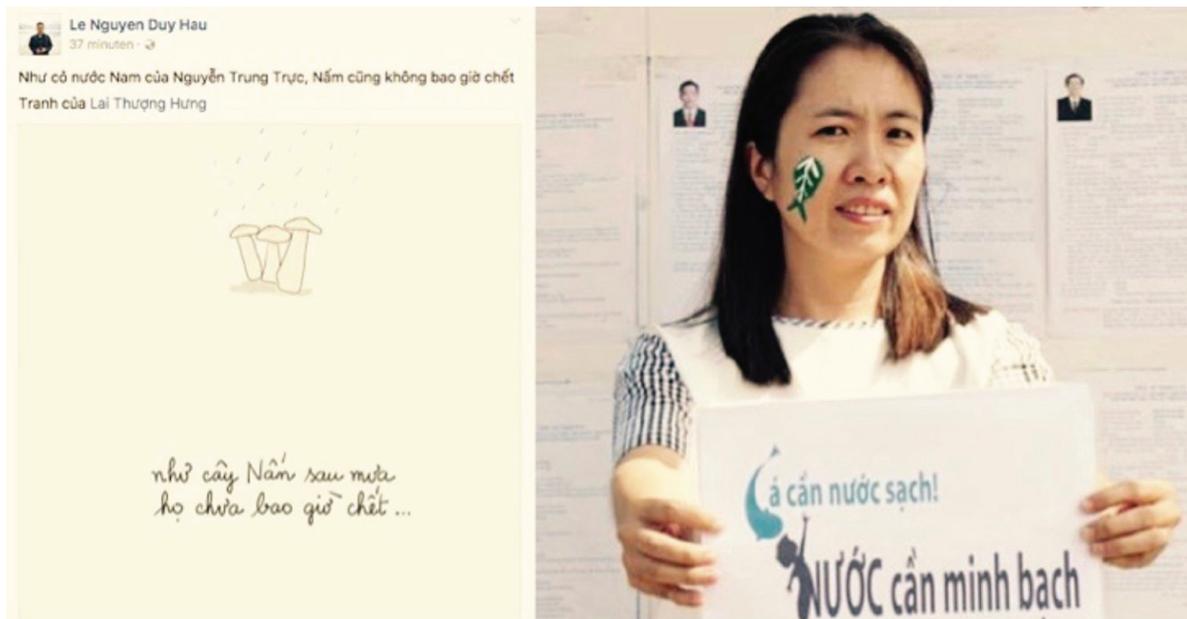


# The environmental movement in Vietnam: A new frontier of civil society activism?

*Thieu-Dang Nguyen and Simone Datzberger*

On 29 June 2017, Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh (blogging name *Mother Mushroom*), a mother of two, prominent blogger and activist in Vietnam, was sentenced to 10 years in prison for ‘distributing propaganda against the state’. Her arrest, trial, and the reprisals against her family have led to international condemnation of the Vietnamese state. Countless messages from Vietnamese have also surged onto the Internet, most visibly on Facebook, expressing support for and solidarity with Quynh and her cause. The [BBC](#)<sup>1</sup> featured Quynh holding a poster that reads ‘Fish need clean water. Citizens need transparency’, at the height of protests following a mass fish death caused by a Taiwanese steel factory called [Formosa Ha Tinh Steel](#).<sup>2</sup>



Picture 1: (left) by Lai Thuong Hung and shared by lawyer Le Nguyen Duy Hau after Quynh’s trial. Hung’s picture reads ‘like Mushrooms after the rain, they will never die’, as a metaphor of resilient ‘Vietnamese grass’ during Chinese resistance era.

Picture 2: (right) shows Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh. © BBC

Quynh has been an intrepid voice for democratization in Vietnam for several years, with prestigious awards from Civil Rights Defenders in 2015 and the US State Department in 2017. Before the Formosa event, however, her work in Vietnam was only popular amongst dissidents, bloggers, and a few pro-democracy networks. Discourses on transparency and accountability, though extensively advocated by pro-democracy activists, had found little resonance with the wider Vietnamese public. This does not come as a surprise, considering Vietnam’s history of state formation and the legacies of century-long oppression.

## Origins of Vietnam’s ‘state-controlled’ civil sphere

Vietnam experienced more than a thousand years of Chinese domination, French colonization, and civil wars between North and South Vietnam. After centuries of Chinese and then French control, early civic activism at the beginning of the twentieth century centred on patriotism and counteracting French power in Indochina. In the *Đông Du* movement, Vietnamese scholars and patriotic citizens organised to send Vietnamese students to study in Japan. Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh, two scholars most associated with this movement, believed that education and the formation of an intellectual class un-indoctrinated by French colonizers could be a driving force to liberate Vietnam. Numerous patriotic youth associations were also formed – one of which

was led by communist revolutionary Ho Chi Minh that later became the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). In addition, pro-independence literary groups blossomed, such as the *Tự-lực Văn-đoàn*.

Following the end of World War II and Ho Chi Minh's declaration of independence for Vietnam in September 1945, the VCP (Vietnamese Communist Party) assumed leadership in North Vietnam. A 30-year long civil war between North and South Vietnam began – infamously known as the proxy war between the US and the Communist bloc. Under VCP rule, liberal notions of civil society were not tolerated. Any form of societal organization was only authorised if it extended the grip of the state to the grass-roots, thereby enforcing socialism and manufacturing public consent.<sup>3</sup>

After the end of the Vietnam War and unification of the country in 1975, a model of 'state-controlled civil society' was enforced by the VCP. Civic life in former South Vietnam dissolved when roughly a million and a half South Vietnamese fled Communist takeover. The majority of the South Vietnamese middle class who remained in the country were disdainfully labelled as 'bourgeois' and put into re-education camps. Those considered dissidents experienced even harsher treatment. Confronted with a decade of embargoes and international isolation, the costs of supporting a large army to fight the border dispute with China (1979) and intervene in Cambodia (1978), as well as ad hoc government policy, Vietnam ended up as one of the [poorest countries in the world in the 1980s](#).<sup>5</sup> Until 1992, 49% of the national population still earned less than \$1.90 per day.<sup>6</sup> Given these circumstances, the environment was hardly a concern among an impoverished population hoping for economic growth and prosperity.



*Picture 2: South Vietnamese civilians scaled the high walls of the US Embassy in Saigon on 29 April 1975, trying to reach evacuation helicopters to flee the Communist takeover © AP*

As the country was under the VCP's leadership, it remained a highly restrictive space for and of civic activism. So-called civil society, as it was advocated by the VCP, consisted of only government-affiliated organizations (e.g.: Vietnam's Women's Union) whose purpose simply was to increase public affirmation of state legitimacy. While state power grew tighter hindering the emergence of an independent civil sphere, the economic situation changed significantly after 1986 – the year the government introduced an '*Open Door*' (*Đổi Mới*) policy which long-time Vietnam observer Elizabeth Pond praised as [Vietnam's second revolution](#)<sup>7</sup>. Bans on private commerce were lifted and foreign exchange was normalised, inviting direct foreign investments, and a shift was made towards a 'market economy with socialist orientation'<sup>8</sup>. As a result, the poverty headcount at \$1.90 per day quickly dropped from 39% in 2002 to 3% in 2012; adult literacy rate increased to 93.5% of the national population in 2009; mobile cellular subscription rose to 128 for every 100 Vietnamese in 2016; and Internet access increased from 0.25% of the population in 2000 to 46.5% in 2016.<sup>9</sup> While the standard of living improved tremendously for the Vietnamese, the lack of transparency and accountability in government decision-making in terms of regulation and trade deals had significant environmental impacts. According to Vietnamese environmentalists, the first-time an environmental issue mobilized the public dates back to 2009 when several intellectuals, members of parliament, and pro-democracy activists voiced their opposition to bauxite projects in Central Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> The campaign, however, did not gain momentum as the information could not be disseminated to the wider public, and anti-bauxite voices were silenced or ignored by the pro-bauxite members of the government.

Vietnam's new economic course and *Open Door* policy not only invited in foreign investors but also led to the growing involvement of [Western donors](#)<sup>11</sup> over the past three decades. For the first time, external funding nourished the emergence of local civil society actors other than those promoted by the VCP. Such actors range from completely antagonistic groups to the state to highly professionalized and institutionalized NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) that provide services and conduct advocacy through informal networking within the government system. These different and disjointed parts of civil society, however, did not transform Vietnam's public sphere into a space of contestation and radical transformation. Rather the opposite- repression of human rights in Vietnam is again [on the rise](#).<sup>12</sup> In 1992, the constitution effectively curtailed the public sphere by circumscribing the right to freedom of speech, freedom of the press, peaceful assembly and association.<sup>13</sup> This was coupled with the practice of [arbitrary arrest and police brutality](#).<sup>14</sup> More recently, the government passed and has rigorously enforced [Article 88 of Vietnam's Penal Code](#)<sup>15</sup> that strictly prohibits 'propaganda against the state'. It is this law which has led activists such as blogger *Mother Mushroom* to be arrested simply for expressing their views on social media.<sup>16</sup>



Picture 3: Illustration of Article 88 in Luat Khoa magazine's [article](#) that compared the severity of Article 88 with similar laws in other Southeast Asian countries, after the trial of Mother Mushroom. According to Luat Khoa, the picture belongs to an organisation called CHANGE.

The rise in arrests, and also the detainment of [Brotherhood for Democracy](#)<sup>17</sup> founder [Nguyen Van Dai](#)<sup>18</sup>, and many [others](#)<sup>19</sup> makes civic activism in authoritarian Vietnam very difficult. Silence, fear, and political illiteracy have been relentlessly used by past ruling elites; and continue to be used by the VCP and its affiliated and powerful corporations. Even though a ban on Facebook was loosened around 2013, freedom of speech is still highly restricted. According to [Freedom House](#), Vietnamese authorities have increasingly cracked down on citizens' use of social media and the Internet in general (particularly restricting any attempt to spread uncensored information and galvanize dissent).<sup>20</sup> Since 1977 the country has been continuously categorized as 'not free' by Freedom House, and in 2017 CIVICUS describes Vietnam as '[closed](#)' in terms of civic space.<sup>21</sup> Firewalls against international and Vietnamese diaspora webpages with a human rights and pro-democratic agenda (e.g.: Human Rights Watch, BBC, Radio Free Asia or Viet Tan) are common practice. Yet Vietnamese still manage to access these prohibited websites as the illegal use of VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) is on the rise, especially among educated and urban populations. Nevertheless, Vietnam's century long civic oppression and restrictive political climate has had a strong effect on how civic activism and public debate are expressed and exercised.

## 'I choose fish!'



Picture 4: Fish washing up Vietnamese shores. Photo: © EPA, retrieved from: <https://newbloommag.net/2016/05/13/fish-die-offs-vietnam-protests/>, last accessed 12 October 2017

On 6 April 2016, sea life began washing up on Vietnamese shores, caused by a toxic spill from a steel mill by the Taiwanese company Formosa Ha Tinh Steel. The contamination spread over at least 200 kilometres of the coast, halting the fishing industry and causing food poisoning, massive ecological disruption and even the deaths of divers investigating the spill. In response to one of the country's worst environmental disasters in history, a Formosa spokesperson initially stated: 'Choose fish or steel!'<sup>22</sup>, implying that Vietnam cannot have development and economic growth without sacrificing the environment. 'I choose fish!', was the direct response from thousands of protestors across the country. Immediately, the hashtag #IChooseFish went viral on social media with the image incorporated into many Facebook profile pictures. Within hours, Facebook became the most popular platform among the Vietnamese for sharing information on upcoming protests, emergency relief (mostly food) for residents in fishing villages, as well as fundraising efforts to conduct independent research in the contaminated area.



Picture 5: Facebook profile pictures. Left: 'I am Vietnamese. I choose fish'. Center: 'Fish need clean water. Citizens need transparency'. Right: 'When I was alive, I only wanted peace, took care of my family, didn't want to clash (with the authority), was too lazy to fight. Now I understand, injustice does not spare me... Today me. Tomorrow you?'.

The first protest against Formosa took place in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (by many, including the authors, still referred to as Saigon<sup>23</sup>) on 1 May 2016, attracting thousands of participants, most of whom were 20 and 40 years in age. Without any coordination effort or leadership, the rally was generally peaceful. People carried large banners written in Vietnamese, English, or French, played musical instruments or held a copy of the Vietnamese constitution in their hands. Smart-phones were widely used to capture the protest and provide real-time updates. One week later, the second protest in Saigon provoked a much harsher response, dismaying Vietnamese throughout the country. All of a sudden, large buses arrived and security forces scattered protestors into smaller groups, pressing demonstrators against the gate of Notre Dame Cathedral and *Hoà Bình* ('Peace') primary school. State forces, misleadingly dressed as civilians, violently attacked protestors and pushed them onto the buses. Arrests continued in various locations where protestors took refuge throughout the evening. Images and videos of bloodshed, tears, and the buses that captured campaigners were widely shared on Facebook, even though many phones were confiscated by the police and Facebook access was intermittent throughout the day. According to *The New York Times*, [more than 500 people were detained and brutally beaten](#).<sup>24</sup>

Alongside protests in Hanoi and Saigon, several protests of thousands of people took place in Ha Tinh and Nghe An, under the leadership of the Catholic Church. Riot police and army vans were deployed to protect the Formosa factory and prevent outsiders from entering these areas. In October 2016, about 4,000 protestors overran the riot police in front of the Formosa compound, but deliberately decided not to enter the factory. Their intention was to state their grievances and not to vandalize or cause any harm.<sup>25</sup>

**How a simple statement quickly transformed into an angry call for transparency and accountability.**



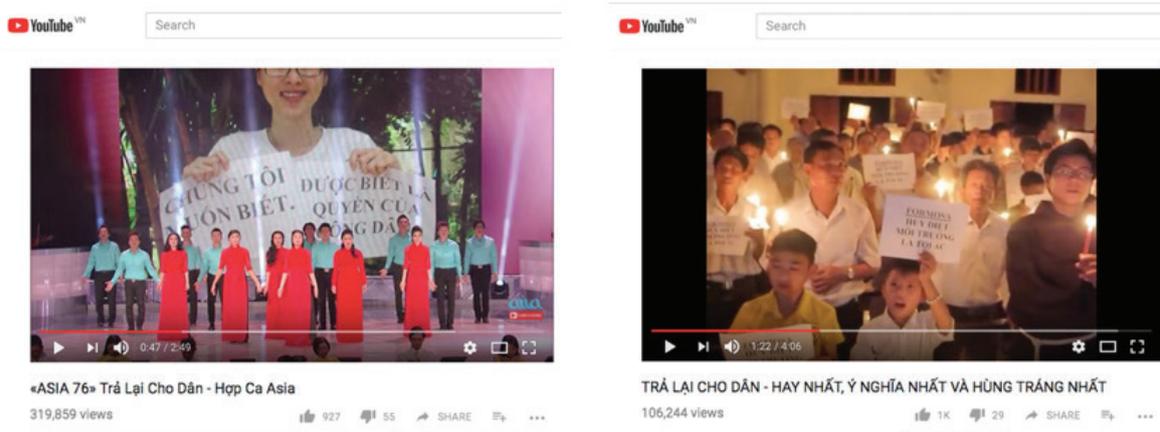
Picture 6: Left: a poem composed by teacher Tran Thi Lam, Ha Tinh high school that describes an uncertain and pessimistic future the country is facing. The poem attracted many shares on Facebook and was turned into a song published on YouTube, as reported by *Asia Times*. Center: a picture mimicking a film poster with three “stars” – Ha Tinh province, Formosa, and Vung Ang sea, shared on Phuoc Nguyen’s Facebook page. Right: A group of young Vietnamese in Ha Tinh/Hue produced a [parody](#) based on the top hit ‘Thật Bất Ngờ’ at the time, mimicking the silencing and dismissal of the authority when local citizens inquired about the cause of fish death.

To this day, it still remains a mystery who exactly initiated the ‘*Nước cần minh bạch*’ (citizen/nation needs transparency) Facebook posts, profile pictures and protest banners which led to unprecedented civic engagement, protests and public debate. Speculation points to pro-democracy activists allegedly associated with *Mother Mushroom*. There are also rumours that an informal

network comprising of Vietnamese NGOs and Western donors, could have been one of the architects behind the virality of this slogan which led to public discussions on transparency and accountability. Their logo, however, never officially appeared during protests nor in social media and no official statement by this network was ever released. The Chairperson of this network, no stranger in development and foreign aid circles in Hanoi, defined it as ‘an informal network that acts as a forum for organizations and professionals’ to ‘exchange information and ideas on issues relating to people’s participation, grassroots democracy and civil society’. The funding comes from participating Vietnamese NGOs and therefore indirectly through the donors of these NGOs – the majority of which are INGOs from the West.<sup>26</sup>

The powerful resonance of the slogan ‘*Nước cần minh bạch*’ (citizen/nation needs transparency) with the wider public, on the other hand, is certainly not a mystery. The urgency of addressing the spill and its devastating impact on the environment made the right to information more salient than ever. ‘We really need to have an answer from the government on whether the ocean is totally clean and the fish are safe to eat’, said Pham Thi Phi, a local from the fishing village of Nhan Trach.<sup>27</sup> It is estimated that by 2020, Vietnam’s marine economy will make up 53-55% of the country’s GDP and more than 60% of its export turnover.<sup>28</sup> Given that fish is not only the country’s main export, but also the main food source for 90 million Vietnamese, there are millions of others who share Phi’s sentiment.

In response to the many protests and public concern across the country, the government launched several counter-initiatives. For instance, it made officials swim in the sea and eat fish to prove that the water was safe (although it was not), blamed overgrowing algae as the main cause for loss and death of fish, intimidated journalists and tried to silence protestors with violence. All these actions only further inflamed public anger. ‘It seems the government tries to cover up for the culprit. We will protest until the government says what caused the spill’, said a Catholic priest and protest leader in Nghe An<sup>29</sup>, exemplifying the deep rooted distrust many Vietnamese held about the government’s response to the toxic spill.



Picture 7: In 2015 Asia Entertainment Center published a song called: ‘*Trả lại cho dân*’ (Give it back to the people) on its Youtube channel. According to the [Saigon Broadcasting Television Network \(SBTN\)](#), the song was composed by prisoners of conscience in Vietnam before the spill, sent abroad and performed by artists of the Asian Entertainment Center (left). The song [was performed again in a church mass](#) in Central Vietnam during the Formosa protests in 2016 (right). ‘*Trả lại cho dân*’ advocates for fundamental human rights and condemns the repression in Vietnam. Asia Entertainment Center and SBTN were labelled ‘reactionary’ and a number of their artists are not allowed to enter Vietnam to perform. Yet they remain a significant platform to connect people in Vietnam and the diaspora community, as well as being a strong support for pro-democracy activists in and outside Vietnam.

Following waves of protests and online campaigns in Vietnam, Taiwanese media started to broadcast the events and generated pressure on the Taiwanese government to hold Formosa accountable for the ecological catastrophe it caused. Eventually, the Vietnamese government declared that Formosa was responsible for the contamination, receiving \$500 million in compensation. Although it remains questionable how much of the compensation actually benefitted the affected fishermen and local population, Vietnamese society had at least the answer it asked for, followed by an [official apology](#)<sup>30</sup> from the Formosa executive board.

## “Let me walk by myself.” – Why activism in Vietnam is generational.

One year after the Formosa event, one of the authors (Thieu-Dang Nguyen) met up with a group of activists who have been fighting since 2014 against a cable car project to connect Son Doong cave; a World Heritage site, with other caves in the area. All members (born in the late 1980s and early 1990s) participated in the Formosa protests in Saigon. A young woman, Ha<sup>31</sup>, the only one in the group who was also arrested, recounted that she joined the protest with no fear. At one point, her taxi was stopped by security forces and they tried to get her out of the car, into a police van. Ha opened the door and responded calmly: ‘Let me walk by myself’. After Ha had spent the night at the police station, she was released the next morning. Numerous recounts like Ha’s were made public and shared extensively on Facebook, inspiring many others to join the protests as well.<sup>32</sup> Her activist friends, Nhan and Anh were not arrested but the experience of the Formosa protests had a lasting effect on them. Nhan grew up and went to school in the area where some of the demonstrations took place. He witnessed first-hand how police violently repressed protests. The very fact that this was happening on his ‘home’ ground sparked an immense desire to have his voice heard. Another group member, Anh, observed that the buses used to transfer protestors to police stations were the exact same buses she had once taken to university. Seeing police inflicting violence on peaceful campaigners and forcing them onto these buses made her realize how fragile peace in her country actually is. Instead of being intimidated by state forces, the Formosa events motivated the group to stand in solidarity with other activists, such as *Mother Mushroom*.

The stories of Ha, Nhan and Anh illustrate how activism in Vietnam reflects generational differences. Older segments of the population hardly participated in protests and did not dare to speak up against the state. They still struggle to make sense of a proxy-war they have had to endure for 30 years. They are a generation that experienced first-hand a culture of fear, silence, and apathy cultivated by the ruling elites of the time. This is particularly true of those in the South of Vietnam: as a director of a Saigon-based community development centre commented: ‘This city was on the losing side’. He stresses, that four decades after the war, it is still very difficult to obtain a permit to found a local NGO or organize a public event in Saigon.<sup>33</sup> In part this also explains the scarcity of registered Vietnamese NGOs in southern Vietnam as well as a growing state-controlled NGO cluster in Hanoi.

By contrast, the younger generation (Vietnamese aged 20 to 40 years) are far more disconnected from wartime and post-war events, with a worldview predominantly shaped by the *Open Door* era. Equipped with means to access information (legally or illegally) they have been the first generation to risk asking critical questions about their country, its past and society. *If the South was 'liberated' why did still more than a million Vietnamese flee the country? Why were students never allowed to question teachers, especially on facts about the Vietnam War? Why did they learn only about the many war crimes and mass casualties committed by the US and its proxy forces but not those committed by North Vietnamese forces?* Even though these questions remain unanswered in educational institutions or school books, the so-called *Open Door* generation is less likely than their parents and grandparents to submit to a regime that withholds so much information from them. Hence, for the majority of young Vietnamese, the Formosa crisis was much more than an environmental movement. While advocating for the environment, they became overtly critical of the everyday administrative, legal and political structures they are embedded in. In the words of a 27-year-old activist: 'After I got involved in environmental activism, I came to the realization that it's not just about some thermal power plant we try to stop. How can we stop the sixty something coal-fired thermal power plants that will be built by 2030? This is an issue with the government. We need to fix the government instead of fighting from one thermal power plant to another.'<sup>34</sup>

Ordinary people who did not belong to any formalized civil society organization and initially did not want to get involved into politics suddenly realized that if they care about the environment, they also have to care about political change and transformation. Slowly, this political awareness is being embraced by a few NGOs – despite the tight grip of the government. Vietnamese civil society, whether informal or formal, started to realize that their work, and environmental work in particular, could not be detached from human rights, fair and open elections, peaceful assembly, access to information as well as freedom of association and speech.

## A new frontier of civic activism?



Picture 8: Protest in front of Formosa factory in Ha Tinh province (Source: Radio Free Asia).

The [Formosa crisis \(2016\)](#), together with several other movements such as the [Tree Movement \(2015\)](#), the subsequent [Vinh Tan toxic dump \(2017\)](#) and ongoing [SaveSonDoong](#), [SaveSonTra](#), [anti-thermal power](#), [anti-hydropower campaigns](#), have formed an unparalleled civic movement in Vietnam. Not only has it won unprecedented public participation, but it has also unified historically fragmented civil society segments and actors. For decades, pro-democracy activists were branded as 'reactionary' [*phản động*] by the Hanoi administration and therefore completely detached from the formal civil society landscape. Because of the government's propaganda, the majority of the population deliberately distanced itself from these pro-democracy groups as punishments for such activities could be severe. One of the successes of the environmental movement was to build a bridge between three types of actors, namely: pro-democracy activists, members of registered NGOs (the majority of which, however, did not participate in protests under the name of their organization) and the rest of society. Despite the lack of leadership, administrative structures and notably funding, these actors jointly managed to create a social movement that had to be taken seriously by an oppressive regime, its neighbouring country Taiwan, and a corporation consisting of influential business men. It also shifted public opinion on pro-democracy activist groups that used to be unrecognized and isolated, if not obscured, by the government. In this process, *Mother Mushroom* became the face of inspiration to many who wanted to follow and pursue her cause.

There are three main dynamics that may explain why the environmental movement potentially represents a new frontier of civic activism in Vietnam. First, environmentalism proved an effective

frame to engage and mobilize the public to resist authoritarian practices, create a cohesive public voice and consequently collective power. It showcased how democratic values can be advocated through an issue or cause that resonates with the majority of the population. In the case of Vietnam, that cause centred on fish, sea, and development – issues that are pertinent to everyday life and close to the heart of Vietnamese people. In so doing, local activists were able to induce social and political transformation through a seemingly apolitical rhetoric capable of transforming hearts and minds. Environmentalism thus created a ‘safe space’ to advocate for political change and induce what Cavatorta<sup>35</sup> calls ‘activated citizenship’.

Second, even though the environmental movement was initiated by civilians from the informal public sphere, it was in part also indirectly driven by a highly professionalized and formalized NGO landscape. Increased political awareness and civic agency has been nurtured through three decades of international aid in accordance with the country’s *Open Door* policy. Since 1989 the number of foreign NGOs in Vietnam has risen considerably, from 183 in 1992 to 514 and an estimated 800 in 2003 and 2010 respectively.<sup>36</sup> This development further led to a rapid increase of Vietnamese NGOs funded by external donors and foreign NGOs operating in the country. Implicitly, these externally-funded NGOs played a role in raising awareness among the wider public. For instance, a few externally-funded Vietnamese NGOs (or individuals associated with them) started to provide informal human rights education. However, these trainings were frequently not arranged under their organization’s name if the cause could be perceived by state authorities as having a confrontational agenda towards the government. This further explains, why the environmental movement in Vietnam is not formally supported by NGOs but rather by individuals from those organizations who helped in their personal capacity, participated in events and advocated in secret. Some of them played a role as key opinion leaders, wrote extensively on their Facebook pages to provide information and facilitated public discussion. With a strong background in human rights education and civic skills obtained through their NGO experience and training, they provided articulate perspectives on human rights, development, and governance in the context of the Formosa crisis. Yet their engagement waned as the Formosa situation was gradually resolved. Therefore, the extent to which foreign and formalized Vietnamese NGOs initiated, nurtured and sustained the movement beyond their public-educational role remains unclear.

The absence of a formalized and officially recognized civil society network behind Vietnam’s environmental campaigns can be further explained by the fact that, to a large extent, foreign and local NGOs operating in Vietnam have become instrumentalized to complement services the government “permits” them to provide. In order to operate as an NGO, several legal steps are required. This includes a Permit for Operation, a Permit for the Establishment of Project Office and Permit for the Establishment of Representative Office. A number of people who were interviewed in Vietnam further noted that during the application process they needed an ‘informal agreement’ with the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Association (which is also in charge of NGOs and semi-autonomous organizations). That is, their permission to open an NGO depended on not causing any trouble for the government. In addition, international NGOs are administered by a committee for Foreign NGO Affairs. Under this legal framework and state control, NGOs are therefore not an independent voice and normally refrain from openly and publicly undertaking political advocacy and public mobilization work. This task still remains

with the so-called local 'reactionaries' and unregistered, grassroots groups. In the context of the Vietnamese government's rising repression, it is highly unlikely that activism will come from a formalized civil society landscape consisting of registered local and foreign actors backed by donor support and bound to a legal framework. Although diplomatic missions, international donors and organizations (e.g.: European Union or United Nations) openly condemned Mother Mushroom's arrest and demanded her release, they still made a conscious choice to refrain from actively supporting environmental campaigns in Vietnam. Protests, Facebook information-sharing and other initiatives such as fundraising campaigns were and still are launched and sustained by Vietnamese individuals. This begs the question to what extent donor-funded and formalized versions of civil society can truly bring about long-lasting social transformation and change, and [push back against a closing civic space](#)?<sup>38</sup>

Lastly, generational differences should not be underestimated when it comes to understanding Vietnamese social movements and civic activism. The older population on both sides of the Vietnam War still have to come to terms with the violent era they went through. It is much easier for post-war generations to address and advocate for issues affecting the country and to confront the government. French colonialism and the Vietnam War created a lack of national unity and significant divisions that continue to persist to the present day between the North and the South. The environmental movement was, strikingly, one of the first events since the end of the war where people from all parts of Vietnam came together and formed a united force. The movement helped to overcome some of the legacies of the past in reuniting the whole country – an unintended consequence.

At the same time, the environmental movement nurtured the emergence of an organic Vietnamese civil society due to the way it formed and consolidated collective consciousness and civic skills and aided by modern technologies. Better access to the Internet, higher incomes and consequently affordability of smartphones led to more coordinated and sustained collective actions. The environmental movement thus provides a unique opportunity of how fundamental freedoms can take root and be exercised even in the context of political oppression. As such, it clearly differs from previous forms of civic activism in Vietnam and invites a re-imagination of new frontiers for social and political change in the future.

## About the authors

**Thieu-Dang Nguyen's** academic and activism interests are centred on civil society, social movements and international aid in the global South. Her early activism work culminated in a number of grassroots initiatives to advance LGBT equality and advocate for the freedom to peaceful assembly and association in Vietnam. She earned her B.A. in Psychology in 2009 and an MA in the US and is currently based in Europe pursuing research.

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Through examination of popular protests that erupted in Vietnam in 2016 after a toxic spill by a Taiwanese steel factory, two scholars explore how environmentalism has proved an effective frame to engage and mobilize the public to resist authoritarian practices, create a cohesive public voice and help build collective power.

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