

Rising up in Vietnam

Alexandre Sisophon reports on a new wave of environmental protests

In October this year, Nguyen Ngoc Anh, a shrimp farmer from Central Vietnam, was reportedly beaten in jail by a cellmate. His injuries were so bad, his wife was quoted as saying, that he could barely walk. He had been sentenced a few months earlier to six years in jail for using Facebook to “undermine” the government on environment and economic policies. The Communist party is very sensitive to criticism, and news of jail sentences of this kind is not uncommon. What is changing, however, is the nature of that criticism – described by some as a new wave of environmental activism.

A photo of Nguyen from May 2016 shows him against a backdrop of protesters. He is smiling and holding a poster saying, “Fish need clean water, people need transparency”. He was taking part in one of many

protests after a steel factory owned by Taiwanese company Formosa Plastics poured waste water into the ocean. The effect on the ecosystem was catastrophic: dead fish were washed up across 200 miles of shoreline; yet the Vietnamese government’s communication was erratic. Not willing to blame a foreign investor that had built a US\$10 billion plant in a remote province, it remained for weeks unable to name the source of the disaster. Protests erupted across the country.

I was in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam’s largest city, when 1,500 people gathered to demand answers from the government. I watched them from a balcony overlooking the cathedral square. At around 10am they started their procession, following their plan to walk down Dong Khoi Street to reach the Saigon River below. However, public security forces set barricades on each

Vietnamese protesters demonstrate against Taiwanese conglomerate Formosa during a rally in downtown Hanoi on 1 May 2016 © HOANG DINH NAM/AFP via Getty Images

