

Mass Protests Sweep Vietnam for The First Time in Decades

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<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/vietnam-protests-economic-zones-cyber-security/>



An Arab spring has started to emerge in Vietnam,” said Pham Chi Dung, a former member of the ruling Communist Party, following the largest and most widespread protests in years.

Over the weekend of June 9-10, tens of thousands of Vietnamese took to the streets across the country to protest two bills on cyber security and the creation of new special economic zones, or EEZs. The protest began with the participation of around 50,000 workers from the Pouchen footwear factory in Tan Tao industrial zone in Ho Chi Minh City, the biggest economic hub in the Southeast Asian nation.

Thousands of people gathered in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Danang, Nha Trang and other cities, chanting and carrying banners that read “Say no to bill on EEZs,” “No land lease to China even for one day,” and “Cyber security law means silencing people.”

The protests showed how widespread the dissatisfaction is with systemic corruption, serious large-scale environmental pollution, deep social inequality, and the government’s weak response to China’s violations of Vietnam’s sovereignty in the resource-rich sea.

In an article for the unregistered Independent Journalist Association of Vietnam, Dung said the protests mark **“the first time since 1975 [when the communists took over South Vietnam] that an action directly challenged the ruling government had been taken.”**

The demonstrations took place the week after the National Assembly, the country’s highest legislative body, publicized its plan to discuss and approve the two bills on June 12-15, as part of its month-long session, which started on May 20.

The call urging people to rally circulated on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. Over 60 million Vietnamese people are online, and Facebook — with more than 40 millions users in Vietnam — is the most popular social network in the country.

Vietnam’s security forces responded aggressively to the call for peaceful demonstrations. Authorities sent plainclothes agents and militia to private residences of local activists to prevent them from participating in the protests. Many activists said they had to leave their houses before the weekend and go into hiding to avoid being locked in by security forces. On June 10, large numbers of police, militia **and thugs** were deployed to suppress the demonstrations, detaining hundreds of protesters **and beating others**. While police successfully suppressed small protests in Hanoi by noon, the rallies in Ho Chi Minh City and Nha Trang, went until the early hours of Monday. **Police in Ho Chi Minh City deployed Long Range Acoustic Devices purchased from the United States to equip patrol ships of the Vietnam Coast Guard, which generates intense sound that can cause extreme physical pain and permanently damage hearing.**

In Phan Thiet and Phan Ri, in the central province of Binh Thuan, **police used tear gas and water cannons** on local residents. After one protester was **knocked unconscious** by police, protesters attacked the police’s special units with stones and bricks, and occupied government buildings. Police surrendered and took off their equipment and went home. However, the government was able to take full control there by the morning of June 12.

The police **detained over 500 protesters**, according to state media and leaked information from police. Protesters were interrogated for hours. During their time in detention **they were beaten** and their cell phones

and other belongings were confiscated. Police released many detainees but still keep dozens of others, threatening to prosecute them on allegations of violating national security rules and “causing public disorders.”

According to legal experts, the bill on cyber security will give sweeping new powers to the Vietnamese authorities, allowing them to force technology companies to hand over vast amounts of data, including personal information, and to censor internet users’ posts. According to activists, the law aims to silence government critics and could lead to internet users being criminally charged for exercising their basic right to freedom of expression. As a result, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have called on Hanoi to not approve the bill. The United States and Canada, however, have merely urged Vietnam to postpone the vote on the bill to ensure it aligns with international standards.

Meanwhile, with the law on special economic zones, Vietnam’s communist government wants to establish three zones — namely Van Don, Phu Quoc and Bac Van Phong — **in strategic locations** where foreign investors may be allowed to rent land for 99 years. Activists suspect that the bill is the first step to allow Chinese investors to acquire land and bring untrained Chinese workers to these locations. Many senior economists, including veteran chief economist Pham Chi Lan, **say that Vietnam — which has already signed a number of free trade agreements with the European Union, the United States and other countries — has no need to set up more special economic zones** to attract foreign investment.

In addition to national security issues — with the potential investment from China — these special economic zones will allow companies in these locations to pay lower or no tariffs for years, according to entrepreneur Le Hoai Anh.

In an interview with Free Asia radio, veteran novelist and former communist soldier Nguyen Ngoc said “*I decided to join the protest [because] the EEZ law will severely impact national security, and the cyber security law will kill off people’s right to freedom of expression, freedom to speak out. This will lead to a nation that is lacking in creativity. Everything will be pushed back to the past, while we need to advance towards the future.*”

In response to the public pressure, Vietnam’s communist-controlled parliament and government said they would postpone the discussion and approval of the bill on special economic zones to the next session of the parliament scheduled in October. The cyber security was approved on June 12, and the law will become effective on January 1, 2019. Despite government repression, protests against the approval of the law and parliament’s plan to resume working on the bill on special economic zones in October are expected to continue.

A central concern with the the bill on establishing new special economic zones, is **how it will affect the country’s sovereignty in the East Sea**. Vietnam and China have a long history of disputes. China has sent their armies to attack Vietnam 22 times over the last thousand years, according to historian Dao Tien Thi. In 1979, China sent around 60,000 soldiers to invade the six northernmost provinces of Vietnam, killing tens of thousands of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians and destroying the entire infrastructure there.

In 1988, China also invaded several islands and reefs, known as the Spratly Islands, controlled by Vietnam. In recent years, China has turned these reefs and islands into artificial structures and deployed modern missiles and other military equipment there in a bid to turn the East Sea into its own lake.

The ruling Communist Party of Vietnam, in order to maintain its power in the country, treats China as its closest political ally. The communist government in Hanoi has verbally protested China’s violations instead of taking stronger actions, such as bringing the case to international tribunal court, as the Philippines has done.

Hanoi has systematically suppressed anti-China protests and persecuted anti-Sino activists. Many of them have been convicted and sentenced to lengthy sentences in trumped up politically motivated cases. However, suppression may only increase the number of people in disagreement with the government. As more and more ordinary people become interested in politics, Vietnam’s government needs to carry out drastic political reforms to allow free elections, and must respect human rights as it works to address social dissatisfaction. The government should use dialogue, while local civil society organizations could mediate between protesters and the government. If the leaders insist on running the country with a one-party regime

and continue to rely on violence, the grievances of the people will not be resolved and the nation may fall into internal struggle.

“The administration needs to care for what its people care for,” said Nguyen Si Dung, a former deputy head of the National Assembly office.