

Vietnam: Extraordinary petition by 'patriotic personalities'

Wednesday 10 August 2011, by [KARADJIS Michael](#) (Date first published: 29 July 2011).

An extraordinary document [1] initiated by some 20 prominent Vietnamese academics, former military figures, former officials, writers etc, expresses great unease about the current situation for Vietnam, faced on the one hand by increasingly aggressive Chinese actions in the East Sea (also known as the South China Sea), and on the other by an economic situation characterised over the last few years by mounting crisis and severe inflation, which is hammering people's living standards.

None of the people who launched this petition or have subsequently signed it (the list currently stands at 1088 people) can be characterised as in any way "anti-Party" people or even people with any history of stirring the pot. On contrary, they are of the kind referred to in the Vietnamese media as "patriotic personalities", that is, people with a life-long pedigree of involvement in the country's historic struggle against US imperialism and/or involvement in the country's reconstruction and development since then, strongly associated with, or members of, the ruling Communist Party (CPV), including former military leaders involved in the country's liberation.

I am not posting this because I necessarily agree or disagree with the contents of their petition, but because, first, the document itself is quite extraordinary, and in today's conditions in the country, brave, and second, because I believe the views expressed in it are currently widespread in Vietnam.

The petition protests, rightly in my view, against the aggressive actions of neighbouring China, which claims the entire East Sea as its own property, and whose actions aim to deliberately humiliate Vietnam so that it understands that the neighbouring rising imperial power is boss. These actions, mainly several years of brutal kidnaps of large numbers of impoverished Vietnamese fisherpeople, who are then held for ransom for weeks or months before being released for many thousands of dollars, and more recently the cutting of cables of Vietnamese ships inside Vietnamese ships, twice inside Vietnamese waters (not even near the disputed islands), have led to revulsion among ordinary Vietnamese, not so much out of misplaced "nationalism" as out of solidarity with the fisherpeople and their families.

However, the petitioners here discuss this issue in a very different way to the anti-communist (or at least anti-government) dissidents and foreign Vietnamese organisations, who in recent years have seized on Chinese aggression, and the Vietnamese government's preference for dialogue and diplomacy, to launch a blatantly nationalistic campaign (which mirrors China's own rhetoric, leaving aside the immense power difference). Their campaign centres on the idea that the CPV is a puppet of China and is therefore deliberately selling the country out.

in fact, the Vietnamese government has never given an inch on the question of its sovereignty over the islands, and continually protests China's actions through various fora, including via multilateral channels such as ASEAN etc. The only thing the Vietnamese government says it will not do is allow the conflict over uninhabited islands to lead to war. the right wing, in demanding "tougher" action, can only be advocating war - without actually saying so. The way they campaign is thoroughly opportunist.

By contrast, the petitioners here continually stress that they want to have good peaceful relations

with China. For example, they call on the government, among other things, to “affirm consistently our goodwill regarding building and preserving friendly and cooperative relations with China” and they stress: “We must make a distinction between a power group within the Chinese government that harbours unethical and illegal plans and actions against Vietnam, and the friendly attitude of the majority of Chinese people toward the Vietnamese people.”

What then are they demanding from the government? When it is read carefully, there are two main aspects to this. The first, and overriding, aspect to the whole document is the demand for more transparency, for more information to the Vietnamese public. The unfortunate reality is that the CPV’s long history of “war communism” due to decades of imperialist siege still has a massive effect on its everyday behaviour, and so this ends up clouding issues and creating misunderstandings, even when issues are straightforward. The petitioners demand the public be informed openly about the nature of the ongoing diplomacy with China over these issues, that more information be made available to the public about the facts of the dispute, and that people be allowed to peacefully protest. On this last point: on many days, the government allows people to publicly protest China’s actions, then on other days it breaks up demonstrations and arrests people. There is simply no justification for such action.

The government does this not because it is a “puppet” of China, but because it sees public protest as embarrassing while it persists with diplomacy; it wants to limit any nationalistic inflammation of the situation. It also fears exploitation of such rallies by anti-government groups, including foreign Vietnamese organisations. However, legitimate protests against violent actions against Vietnamese fisherfolk and Vietnamese boats and ships is not in and of itself nationalistic inflammation; on the contrary, the latter may become a threat precisely when legitimate protest is crushed for no reason, as people suspect the government is “covering up” or “trying to protect China” when it arrests people. This is combined with the lack of overall transparency noted above: if people feel the whole truth is not coming out, if issues are clouded, this gives space to those on the right who want to exploit the situation and raise nationalistic slogans.

An example of the difference is where the petitioners here demand the government “explain the background, content, and legal validity of the message that Premier Pham Van Dong sent to China’s Premier Chu An Lai in 1958 regarding the East Sea, in order to conclusively do away with intentional misinterpretation by China”. This refers to a letter in which Dong supported China’s then decision to extend its territorial waters to 12 miles, in the context of US aggressiveness against China at that time; the letter makes no mention of the disputed Paracel and Spratley island chains, yet not only has China deliberately misinterpreted this to suggest Dong was submitting to China’s claims to the islands, but so have the foreign Vietnamese organisations and their supporters in Vietnam claimed for many years that this was the ultimate “communist sell out” of the nation to China. This claim is sheer demagoguery, and the way the petitioners here handle it is quite the opposite to this.

However, the second aspect to this is the petitioners’ view – and that of increasing numbers of Vietnamese people – that the massive economic penetration of Vietnam by Chinese business is having many negative impacts on Vietnam, and threatens to entangle Vietnam in a neocolonial relationship under the new Chinese superpower. Of particular concern is where the petitioners note that:

“China has won as much as 90% of all engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) contracts in Vietnam in areas such as electric power plants, metal and nonmetallic refining facilities, chemical plants, and bauxite and titanium mining facilities. In contrast, China has imported from Vietnam agricultural products and raw minerals the extraction of which leaves behind environmental problems with long-term consequences.”

Moreover, they place this reality - which does indeed mirror classic relations between an imperialist power and a neocolony - within a context of what they describe as China essentially morphing into a new imperialist power, without using this exact word:

“China, in the role of being “the manufacturing factory of the world” and the biggest money lender, aspires to become a world superpower. Under the cloak of “peaceful rise”, China is projecting its power in multiple forms to infiltrate and dominate other countries on all continents. A number of world analysts are of the opinion that China has surpassed all accomplishments of neo-colonialists after World War II.”

While most of the Western left remain unconvinced that China is becoming a fully imperialist power (regardless of their other views on China and its actions), in my view this is something open to interpretation, and it may be that many are simply refusing to see the bleeding obvious due to a certain rigid view of what constitutes an “imperialist” power. That does not mean I am necessarily convinced either; sometimes what looks like the bleeding obvious may be quite different to what it seems. However, I am open to the idea, and I do not think these Vietnamese veterans are being “nationalistic” for simply expressing this opinion, which may well be correct.

Despite the obviously genuine concerns of these Vietnamese petitioners, however, are they unwittingly allowing themselves to become the vanguard of a new Vietnamese nationalist movement, which may at some point replace the official socialist ideology as the new ideology of capitalist Vietnam? As I have written previously [\[2\]](#), I believe that precisely this is occurring in China, where capitalist relations have developed more rapidly than in Vietnam; and that is also what I think of the openly nationalist ideology of the more right-wing Vietnamese oppositionists described above.

I don't think this is a correct way to describe this current development in Vietnam. It is not out of the question that such a movement could evolve that way, but at this stage, we need to distinguish between the development of a narrow and confrontational nationalism, centred around exploiting traditional and historical anti-China sentiments, on the one hand, and the entirely legitimate protests of Vietnamese people against the brutal and shabby treatment of their impoverished fisherfolk by the naval forces of a mighty superpower, against the increasingly aggressive actions of the Chinese navy against Vietnamese ships in Vietnam's territorial waters as part of its entirely illegitimate claim on the entire East Sea, and against mercenary Chinese business interests in Vietnam, which have tended to be exploitative, corrupt and environmentally destructive.

While some Western leftists react in a concerned way to the very idea of any conflict between what they view as “two socialist countries” (and thus view the Vietnamese reaction as equally dangerous to the Chinese aggression), many of these same people would have an entirely different view if the country kidnapping hundreds of Vietnamese fisherfolk over many years and ramming Vietnamese ships while grabbing most contracts in strategic areas of the economy was a Western imperialist power (especially given that many of those who fought Western imperialism in the past are the same people as those now protesting China's aggressiveness). Clearly, the reaction by a small and poor country against national oppression by a mighty superpower cannot simply be brushed aside as “nationalism”.

The entire issue of the massive Chinese investment in the bauxite-aluminium venture in the Central Highlands is only the most extreme cases regarding Chinese business interests. Whether true or not, the perception that many of these ventures mainly exist due to large-scale bribery of officials by Chinese big business is very widespread; certainly, the fact that Chinese companies are developing the kind of monopoly of contracts in so many crucial areas as described above cannot be explained either as mere coincidence or by “traditional friendship” or by geographic proximity. Chinese foreign investment is in general no better or worse than that from other capitalist and imperialist

countries (though many argue that it is worse in some respects, especially regarding issues such as the environment, food safety and labour), but the growth of this kind of monopoly in such important areas does threaten a neocolonial relationship with one power, leaving Vietnam less bargaining room among investors from a variety of countries.

There is a difference however between a threat and a reality. Vietnam is far from being a neocolony of China, or of anyone else, yet. The level of independence achieved by the revolution is not something that can easily be given away for cash, no matter how much corruption and dealing goes on between Vietnamese elites and Chinese big business. While the petitioners are also not saying it is a neocolony, in my view the danger lies in exaggerating the current relationship to the extent of starting to blame all the rot in the country on the foreign power. While the concerns about Chinese aggression and economic penetration are legitimate, the entanglement of a democratic movement with a "national" issue against a foreign power (when that foreign power is not directly colonising or invading you) does pose difficult problems from the outset, which does give it the potential to develop in a negative nationalistic way.

Even in the case of bauxite, it must be remembered that the Chinese company is in a joint venture with the Vietnamese state minerals corporation. Are they just engaging in this environmentally disastrous venture due to being "bought out by the Chinese", or are they not doing it themselves to make money?

The final thing I want to say here is that there are clearly a wide variety of people with a range of views on other issues involved here. This accounts for the fact that while they describe a drastic economic situation, the rising rich-poor gap and so on, and call for action on this, they do not put forward any specific demands in relation to the economic system. While I noticed two names in the extended list (one of which was in the original list of 20) who are known to be in favour of a greater development of capitalism, many others are life-long communists who hold no such views, and likely the opposite in many cases. Indeed their description of the situation:

"The disparity between rich and poor is widening, and the distribution of income has become more and more unjust. Injustices in the distribution and accumulation of assets, land lease and use, implementation of laws, and formation of new power groups and monopolies are major issues that run contrary to the nation's goal of building "a well-to-do citizenry, a strong country, and a society that is democratic, just, and civilised"."

This is a description of none other than capitalism, and the slogan at the end is precisely the CPV's current euphemism for a socialist country.

Thus, there are no clear economic demands for either a more capitalist or more socialist direction. What they are agreed on, however, is, once again, more openness, more transparency and more democracy. Whether their views bend left or right on economic policy, they all agree that such increased transparency can only help the economy, and can only help root out the cancer of corruption. Whatever the reasons for decades of war communism, caused by being occupied, invaded and bombed for decades by the world's mightiest imperialist powers, this era is long over. Now as capitalism rapidly develops in Vietnam - including within the ruling CPV, which officially invited capitalist membership at its 11th congress earlier this year (a decade later than the Chinese Communist Party did) - the continuation of an undemocratic status quo where the state can use all kinds of arbitrary powers can now increasingly become little more than a repressive cover for those among the ruling elite who use their power to amass fortunes.

Now more than ever, if there is any chance of holding back the onslaught of open capitalism and retaining some elements of the socialist orientation that generations of Vietnamese shed their blood

for, it can only come via greater openness, genuine involvement of the ordinary people in decision making, advancing socialist democracy.

Such open discussion is also the only way that the genuine grievances many Vietnamese people today have with the aggressive and destructive actions of the neighbouring imperial giant to their north can be disentangled from the rabid nationalism being pushed by an array of anti-regime dissidents and overseas Vietnamese anti-communists.

Therefore, whatever my reservations with some of the formulations and some of the potential of this movement, on the whole I think the initiative of these “patriotic personalities” is not only very brave and very praiseworthy in its forthrightness, but also generally a welcome development. I hope the CPV leadership finds the wisdom to respond with dialogue rather than more arrests.

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Long time friend of Vietnam

P.S.

* From Vietnam from the Left:

<http://mihalisvn.blogspot.com/2011/07/extraordinary-petition-to-vietnam.html>

Footnotes

[1] see on ESSF (article 22538) [Vietnam: On the defense and development of the country in the current situation](#).

[2] See on ESSF (article 20158): [China, Vietnam and the islands dispute: What is behind the rise of Chinese nationalism?](#).