

RESEARCHERS AT SINGAPORE'S *INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES* SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

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## **Reflections on the Oil Rig Crisis: Vietnam's Domestic Opposition Grows**

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In addition to inflating regional tensions, China's most recent provocations in the South China Sea have heightened tensions in Vietnam's domestic politics. Rather than a broad show of solidarity, the Vietnamese public's response to the oil rig crisis has highlighted growing divisions between the people and the government.
- The groups and networks who led the public discourse on the oil rig crisis were well-known and widely respected regime critics. Their outrage against China was tightly wound up with admonishments against the Vietnamese regime's arcane and authoritarian tendencies for dealing with the South China Sea conflict.
- Through online discourses, collective statements, and, increasingly, public demonstrations, these groups and networks have found new ways to pressure the regime and raise public awareness on some of the most highly sensitive and traditionally taboo political topics.
- Despite the recent development of China moving its oil rig to a new project near Hainan, tensions continue to simmer and critical discourses and expressions of opposition continue.

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## INTRODUCTION

When China announced it would deploy up to three more oil rigs in disputed waters with Vietnam, it made clear that it had no intentions of relenting in its current stand-off in the South China Sea. And despite moving the rig to a new project area near Hainan last week—a month earlier than planned—tensions continue to simmer with observers still fearing further escalation of the conflict.<sup>1</sup>

The situation has created an especially difficult dilemma for the government, which is caught navigating the Scylla and the Charybdis. It is especially acute for the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam, whose exclusive right-to-rule has been historically based on its ability to protect the nation from foreign domination.

While the Vietnamese response to the oil rig issue has been widely characterized as an undifferentiated outpouring of nationalism, it is worthwhile to recall that the voices leading to the public's condemnation of the Chinese rig belonged to some of the country's most well-known and well-respected regime critics. Tightly wound up with their condemnation of the rig was a sharp rebuke of the government. As one protestor at the oil rig demonstrations expressed, "We want to send a message to the Vietnamese government...they are responsible for this situation."<sup>2</sup>

This Perspective argues that the Vietnamese public response to the oil rig crisis reflects a growing political culture and consciousness that has become increasingly vocal and assertive in recent years, and for which the South China Sea conflict has been its most important rallying issue. By studying the discourses and demonstrations that emerged last May in reaction to the oil rig crisis, I address questions about who these groups leading these discussions were, what kind of challenge they presented to the regime, and consider how serious that challenge may be.

## THE REGIME CRITICS WHO LED THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Shortly after reports emerged about a Chinese oil rig being deployed to areas of the South China Sea that Vietnam claims to be within its Exclusive Economic Zone—and especially after online video footage was circulated of a Chinese ship ramming a Vietnamese one—the Vietnamese public expressed outright condemnation of China's "invasive" actions. Certain elements within the domestic press—both printed and online—presented a barrage of reporting on the topic (even despite little information available to them) and highlighted strong statements made by, for the most part,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Diplomat*, "So China Moved Its Oil Rig. What Now?", 17 July 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/07/so-china-moved-its-oil-rig-what-now> [accessed: 20 July 2014].

<sup>2</sup> Agence France-Presse, "Vietnamese Protests against China Gather Pace, Fuelling Regional Tension," *The Guardian*, 11 May 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/11/vietnamese-protests-against-china-gather-pace> [accessed: 11 May 2014].

lower level state officials, such as the Vietnamese Coast Guard officer who promised that “Vietnam will strike back!”<sup>3</sup>

However, for a wider and more candid discussion, many turned to the Internet, particularly websites and blogging sites well-known for their critical opinions and political content. Amid these discussions, certain groups took the lead in making collective denunciations of the Chinese rig. One of the first was a group of “20 Civil Society Organizations.”<sup>4</sup> However, these were not just typical civil society organizations or NGOs, which, in Vietnam, tend to remain silent on such politically sensitive issues. Rather, they represented some of the most politically contentious activist groups and individuals to have emerged in recent years<sup>5</sup>.

Among this group of twenty were *civic and political activist organizations*, such as the Civil Society Forum (formed earlier this year), the Friendship Association for Political and Religious Prisoners, and the human rights and democracy activist coalition Bloc 8406, which scholar Carlyle Thayer once described as the most advanced expression of an interconnected “political civil society” inside Vietnam<sup>6</sup>; *blogger groups and networks*, such as the Vietnam Bloggers Network (also formed earlier this year) and some of the most widely read and scandalous political sites on Vietnamese politics today, such as *Dan Lam Bao* [Citizen Journalist], *Dan Luan* [People’s Forum] and *Anh Ba Sam*; and *religious organizations and advocacy groups*, such as the Association for the Protection of Religious Rights and Freedoms, Nguyen Kim Dien’s Clergymen Group, and the Unified Sangha Buddhist Church of Vietnam, whose political struggles with the party-state have been long-standing. Among them were also what may be called *patriotic groups*, such as the Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City chapters of the No-U Group (referring to the U-shape claim of China in the South China Sea) and the Facebook group Patriotic Diary, which have also emerged in recent years to raise public awareness and criticize the Vietnamese leadership on the South China Sea conflict.

These organizations are not only politically active, but are some of the most vocal and confrontational regime critics, many of whom have suffered years of surveillance, harassment and imprisonment at the hands of the party-state. Other groups and coalitions of this type also issued collective statements in the early days of this crisis, including the Vietnam Independent Writers’ Association, which is a group of

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<sup>3</sup> X. Linh et al., “Nếu Tàu TQ Tiếp Tục Đâm, Việt Nam Sẽ Đáp Lại,” *VietNamNet*, 7 May 2014, <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/chinh-tri/174229/neu-tau-tq-tiep-tuc-dam--viet-nam-se-dap-lai.html> [accessed: 11 May 2014].

<sup>4</sup> “Lời Kêu Gọi Biểu Tình Yêu Nước Của 20 Tổ Chức Dân Sự Việt Nam [Call to Protest of the 20 Civic Organizations of Vietnam],” *Bauxite Việt Nam*, 8 May 2014, <http://anonymouse.org/cgi-bin/anon-www.cgi/http://www.boxitvn.net/bai/25964> [accessed: 11 May 2014]. Note that in this and subsequent statements issued by this collective of organizations, they at first referred to themselves as Vietnamese “civic organizations” [to chuc dan su] and later as “civil society organizations” [to chuc xa hoi dan su]. For the sake of consistency and simplicity, I have chosen to use only the latter term because it seems to be the one that these groups finally settled on together.

<sup>5</sup> Some of these groups, however, have had a much longer history.

<sup>6</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam and the Challenge of Political Civil Society,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 31, no. 1 (2009): 1–27.

writers from inside and outside the country whose announcement to establish the Association earlier this year recalled the *Nhan Van-Giai Pham* Affair of the 1950s<sup>7</sup>; the Vietnam Episcopal Council, which was formed in the 1960s to assert its independence from the party-state and declare its ultimate allegiance to the Vatican; and the Bauxite Vietnam group, whose online petition in 2009—which involved a Chinese state-owned enterprise mining bauxite in a geo-politically sensitive region—collected an unprecedented number of Vietnamese signatures in opposition to a major policy of the party-state.

Fifty-three intellectuals from Ho Chi Minh City also issued a statement on the Chinese rig, who deserve special mention.<sup>8</sup> The “intellectual” is a popular, if loosely conceived, term for referring to prominent Vietnamese scientists, artists, reporters and others who are also social and politically active. Among this group of 53 were several *highly accomplished scholars*, such as former members of the Prime Minister’s Research Council, Tuong Lai and Tran Dinh But, and former Rector of the Ho Chi Minh City Economic University, Dao Cong Tien; *well-known writers and reporters*, such as writer Pham Ding Trong, former Voice-of-Vietnam correspondent Le Phu Khai, and former Editor-in-Chief for the Party’s *Lao Dong* [Labour] newspaper, Tong Van Cong; five Catholic priests from dioceses in the Ho Chi Minh City area, including Bishop Phaolo [Paolo] Nguyen Thai Hop; and nearly half of whom were former state officials from such organizations as the Vietnam Fatherland Front, the National Assembly, the Ministry of Public Security and different administrative, technical and security offices of Ho Chi Minh City. A handful of these signatories also listed affiliations with the former Republic of Vietnam (aka South Vietnam), while five indicated that they were *former political prisoners*.

In sum, the groups leading the condemnation of the Chinese oil rig were some of the nation’s most potent regime critics. Their particular combination of public prestige, illustrious personal, and outspoken criticism, for which many have paid a high price, have made them the closest thing to an alternative leadership or “vanguard group” in the party-state.

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<sup>7</sup> The Nhan Van-Giai Pham Affair of the 1950s was the last time a group of artists and writers collectively tried to assert their independence from the party-state and for which they were also brutally punished for decades.

<sup>8</sup> “Tuyên Bố Của Ban Vận Động Văn Đoàn Độc Lập Việt Nam về Việc Trung Quốc Cho Giàn Khoan HD – 981 và Các Tàu vũ Trang Xâm Chiếm Vùng Biển Thuộc Chủ Quyền Việt Nam [Declaration of the Mobilization Committee of the Vietnam Independent Writers’ Association on China Moving Oil Rig HS-981 and Other Armed Vessels into the Sovereign Waters of Vietnam],” Bauxite Việt Nam, 8 May 2014, <http://anonymouse.org/cgi-bin/anon-www.cgi/http://www.boxitvn.net/bai/25966> [accessed: 11 May 2014]; “Chúng Ta Đã Ở Vào Thế Chẳng Đặng Đứng [We Are in the Position of No Turning Back],” Bauxite Việt Nam, 8 May 2014, <http://anonymouse.org/cgi-bin/anon-www.cgi/http://www.boxitvn.net/bai/25968> [accessed: 11 May 2014]; Paulo Bui Van Doc, “Thư Kêu Gọi Của Đức TGM Phaolô Bùi Văn Đọc, Chủ Tịch Hội Đồng Giám Mục Việt Nam về Tình Hình Biển Đông [Letter of Archbishop Paolo Bui Van Doc, President of the Vietnam Episcopal Council, on the Situation in the East Sea],” Bauxite Việt Nam, 12 May 2014, <http://anonymouse.org/cgi-bin/anon-www.cgi/http://www.boxitvn.net/bai/26183> [accessed: 12 May 2014]; “Thông Báo về Mit Tinh Chống Trung Quốc Xâm Lược [Announcement of Meeting to Protest Chinese Invasion],” Bauxite Việt Nam, 10 May 2014, <http://anonymouse.org/cgi-bin/anon-www.cgi/http://www.boxitvn.net/bai/26047> [accessed: 11 May 2014].

## THE DOMESTIC POLITICS OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA CONFLICT

The online discourses and collective statements issued by these critics offer insight into the current state of domestic politics. First and foremost, their condemnation of the oil rig was articulated in such a way that they reinforced criticisms of the party-state's arcane and authoritarian tendencies in dealing with the South China Sea conflict. In particular, they admonished the leadership against its standard practices of restricting public information, resorting to secretive meetings with Beijing, and, above all, punishing and repressing Vietnamese citizens for expressing their "love of country" (*yeu nuoc*) in the South China Sea.<sup>9</sup> Many of them also called explicitly for the imminent release of bloggers and other prisoners of conscience, such as Anh Ba Sam, who is a well-known critic of the Vietnamese leadership on the South China Sea conflict, and who was arrested amid the first reports of the Chinese rig in early May.<sup>10</sup>

However, these demands were not, as has often been suggested, simply opportunistic add-ons to a general outpouring of nationalist sentiment. Rather, they were central to these groups' particular vision—or re-vision—of the Vietnamese nation, notably one in which communist authoritarianism has a questionable role at best.

Second, these particular discourses were also the ones from which emerged the initial calls for public demonstrations against the Chinese rig. Specifically, the group of 20 Civil Society Organizations called for demonstrations to begin in front of the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi and the municipal Cultural House in Ho Chi Minh City at 9 am on Sunday, May 11<sup>th</sup>, and the group of 53 intellectuals had called for another demonstration at the Opera House in Ho Chi Minh City at the same time on the same day.<sup>11</sup> That these groups were able to openly announce and organize these demonstrations was in itself a remarkable event, as the Vietnamese state has tended to pursue a strict policy of zero tolerance for public demonstrations. It is also testimony to the significant momentum that these groups and networks have built in recent years, especially in relation to the South China Sea conflict.

To be sure, public demonstrations on the South China Sea conflict have been occurring in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City almost every year since 2007. While the early ones were fleeting one-off events and counted on little more than a few dozen persons, in 2011 their numbers rose to several hundreds. The 2011 demonstrations

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<sup>9</sup> "Lời Kêu Gọi Biểu Tình Yêu Nước Của 20 Tổ Chức Dân Sự Việt Nam [Call to Protest of the 20 Civic Organizations of Vietnam]"; "Chúng Ta Đã Ở Vào Thế Chẳng Đặng Đùng [We Are in the Position of No Turning Back]."

<sup>10</sup> Although the timing was uncanny, it was most likely coincidental, if only because the Vietnamese security forces are rarely able to act so quickly in response to new developments, as, indeed, subsequent events regarding the oil rig crisis would seem to indicate.

<sup>11</sup> On the Friday before, a small group of persons had held out signs and banners in front of the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi—and received many sympathetic honks from passing traffic—but they were reported to be less than a couple of dozen. A simultaneous but smaller demonstration was also reported to have taken place in the Central Region city of Da Nang also on May 11<sup>th</sup>.

were publicly endorsed and joined by many prominent intellectuals, which raised both public awareness of the demonstrations and credibility for the demonstrators, and they were carried out every Sunday morning for eleven straight weeks before being busted up by security forces.

The organization of the initial demonstrations on May 11<sup>th</sup> explicitly recalled for Sunday morning in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City explicitly connected them to a longer and increasingly widespread history of public opposition to the regime's handling of the South China Sea conflict. They were as much a response to the oil rig crisis as a product of this growing wave of political activism and domestic opposition.

## STATE RESPONSE AND CONTINUING TENSIONS

How serious a challenge these groups and coalitions actually pose to the regime's political stability is a most difficult question. We might, however, gain some sense of it by measuring the regime's own response to these events.

The initial oil rig demonstrations created a considerable dilemma for the government. To crack down on the demonstrators would appear to reconfirm the allegations that had been raised against it and their underlying suspicions that it was more interested in saving itself than protecting the nation. However, allowing the demonstrations to continue would only allow the public swell of opposition to continue to rise against them during a very volatile political moment.

Then whether by chance or—as some Vietnamese have argued—design, riots broke out that helped the leadership out of the dilemma.

Riots began in the southern provinces of Binh Duong and Dong Nai on May 13<sup>th</sup> and another in the central province of Ha Tinh the following day. They were a shock to people inside and outside of Vietnam, and resulted in over three hundred foreign factories being ransacked, looted and, in some cases, burnt to the ground; more than one hundred people injured; and the death of at least two Chinese nationals.

However, it would be highly misleading to equate these riots with the peaceful demonstrations that took place only a couple of days earlier. They occurred in different places (provincial towns rather than major cities), among different kinds of people (young workers rather than a wide cross-section of urban groups), and they had no traceable history or public discourse that would connect them with a broader social group or movement.

Furthermore, multiple reports have suggested that groups of young men had an active role in instigating the violent acts. They were reported by state and non-state sources to be riding around on motorcycles, crashing through factory gates, calling on employers to release their workers for protesting, handing out flags, banners and even, some reported, money, and carrying sticks, crowbars, combustion fuel

and other appurtenances useful for organizing and inciting a riot. However, despite having detained more than 1,000 persons in connection with the riots, domestic security has been unable yet to offer a credible explanation of who these mysterious groups were, where they came from, how they were organized or what their motivations might have been.

Nonetheless, the gravity of the situation required a serious response and the government did not hesitate. When the same peaceful demonstrators tried to assemble again in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City on the following Sunday of May 18th, they were met with what can only be described as an elaborate show of state force. Estimates of as many as 4,000 security officers were present on Hanoi streets to monitor and control a gathering of what had been a few hundred people the week before. Reports also emerged of police officers surrounding the houses of certain bloggers, intercepting them on their way to demonstration sites, and in some cases, beating and arresting them. To be sure, demonstrators must have been surprised to see that the party-state's initial warnings of a strong stance and harsh actions on the oil rig crisis would be most visibly carried out on them.

In certain ways, the party-state's response to the oil-rig demonstrations was par for the course—cracking down on public demonstrations. However, the emergence of the initial demonstration in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City were exceptional because of the broad public support they had. Only by using large riotous demonstrations in one place as justification to quell small peaceful ones in another was the leadership able to evade this challenge.

## CONCLUSION

China's recent actions in the South China Sea have put the Vietnamese government on a razor's edge. It has raised the stakes on an issue that numerous and diverse Vietnamese groups have used in recent years to rally together and openly criticize the party-state regime. While the regime has historically been able to marginalize dissidents and justify harsh punitive measures against them by insinuating that they were opposed to Vietnam (as embodied by the party-state), the conflict in the South China Sea has reversed the terms of that equation. It shows a nationalist and patriotic citizenry harassed and repressed by the regime. That is the key point so often missed when examining Vietnam's recent outpouring of nationalist sentiment over conflicts in the South China Sea.

While the government has managed to quell public demonstrations against the Chinese oil rig for the moment, these criticisms and challenges to the regime continue to be posted and circulated online. Since news of the riots spread, many of the groups mentioned above have circulated more petitions and collective statements condemning the use of violent expression but also continuing to criticize the arcane

and authoritarian tendencies of the the leadership in its handling of the South China Sea conflict.<sup>12</sup> Their initiatives have also drawn in a growing number of citizens – for example, outspoken mathematician Nguyen Quang A co-drafted an open letter urging the government to pursue international legal action against China, which collected 3,711 online signatures, and another petition signed by 115 prominent intellectuals has received over one thousand online signatures.<sup>13</sup>

While these groups and coalitions continue to struggle against the authoritarianism of the party-state, often at great personal and professional risk, they have also shown themselves wary of violent confrontation. Their general strategy appears to be more about slowly winning over the hearts and minds of Vietnamese people, rather than sudden and potentially violent confrontation. It is also interesting to note that while past debates over important political matters were almost exclusively confined to infighting within the Party's high-level factions, the Vietnamese public now seems to be taking on a more important role.

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<sup>12</sup> Huỳnh Tấn Mẫm, "Lời Kêu Gọi [A Call]," Bauxite Việt Nam, 14 May 2014, <http://anonymouse.org/cgi-bin/anon-www.cgi/http://vanviet.info/van-de-hom-nay/loi-keu-goi/> [accessed: 14 May 2014]. "Tuyên Bố Chung Của Một Số Tổ Chức Xã Hội Dân Sự về Các Cuộc Biểu Tình Của Công Nhân Chống Trung Quốc Xâm Lược [Declaration of Some Civil Society Organizations on the Workers' Protests against Chinese Invasion]," Bauxite Việt Nam, 17 May 2014, <http://anonymouse.org/cgi-bin/anon-www.cgi/http://www.boxitvn.net/bai/26384> [accessed: 17 May 2014].

<sup>13</sup> Huỳnh Tấn Mẫm, "Lời Kêu Gọi [A Call]"; Lê Trung Tĩnh and Nguyễn Quang A, "Gửi Thư, Lời Cảm Ơn, và Ý Nghĩa Của Từng Chữ Ký [Sent Letter, a Word of Thanks and the Significance of Each Signatures]," Bauxite Việt Nam, 28 May 2014, <http://anonymouse.org/cgi-bin/anon-www.cgi/http://www.boxitvn.net/bai/26708> [accessed: 28 May 2014]; Nguyễn Quang A and Lê Trung Tĩnh, "Thư Yêu Cầu Khởi Kiến Trung Quốc Ra Tòa Án Quốc Tế [Letter Demanding to Sue China in the International Court]," Bauxite Việt Nam, 15 May 2014, <http://anonymouse.org/cgi-bin/anon-www.cgi/http://www.boxitvn.net/bai/26324> [accessed: 15 May 2014]; "Thư Ngỏ về Tình Hình Khẩn Cấp Của Đất Nước [Open Letter on the Critical Situation of the Nation]," Bauxite Việt Nam, 5 June 2014, <http://anonymouse.org/cgi-bin/anon-www.cgi/http://www.boxitvn.net/bai/26776> [accessed: 5 June 2014].

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