

# **Vietnam: Dissent, Repression and the Emergence of an Independent Workers' Movement**

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Reverberations of the democratic revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East have been felt all over the world, including Vietnam. On 26 February the veteran dissident Dr. Nguyen Dan Que was arrested on charges of seeking to overthrow the government. Police in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) said they found thousands of anti-government documents on his computer, some calling for the Vietnamese people to stage mass protests like those in the Arab world. Dr. Que was reportedly released on bail the following day. He has been imprisoned three times for campaigning for democracy and human rights, spending nearly twenty years in prison.

Most Vietnamese people alive today were born after the end of the American War (1965 – 1975) and the reunification of the country under the single-party rule of the Communist Party of Vietnam. The majority still live in villages and farm the land, although the shift towards industry and life in the cities is proceeding rapidly. This country that repulsed the armies of France and the United States has become a favourite “emerging market” for international capital. Corporate power appears to be succeeding where B-52s and napalm failed. Despite imprisonment and harassment of activists, an independent workers' movement keeps springing up.

The country is officially known as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Based on the relation of workers to the means of production, Marxist-Humanists do not consider Vietnam ever to have had a socialist system, but rather a form of state-capitalism. Modern Vietnam has passed through many violent transformations, and the development of capitalism has taken a zigzag path: colonial capitalism under French rule, a form of dependent capitalism under US domination in the old South Vietnam, classic state-capitalism in the North, and in the first decade after reunification. Over the past quarter

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century, a hybrid form has developed, in which the country is wide open to global capital, while the Communist Party retains a tight monopoly of political power.

Under the Vietnamese constitution, land is the property of the people as a whole. The state allocates rights to the use of land to households. This system was adopted from 1986 onwards, as part of the *doi moi* (renewal) reforms, replacing the earlier policy of central state planning and compulsory collective farming.

Land allocations last for 20 years for rice and other annual crops, longer for perennial crops. Most farms are very small. According to official statistics, in 2009 10 million hectares of cultivable land were allocated to nearly 14 million farming households, with an average holding of 0.7 hectares. More than half the population live by farming rice, using traditional methods, ploughing and harrowing the paddy fields using water buffalos, irrigating, planting and harvesting by hand.

This system of smallholding agriculture has raised productivity and living standards. Vietnam has gone from being an importer of rice in the 1980s to a leading exporter. However, the system may now be nearing the limits of its capacity to support a growing population or further improve living standards.

Although there is no private ownership of the land itself, land use rights may be bought, sold, leased, inherited and mortgaged. Thus rights to hold and use land, as well as the produce of the land, have become commodities.

This leads to a process of land being accumulated into a smaller number of larger holdings. In An Giang province in the Mekong Delta, most holdings were less than 1 hectare, but the 426 holdings of 5 hectares or more amounted to 3,750 hectares.

Those who sell or lose their holdings (or fail to obtain new ones) will have to seek paid work in agriculture, industry or services. Many will go to the cities; some will travel abroad in search of work. Whether they are better or worse off in terms of income, they will no longer be farmers, but workers. According to Vietnam's independent unions, many farmers have been wrongfully deprived of their land by corrupt officials.

In Hanoi, there is a Women's Museum that commemorates the women who fought in the wars of national liberation, as well as the protests of the international women's movement against the US war. Vietnam has an official Women's Union, subordinate to the state and the party, which provides micro-credit to women, campaigns against domestic violence and helps women to get out of prostitution. The state has a National Committee for the Advancement of Women. Despite such efforts, women in Vietnam still face many

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disadvantages. Traditionally, families prefer sons to daughters, and so many female foetuses are aborted after ultrasound scans that there is an unnatural imbalance in the birth rate: in 2008, 112 boys were born for every 100 girls. Fees must be paid for both health care and education. Families who cannot afford school fees are more likely to take girls out of school than boys. Women in remote rural areas are least likely to receive health care.

The poorest women, especially in the countryside but in cities too, do heavy manual labour such as carrying loads and breaking rocks on construction sites, all for very low wages. Prostitution is illegal but widespread in practice, often in the guise of massage parlours and karaoke bars. There is also a traffic of Vietnamese women to serve the sex trade in other countries, often lured there by promises of good jobs or marriage to foreign men.

Women make up about half of university students, and one quarter of members of the National Assembly (which compares favourably with 21% in the UK Parliament and 17% in the US Congress – except that all candidates have to be approved by the ruling party) but at the very centre of power, only one of the fifteen Politburo members is a woman.

A few of Vietnam's minority peoples, known as Hill Tribes, live in matrilineal societies. Women propose marriage to men, husbands live with their wives' families, and property is inherited by daughters from their mothers. (The status of Vietnam's ethnic minorities is an important question, but cannot be discussed in the scope of this article).

For international capital, low wages – lower than in China or Thailand – are Vietnam's main attraction. Typical industries such as garment and footwear making, toy manufacture and assembly of electronic goods are labour-intensive, producing high volumes of goods at low profit margins. Many of the companies that have set up factories in Vietnam are themselves based in newly industrialised countries such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. Recently Vietnam has had some success in attracting more hi-tech industries to favoured areas where the infrastructure has been modernised. Bac Ninh province is home to the world's largest laser printer plant, owned by Canon.

There is an official, party-aligned, state-recognised trade union confederation, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL), widely criticised for passivity and closeness to management. Strikes are not altogether banned, but the restrictions are much tighter even than in post-Thatcher Britain. Strikes are not permitted in public services or state-run enterprise. Strikes that affect more than one enterprise are also prohibited. The prime minister has power to suspend a strike deemed detrimental to the national economy or

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security. In practice, most strikes are illegal. Nevertheless hundreds of strikes, involving hundreds of thousands of workers, take place every year.

During a short-lived period of liberalisation in 2006, which soon gave way to renewed repression, two independent unions were established: the United Worker-Farmers' Organisation of Vietnam and the Independent Workers' Union of Vietnam.

In October 2010, three independent labour activists were sentenced to long prison terms by a court in Tra Vinh, in the southern Mekong Delta. Nguyen Hoang Quoc Hung was sentenced to nine years, while Doan Huy Chuong and Do Thi Minh Hanh were both given sentences of seven years. The three had helped to organise a strike of 10,000 workers at the My Phong shoe factory. The sentences imposed on these three campaigners were especially harsh. A report by Human Rights Watch (Not Yet a Workers' Paradise – 2009) details eight previous cases since 2006 (including an earlier prosecution of Doan Huy Chuong) of labour activists sentenced to prison terms ranging from nine months to five years; as well as several others detained but not brought to trial.

Particularly disturbing is the case of Le Tri Tue, who sought political asylum in Cambodia, but went missing from a guesthouse in Phnom Penh in May 2007. The fear is that he was abducted by Vietnamese agents, and either killed or secretly imprisoned.

The repressive character of the state is also expressed in widespread police brutality. Human Rights Watch documented 15 cases of people who lost their lives in police custody over a 12 month period. Most of the victims were arrested for petty offences, including traffic violations. They included Nguyen Van Khuong, who died, ironically, after being arrested for failing to wear a safety helmet while riding a motorcycle.

To date, there is no sign that the Vietnamese elite might be contemplating democratic reform from above. Arrests and prison sentences remain the standard response to political dissent and independent labour activism. With economic growth of around 7% a year, the economic prospects for most Vietnamese seem better than for most Tunisians or Egyptians. However, no economic boom lasts forever, and rising prosperity does not necessarily insulate a country against mass democratic protest, as shown in oil-rich Libya and Bahrain. Sooner or later, a mass freedom movement will emerge to challenge the single-party state. Whether that movement will head towards socialism cannot be predicted in advance. However, a country that combines a Stalinist political apparatus with privately owned sweatshop industries may be fertile ground for ideas of a new human society, where authentic socialism is rooted in thoroughgoing democracy.

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