

[Why Vietnam Won't Fall](http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2011/03/07/why-vietnam-wont-fall)

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By Carl Robinson

Long-time Vietnamese dissident Dr Nguyen Van Que has no doubt enjoyed his few moments of worldwide attention. Inspired by events in the Middle East, the physician published an [Op-Ed](#) piece in *The Washington Post* last week calling on Hanoi's diehard Communist regime to become "free and democratic." Almost immediately, the police arrested and charged him with calling for the overthrow of the government. But just a couple days later, doubtless after a word from Washington, he was released on bail and allowed to return to his home in southern Ho Chi Minh City, the former Saigon.

The 68-year old must be quite chuffed at poking Hanoi's hornet nest—and seemingly getting away with it. ("Let's dismantle the Politburo" and "assemble in the streets," he said recently on the Internet, according to AFP.) He's been sniping away on human rights and political pluralism since 1978, three years after the collapse of South Vietnam. He's been arrested four times and spent 20 years in prison. In 1998, Dr Que was amnestied on condition he migrates to the United States. But he refused to leave. Not many Vietnamese would turn down an offer like that.

But just how concerned should Vietnam's ruling communists be about a contagion from the Middle East suddenly striking their country? After all, their political pre-eminence is guaranteed by the country's constitution. In early January, Vietnam's Communist Party Congress re-affirmed that supremacy and vowed never to introduce political pluralism. Hanoi gets lectured on a human rights on a regular basis by Washington and groups like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International keep a close eye on dissidents with the latter "adopting" several, including Dr Que.

After traveling extensively around Vietnam over the past 18 months, I can report that Hanoi doesn't have much to worry about. **Quite simply, Vietnam isn't going to follow Tunisia, Egypt and perhaps Libya into collapsing any time soon.** And the reason? Why, perversely, for the very same reasons the old South Vietnam fell to the hard-line, no-compromise communists from the North in 1975. **Nobody wants to fight. They have better things to do.**

After nearly 60 years of Communist Party rule in the North and over 35 years in the South, **all of Vietnam today is extremely individualistic.** Instead of a common sense of purpose and unity, it's every person for him- or herself, the *sauve qui peut* mentality that led to the South's sudden collapse and later desperate escape of the Boat People. The best analogy is to a church-run boarding school where rules are made to be broken or for others to follow, not me. Everyone is treated like children and receive regular religious teachings in the form of constant slogans, anniversaries and grandiose dreams. When I complained about the dreadful echo of the early morning propaganda loudspeakers to a group of Vietnamese in a coastal town recently, one laughed and said, "That's just political noise. I don't hear or see anything!"

Basically, the Vietnamese are satisfied enough with their lot with average incomes steadily rising towards \$2000 a year. Sure, 12 percent inflation is a problem, but three years ago it was running close to 30 percent. Everyone makes do, skimping and scrounging, while hustling a bit harder at work. No one has forgotten how tough life was after 1975. **Hanoi's failed socialist economy experiment morphed into today's free-for-all "market economy" and no one is ready to risk putting where they are today in jeopardy.** And **their children are totally obsessed with materialism and having fun. I simply cannot imagine any circumstances under which the Vietnamese would rebel and overthrow the communist regime.**

Of course, nobody really likes the government. In fact, they are quite united in their dislike, which provides a constant source of conversation—and jokes—over coffee, both a constant of Vietnamese life. Young people easily crack through the firewall around Facebook and post as inanely as their counterparts in the West. With its constant challenges managing a diverse country now over 80 million people, compared to only 30 million at war's end, the government is a soft target for ridicule as people simply get on with their lives.

Corruption is indeed a serious problem and, within certain bounds, a topic the government-controlled media is allowed to explore. Big scandals erupt with regularity. But in their day-to-day lives, **everyone is complicit**, starting with \$15 bribes to avoid speeding tickets or something under the table to speed up that application for a home extension. The money comes back around when these same corrupt officials, whose average wage is only \$150 a month, sit down in a local restaurant to spend their hard-earned bribes. **Everyone is on a fiddle of some kind.** With so many privately-owned businesses, tax avoidance is rife. Outside the depressing statistics, Vietnam has a huge and thriving secondary economy that runs on US dollars and gold bars.

And so, Vietnam's dissenters continue to get the headlines. And in the absence of government and business transparency bloggers continue to peddle hearsay. **But everything takes place under the watchful eyes and ears of Vietnam's internal police.** Occasionally, they swoop in—but always very selectively, reserving a special ire for former communists who've left the tent to call for more pluralism or democracy. The people get the message.

Of course, even one political prisoner is too many. But realistically, Vietnam has fewer than 100 dissidents in jail or house arrest. One rarely hears of systematic torture as in other hard-line regimes. Plus, the regime has been able to export its potential malcontents, first as Boat People and, as the price of normalizing relations with the United States in the 1990's, visas for the thousands of former South Vietnamese military who spent time in re-education camps after 1975. Another price Washington demanded was freedom of travel, and today, Vietnamese can travel overseas. Some never return, but usually for economic rather than political reasons.

In urging his hard line against the communist regime, Dr Que pointed out in his *Post* piece that “Hanoi needs Washington much more than Washington needs Hanoi,” especially as tensions rise over Chinese hegemony into the South China Sea and disputes over two island archipelagos. Hanoi complains vehemently when Washington raises human rights issues, particularly in the State Department's annual reports. But then Vietnam has modified its behaviour, particularly when it comes to religious freedom. Overall, Vietnam is much more open and less restrictive than 15 years ago. Gradual rather than dramatic change is the way things happen in Vietnam.

Barring some monstrous and unforeseen stuff-up, **I believe Vietnam will continue down the path of gradual change.** The long docile National Assembly has started flexing its muscles in recent years, halting a high-speed North-South rail link on cost grounds and speaking out on a Chinese-run bauxite mining project. The selection of candidates for next year's election will be interesting to watch. Authorities are also paying closer attention to public opinion, such as cancelling a huge fireworks display last October marking Hanoi's 1000th birthday after ravishing floods struck central Vietnam. And when people do get angry enough to take to the streets, such as the death of a motorcyclist in police custody in northeast Vietnam last year, the government does respond. **After all Vietnam's upheavals of the past 60 years, another revolution—even rebellion—is simply not in the cards.**

Carl Robinson was an Associated Press correspondent in Vietnam during the war. He now runs the Google Group “Vietnam Old Hacks” for former correspondents and others who worked in South Vietnam during the war. Living in Australia since the war, he is also the author of [Mongolia: Nomad Empire of Eternal Blue Skies](#).