressure to get you sacked from work. My friend lost his job after joining demonstrations that year. For the young students who come from the

province to Hanoi to study, they [put] pressure on the headmaster, even the landlord.

Even at night, they could force you to go at once. They throw your luggage out of the apartment. I remember one of [my colleagues] sending me a message asking if I had a room for him to stay because he was wandering the streets late at night.

In Vietnam, we have small family — like my wife and children and sisters and mum. But we have bigger family, like many family members living in one village, so we have close relations. Good or bad, we have close connections. If [the security forces] make pressure on me and I overcome the pressure, they give stress to my family members.

They call us reactionaries. In the past, if someone was named a reactionary, they could be killed at once without any trial. So you can imagine how terrible it is, that word. So they call us reactionaries, and maybe they spread the word to the home village. And of course the family don't have enough information to think what is wrong, what is right, because Vietnamese people, we're living under the ruling Communist Party for a long time, for several decades. So they don't know what's really happening to our country, and they don't know how important our work to defend our country is. They're always afraid.

What does your family, both your extended family and your nuclear family, say to you?

My wife, of course she knows my work, and she knows what I'm thinking because sometimes I get angry with the news on TV ... Many of us quarrel with the TV because the ministry or secretary appears on the TV and says "blah blah blah" and we say, "No, it's false!". But we have no chance to discuss or to debate or to talk to them.

And of course, even we sometimes have terrible discussions or quarrels with each other about our point of view. The conflict between thoughts is inside every family in Vietnam.

Sometimes I feel exhausted. I'm not exhausted when I face the police or [talk] with other people in society. But sometimes I feel exhausted when I persuade my own family members that what I'm doing is good for the country, for the people and everyone in society. They say, "Oh, but it's so dangerous. You can easily get arrested and put in jail at any time because they have everything and you have nothing."

Little by little, though, [my family members] get more and more information. They recognise that I am not alone. I am just in front, but there are many behind me. They can secretly support me. And little by little they understand what I am doing ... and now I think they are more confident than some years ago.

Were you surprised by the reaction?

Sure, sure we were surprised when we were arrested and put on the bus and driven to the police station and questioned, and even some were beaten there. I myself was not beaten inside the police station, but my friends, especially the young, were beaten if they refused to answer the questions or they resisted.

Why did you decide to keep going?

[The Communist Party] have all the power in their hands. They have prisons, they have guns, policemen, army force, the court: they have everything. They have media. We have nothing except our hearts, and our minds. And we think it's the right thing to do ... that's all.

Now that you're not under round-the-clock surveillance, when do the police follow you or come to your house?

If they hear the news that there could be a demonstration or small rally ... they watch my house closely. They deploy dozens of policemen, and even local people to help them, to watch me and prevent me from going out of my house. They say to me, stay at home until maybe 5pm. If you need to buy some food, give us money and we can go to the market and buy for you.

How many times has that happened?

Uncountable times. I can't remember. It happens not only to me but also to activists in not only Hanoi ... in Ho Chi Minh City, Danang, Nghe An and other provinces.

One time Dr Nguyen Quang A, a prominent dissident, was abducted. They arrested him and put him in a car and drove far from Hanoi. He posted on his Facebook account that they drove him to the border with China, more than 100 kilometres from Hanoi. Then they drove back late at night and dropped him near his house. Because they wanted to prevent him from meeting an important visitor from another country.

What would happen to you and to your family if you were arrested and jailed today?

If I'm arrested, I worry most about the children. And I don't know if [the government] can carry out a smear campaign at the school to boycott my children or not. My children haven't faced such problems now, but I heard that when [Pham Van Troi] got arrested last July they [isolated his] children from the community.

Did the 2015 attack make you consider the most dangerous possibilities? Are you concerned on a daily basis about being beaten again or killed?

Yes, I think about [it]. Even though they can kill me ... I cannot stop fighting. I cannot stop my social work. I posted on my Facebook, you can kill me any time ... but my will will never die. They want to send the message: we will defeat you, we will keep the power. But [we're] not afraid of them any more ... we are ready to sacrifice our own lives for such work.

Does the knowledge that you are being watched affect how you conduct your activism?

I know the police are following me on the live stream ... sometimes 1,000 people [go] online at once to watch my live stream. So I know if I overuse the live stream to criticise the party too much, maybe they're afraid or get angry, so they're [likely] to arrest me. So I must balance, balance, balance always. When I go on the live stream, I think of my friends or my fellows who are now in jail and it's not easy to control my mind and my words.

What do you think is the single biggest threat to the Communist Party?

Human rights and civil rights. We lack knowledge of such rights. They don't know how to practise it ... For example, if I want to share my knowledge about human rights in a meeting [with] dozens of people ... they would try to harass. They [would] even force the owner of the cafe to close. They wouldn't let me organise the event like this. It means we are prevented from teaching the people how to learn about human rights. And that's a big problem, not only for us but for them.

We have never [had] knowledge of human rights. So that's why we are good at fighting, at killing each other ... When we have trouble, we cannot try to

sit around the table and find a way to [resolve] the problem. We, the Vietnamese, are not good at such a thing. But now we must learn. It means that we must have a society or an environment [in which] everyone can have a chance to live and to help each other rather than to kill each other ...

You went to your first demonstration as a result of Chinese aggression. I'm curious if you think tension with China is going to become a flashpoint for people to take action against the government.

The tension between Vietnam and China can easily become a flashpoint. But China [is in] control of the situation. Their tactics are salami slice; they want to take little by little. They know that in the past the Vietnamese people [were] ready to defend our country. They know from history, and they know that it's not easy to defeat our nation and our people. They don't need to declare a war against Vietnamese people, they use the Communist leaders to control our country, our people. They just send orders and the puppet does what they want.

And of course if a war suddenly happens between Vietnam and China, the Vietnamese people will stand up and defend their country ... But [before that] happens, the people, I think, will say, "We must kill the Communists, the Vietnamese Communist Party first, before we go to battle against China".

Where do you see Vietnam a decade from now?

I think that under pressure by the human rights groups and foreign governments ... the Communists [will be forced] to give power to the people. I heard the news that [a] delegation from the EU came to visit Vietnam and they said in a news conference that human rights [must come] before a bilateral trade agreement. So [it's] not easy for the Vietnamese government. They're now under big pressure from both inside and outside. Inside, the

demand for rights from the people. And outside they're under pressure from the human rights groups and [foreign] governments. In the coming years maybe they [will reform] so we will have the chance to organise our own civil society.



John Fuller is a writer based in Southeast Asia.

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