Online Petitions: Promoting a Public Voice in Vietnamese Politics

By Jason Morris-Jung*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

• Online petitions posted by networks of prominent Vietnamese intellectuals and influential figures have become an important new trend in Vietnam’s domestic politics in recent years. They reflect a vanguard movement to express a public voice among the country’s otherwise highly exclusive and party-dominated political institutions.

• The petitions have covered a wide range of topics, from bauxite mining to prisoners of conscience to land expropriations to territorial conflicts with China. The petitions themselves are a result of important new trends in the Vietnamese socio-political sphere, notably the rise of the Internet and rising anti-Chinese sentiment. However, the petitions have also shaped these trends in important ways by forging them into a more critical political discourse aimed at the authoritarian political system.

---

1 This contribution is based on Jason Morris-Jung, “Vietnam’s Online Petition Movement,” in Daljit Singh (Ed.), Southeast Asian Affairs 2015 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015).
While the number of petitioners is still small and their effectiveness in influencing policy has been minimal, the primary purpose of the petitions is as an intervention on political consciousness under the leadership of a vanguard group.

The petitions also reflect wider demands for democratization within Vietnam by opening up political space and promoting liberal-democratic ideals.

*Jason Morris-Jung* is Visiting Fellow at ISEAS; email: jason_morris-jung@iseas.edu.sg.
INTRODUCTION

As the Vietnamese Communist Party gears up for its 12th National Party Congress next year, it is worth considering what voice the Vietnamese public has in the country’s politics, if any. The Congress is the grand stage for the party leadership, where it will determine the country’s top leadership positions and set the political and economic agenda for the next five years. It is also a highly exclusive one, dominated by the upper elite of the communist party. This preeminent political event, to which all eyes turn who have an interest in Vietnam’s domestic politics, is reflective of a political system that systematically denies a public voice and resolutely blocks out alternative views to the “party line.”

However, an important new development by which certain Vietnamese groups have been trying to generate a public voice in domestic politics has been through the emergence of high profile online petitions. These petitions have been led primarily by prominent Vietnamese intellectuals and influential figures from both inside and outside the country, who have used their public prestige and nationalist credentials to challenge state authority and draw attention to a wide range of important and controversial issues. In this piece, I examine the gradual emergence of the online petitions since 2009 and assess their significance for domestic politics. I argue that while the petitions are themselves manifestations of a changing socio-political sphere, they have also helped create and shape these trends in ways that challenge party dictatorship and promote liberal democratic ideals.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE ONLINE PETITION MOVEMENT

The dominance of the Vietnamese Communist Party in domestic politics has allowed little room for a public voice, especially at the national-level. While some scholars have described the party-state as flexible, pragmatic or as paradoxically responsive-repressive, these perspectives must be understood within the context of a political system that provides few formal mechanisms for meaningful political participation by its citizenry and exerts strong state control over domestic media, civic organizations, and dissident opinions. More commonly, Vietnamese citizens have sought to influence government policies through informal and uncontroversial means, which typically rely on personal connections with sympathetic state officials and often a loyalist rhetoric that seeks to aggrandize rather than challenge state authority. However, this approach self-censors opinions or concerns that directly challenge state leaders or, notably, oppose the communist party’s dominant role in domestic politics. In other words, the Vietnamese public has little voice unless it speaks in the language of the state itself.

However, a recent trend by which certain Vietnamese groups have been raising their voice and challenging state authority has been by posting petitions online. These petitions have typically emerged in response to controversial current events on a wide range of issues, ranging from bauxite mining to human rights violations to territorial struggles with China. They have come under different names, including petition or recommendation (kiến nghị), declaration (tuyên bố), appeal (lời kêu gọi), open letter (thư ngỏ), or simply as statements to “oppose” (phan đối), “demand” (yêu cầu) or “contribute ideas” (gồm ý). However, what brings them together is that they all demonstrate a collective effort to make public their concerns and express grievances about state leaders and the political system.

Typically, a leading group drafts and signs the petition (whose numbers range from a few dozen to over one hundred) and then posts it online for a wider audience to read, consider and, if they so wish, sign. The most high profile petitions since 2009 have collected thousands of online signatures, including 15,000 who signed onto the Petition of 72 on national constitutional revisions (see Table 1). To sign the petition requires making public one’s full name, job or organization, and address, though, apart from name, these data are filled in with widely varying degrees of detail or completeness. In Vietnam, associating oneself with views that challenge state authority and party dominance is a personally and professionally risky endeavour. For this reason, the numbers of persons signing onto the online petitions is unprecedented and significant.

To understand better how the online petitions have helped express a public voice, it is useful to examine how they have emerged as a new political practice in recent years. The first of these petitions to achieve a high profile came in April 2009. It protested government plans to mine bauxite in the Central Highlands of Vietnam—whose more scientific subject matter partially shielded petitioners from accusations of political malfeasance—and collected nearly three thousand online Vietnamese signatures. However, a main reason the petition garnered so much public attention was because of the 135 persons that initially endorsed it. Among them were many of Vietnam’s most well-known and highly accomplished artists and intellectuals from inside and outside the country. Their personae combined intellectual leadership with nationalist credentials, which gave the petition both prestige and credibility.

---


5 The ratio of signatures from inside and outside the country was near even. Among the first 135 signatures, slightly more were from inside the country and in the list of 2,700 nearly two thirds were from inside the country. For more details, see Jason Morris-Jung, “The Vietnamese Bauxite Controversy: Towards a More Oppositional Politics,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 10, no. 1 (February 1, 2015): 63–109, doi:10.1525/vs.2015.10.1.63.
The bauxite petition was a unique event in Vietnam’s domestic politics, but it was followed up one year later with another petition on bauxite mining. This one was written in response to a massive spill in bauxite residue (commonly dubbed as “red mud”) in Hungary in October of 2010, which killed a dozen persons and contaminated two nearby villages and local rivers. It also collected nearly three thousand signatures, but with important new additions. This petition brought together two influential groups of Vietnamese intellectuals—the one that led the initial bauxite petition and a group of mostly senior statesmen who, a few years earlier, had formed what they described as Vietnam’s first independent think tank, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). Among this latter group were several who had previously served under reformist Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt and his successor Phan Văn Khải. Their participation further enhanced the prestige and credibility of the petition and suggested a widening circle of oppositional voices within the party-state. Former Vice-President, Nguyễn Thị Bình, whose role in negotiating the end of US involvement in the Vietnam War endeared her to domestic and foreign populations alike, also signed this petition.

Again one year later, this coalition of intellectuals led a third petition to demand the release of lawyer and democracy activist Cù Huy Hà Vũ, who had been sentenced on charges of “spreading propaganda against the state.” If the bauxite petitions had provided these petitioners with a degree of political shielding, the petition for Cù Huy Hà Vũ was explicitly political. It explicitly challenged the party-state on practices of censorship, political repression, and human rights violations. They were obviously not the first group of Vietnamese persons to speak out about these matters, but they demonstrated that a growing number of influential persons inside Vietnam were willing to do so.

Later that year, a few other petitions emerged in response to skirmishes with China in the Eastern Sea, or South China Sea. They included a petition led by a retired military general that demanded the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to clarify its position on statements it made that appeared to support China’s sovereign claims in the Eastern Sea, another led by intellectuals inside Vietnam criticizing Vietnamese leaders’ poor management and apparent complicity towards the maritime conflict, and two others led by overseas Vietnamese intellectuals expressing a similar critique. These petitions brought to the fore growing public concerns over Chinese sovereignty claims in the Eastern Sea and aimed them at Vietnam’s political leadership and political system. The petitions also emerged during eleven weeks of weekly demonstrations in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to protest against China’s actions in the Eastern Sea. The petition helped bring legitimacy and awareness to these, at that time, rare expressions of mass discontent. A few of the petition leaders joined these protests.

In 2012, two other online petitions showed their growing popularity among an increasingly wide cross-section of Vietnamese society. The two petitions brought attention to separate cases of government land expropriation. One involved a farmer in Hà Phong, who had hid in a tree in his orchard to shoot at incoming police officers. The other concerned mass demonstrations over government land expropriations for private investments in a province adjacent to Hanoi, which at various times had been forcibly repressed by domestic security. The petitions protested the injustice of the expropriations and defended the rights of local
people to demonstrate peacefully against them. These petitions were significant because they connected popular grievances over land and justice with a more critical discourse of the Vietnamese political system, notably in its practices of repressing peaceful expression and hiding information. They also demonstrated the capacity of the petitions to bring diverse Vietnamese groups together, including the hundreds of farmers and local residents in these provinces who also signed the petition.

The popularity of the online petitions reached a new level in 2013, when 15,000 Vietnamese persons signed a petition by 72 intellectuals and influential figures (for which it became dubbed as the “Petition of 72”) to comment on revisions being carried out by the government on the national constitution. If previous petitions had challenged the authoritarian policies and practices of the party-state, the Petition of 72 set out a constitutional formula for transitioning towards a more liberal and democratic state. It called for a “society based on democracy, equality and rule of law” (Para 11), protecting the “natural rights of humans” according to the criteria of the United Nations’ Declaration on Human Rights (Para 18), limiting powers of the state to expropriate land (Para 24), and “protect[ing] in reality the independence of the judicial system” (Para 25). The petition also provided a proposed draft for the new constitution, which notably omitted the current article that establishes the Vietnamese Communist Party as the sole “force leading the State and society.”

The push for democratic reforms continued in dramatic fashion in 2014, notably with an open letter by 61 prominent party members (nearly half of whom had also signed the Petition of 72) that boldly called for party members and leaders to “voluntarily and proactively . . . leave off from the mistaken path of socialism for a definitive change to the path of the people and democracy, and most importantly change the political system from totalitarianism to democracy in a decisive but stable way” (Para 6). This letter emerged during the tumultuous events that followed China’s placement of a state-owned oil rig—together with more than one hundred protective Chinese vessels—in Vietnamese waters on the Eastern Sea in May 2014. The petitioners used the extraordinary events, which including rioting and attacks on foreign factories, to suggest that Vietnam’s socialist authoritarian system was failing and to demand for democratic reforms. Such explicit calls for democratic reform were also made in

---


7 In addition, the petitioners argued that one of the basic objectives of the Constitution was to “limit abuse of power by the authorities” (Para 5) and rejected its manipulation to spread propaganda for any particular organization (Para 7). “Kiến nghị về Sửa Đổi Hiến Pháp 1992 [Petition on Revisions to the 1992 Constitution],” January 19, 2013, http://boxitvn.blogspot.sg/2013/01/kien-nghi-ve-sua-oi-hien-phap-1992.html.


a collective statement to support pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong in October 2014. This statement encouraged Vietnamese youth, parents and teachers to learn from the Hong Kong protestors by developing a “deep awareness of democracy” (Para 8) and to take up democratic struggle at home.\footnote{10}

This overview highlights but a few of the more important online petitions that have emerged since the bauxite mining petition of 2009. It shows how the petitions began slowly and cautiously at first, but in every year since 2009, have become more frequent, more popular, and bolder in their criticisms of the party-state. In the next section, I assess their significance for Vietnam’s domestic politics.

ASSESSING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ONLINE PETITIONS

The online petitions have been an important new development in Vietnamese politics. On one level, they have been important simply for bringing public attention to controversial issues and current events that are more usually censored in domestic media or strongly distorted by state propaganda. Beyond this, they have brought diverse groups together around issues of common concern and helped promote liberal democratic ideals. These achievements, however, must be understood within the context of recent developments in the Vietnamese socio-political sphere and the particular type of intervention that the online petitions make upon it.

To be sure, the online petitions reflect the rise of the Internet in Vietnam and its growing use as a tool for domestic contestation. However, the political significance of the petitions is not simply as a manifestation of a new technological development. As the scholarly literature has argued, the causal relation between Internet development and democratization is neither clear nor automatic, especially in authoritarian regimes.\footnote{11} Just as important as the technology itself are the questions about who is using it and how it is being used. The online petitions are an example of one concrete application of Internet technology for the purposes of challenging state authority and democratizing political space.

In this regard, it is important to recognize who have been leading the online petitions. As discussed above, they are prominent Vietnamese intellectuals and other influential figures, many of whom are now retired or semi-retired and spent their entire careers in the service of the party-state. They combine an intellectual leadership with nationalist credentials, which distinguishes them from previous groups of democracy activists in Vietnam and makes them powerful spokespersons in the eyes of the Vietnamese public. Their personae reflect what


Dan Slater has referred to as “communal elites,” who are society’s primary possessors of nationalist or—in other cases—religious authority and who have been “pivotal” to successful democratic mobilization in other Southeast Asian countries. ¹²

Indeed, Slater argues that the main reason for Vietnam’s “chronic lack of democratic mobilization” has been the absence of politically autonomous communal elites. ¹³ Rather, the Vietnamese Communist Party’s monopoly over nationalist authority has left democracy activists “chronically hamstrung by their symbolic disadvantage” and ensured the endurance of authoritarian rule. ¹⁴ The online petitions have helped leading intellectuals and influential figures gain public recognition as communal elites capable of challenging state ideology.

Furthermore, the type of intervention the petitions are making on political discourse has also been important, not only for raising awareness or sharing information but even more so for formulating discourses of opposition and contestation. In this regard, anti-Chinese sentiment has been used in the petitions as a forceful point of leverage against state leaders. The resurgence of widespread anti-Chinese sentiment in Vietnam has also been a recent development of the past five to ten years in response to China’s growing assertiveness and militarization in the Eastern Sea. However, the petitions have helped shape these anxieties into a political discourse that is more critical of state leaders and the political system.

While the convergence of the online petitions and anti-Chinese sentiment was already evident from the first bauxite petition, it was most spectacular in the oil rig incident of May 2014. ¹⁵

As discussed above, the petitions used the oil rig incident not only to condemn Chinese actions but also to chastise Vietnam’s own political leaders and demand for radical changes in its political system. While opposition to the communist party and calls for democratic reforms are not new to Vietnam, they have gained new potency in the online petitions by their association with historically-rooted anxieties over Chinese domination. In this regard, it is worthwhile recalling historian Peter Zinoman’s final analysis on the Nhan Van-Giai Pham Affair of the late 1950s, which to this day remains one of the most significant—if quashed and repressed—challenges to state authority among party members. ¹⁶ Zinoman concluded that, in comparison with the dissident movements in Eastern Europe, the NVGP was a weak reformist movement. It shared many similarities with those dissident movements, but it

---

¹³ Ibid., 213.
¹⁴ Ibid., 226.
lacked two critical ones, namely an expressed anxiety over a regional hegemon and connections with other politically active or disgruntled segments of society. China raises the spectre of the regional hegemon and the petitions have been effective using this common concern to connect with diverse public groups, among them students, workers and farmers.

Not least of all, the prominent intellectuals and influential figures that have led the online petitions have increasingly used them to promote liberal democratic ideals. While at first the petitions challenged state authority on specific issues (e.g., bauxite mining, detention of Cù Huy Hà Vũ, controversial statements by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), increasingly they have called for democratic reforms. These calls were made most explicitly and spectacularly in the Petition of 72 on constitutional revisions and the open letter of the 61 party members in the wake of the oilrig incident. However, many other petitions also espoused a liberal democratic discourse in their arguments for freedom of speech and conscience, protection of human rights, private property and rule of law. While the petition movement itself may not be entirely democratic—notably, it is led by elite figures and biased in its online technology towards urban and wealthier populations—it reflects an effort to open up and democratize political discussion in Vietnam. It does so by drawing diverse public groups together around common areas of concern.

CONCLUSION: PROSPECTS OF POLITICAL REFORM

Whether major political reforms will arrive in Vietnam depends on many factors, including some that are not necessarily within Vietnam’s control (e.g., economic shocks). However, the petitions are making known to state leaders and the outside world—too often complicit in the rekindled war stories and orientalist narratives that assume popular support for an authoritarian party-state—that the Vietnamese public demands more from its political institutions. The online petitions themselves have been important in capturing and expressing growing aspirations towards a more liberal democratic system. By way of conclusion, I will discuss some limitations of the petitions while further specifying the nature of their intervention and significance.

Skeptics will point out that the actual number of persons signing the online petitions is small or suggest that they are being driven primarily by overseas Vietnamese anti-communist groups. While overseas Vietnamese have been important to the petitions, the latter claim is unfounded. The people leading the petitions are in the majority from inside the country, as well as the persons signing onto them. Even among those from outside Vietnam, only a small minority can be said to be part of overseas Vietnamese anti-communist groups. More important is that a wide range of Vietnamese groups are finding common cause with such radical groups, and the overseas Vietnamese population more generally.

The point is more valid that the total number of persons represent only a tiny fraction of the national population. Even the near 15,000 persons who signed the Petition of 72 represent less than a tenth of a percent of the domestic population. However, they are a vanguard group
engaging in politically risky behavior to try to advance a new cause, including both those persons leading the petitions and the ones signing them. By declaring their names, jobs and addresses on the petition, they expose themselves to retribution by state authorities with concrete evidence of potentially subversive behavior. Furthermore, the popular support behind the petition, precisely because of the harsh political context, is unknown. The amount of public discussion they have created online and through informal conversation suggests that it is significantly more than what is represented solely by the list of signatures. As suggested above, the widening forms of contestation that have emerged in Vietnam since the bauxite petition of 2009 suggest that the online petitions are having an at least supportive if not catalytic role in transforming the domestic political sphere.

Others have also noted that the petitions have been almost entirely ineffective in influencing state decisions or government policy, as top leaders most often choose to ignore the petitions officially and then suppress and repress them unofficially. However, this argument misinterprets the purpose of the petitions, which is more performative than instrumental. Their purpose is not to influence political leaders in whom they have little faith, but rather to show and make visible to the Vietnamese public how obdurate and uninterested these leaders are. This also partly explains why the petitions movement lacks more formal organizational structures that could help them advocate their specific causes. Once again, the purpose is not so much to triumph in specific (lost) causes, but rather to make an intervention on political consciousness and culture in Vietnam. That intervention is to develop a greater political awareness among the public and forge popular grievances and anxieties into a more pointed criticism of the party-state.

As the country’s top leaders prepare for the next National Party Congress, it would be wise for them to consider these new trends in domestic contestation and hopefully consider policies that can help resolve the growing tensions rather than inflame them further.
Table 1. Selection of Online Petitions 2009-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Initial Signatures (#)</th>
<th>Total Signatures (#)</th>
<th>Lead signature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Petition on the Master Plan and projects for bauxite mining in Vietnam</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>April 9th</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>2746</td>
<td>Nguyễn Huệ Chí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petition on bauxite mining in the Central Highlands, in light of the red mud spill disaster at the Ajka Timfoldgyar factory, Hungary</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>October 9th</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2765</td>
<td>Hoàng Tụy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petition for the release of Citizen Cù Huy Hà Vũ</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>April 9th</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1889</td>
<td>Nguyễn Huệ Chí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petition to Ministry of Foreign Affairs to clarify its relations with China</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>July 2nd</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>No longer available</td>
<td>Nguyễn Trọng Vinh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petition for the protection and development of the country in the current situation</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>July 10th</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1219</td>
<td>Hồ Uy Liêm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Letter to the Leaders of Vietnam on Foreign Threats and National Strengths</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>August 21st</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>No longer available</td>
<td>Đoàn Quốc Sỹ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Description</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Month</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Signatures</td>
<td>Signer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total reform to develop the country [note: overseas Vietnamese]</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>September 8th</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Hồ Tú Bảo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petition of the citizens [on case of Đoàn Văn Vươn]</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>February</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1361</td>
<td>Lê Hiện Đức</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declaration on the forceful expropriation of land in Văn Giang [in Hưng Yên Province]</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>May 1st (Int'l Labour Day)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>3350</td>
<td>Nguyễn Huệ Chí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open letter [by the persons who signed the 7-11 and 9-11 petitions]</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Aug 6, 2012</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Nguyễn Quang A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declaration to oppose the Chinese authorities on printing an image of the &quot;cow's tongue&quot; [i.e., nine-dash line on South China Sea] in citizen passports</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>November 25th</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>Nguyễn Đình Đâu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeal to enforce human rights in accordance with the National Constitution of Vietnam</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>December 25th (Christmas Day)</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>Hoàng Tuy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petition</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Signature Count</td>
<td>Petitioner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petition for revising the National Constitution of 1992 [Petition of 72]</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Nguyễn Quang A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declaration to oppose Decree 72 of the Government</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>Nguyễn Quang A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter to demand pursuit of legal action against China in international court</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Nguyễn Quang A and Lê Trung Tịnh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter on the urgent situation of the country</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>Phạm Xuân Yêm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter to the Central Committee and all Party members of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Nguyễn Trọng Vĩnh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declaration on the pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong and Vietnam</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Bạch Đằng giang Foundation, Đại diện: Ths Phạm Bá Hải**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demand for release of writer Nguyễn Quang Lấp, also known as blogger Quê Choa</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Nguyễn Ngọc</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Signatures no longer available online. This figure is taken from Malesky (2013)**

**This petition was led by organizations, each listed with a representative individual**