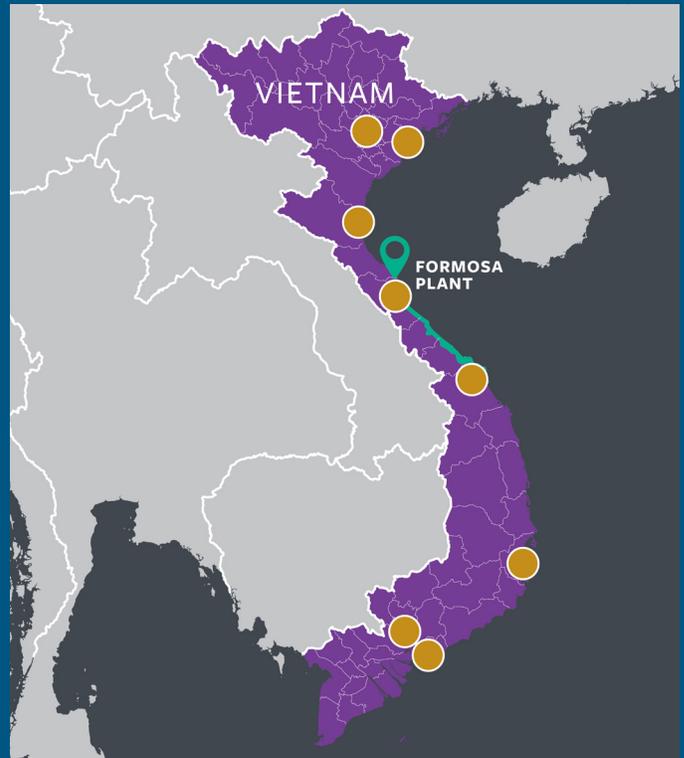


## HOW CIVIC MOBILIZATIONS GROW IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS

# Vietnam Case Study

An ecological disaster in Vietnam in 2016 triggered one of the largest civic mobilization campaigns in decades.

- Area affected by the spill
- Major protest locations



In 2016, the government’s response to an environmental disaster triggered one of Vietnam’s largest civic mobilizations in recent decades, the “Formosa protests.” The release of untreated wastewater from a steel plant owned by the Taiwanese conglomerate Formosa Plastic Group caused mass fish death along the coast. Communities of fishermen in several coastal provinces lost their livelihoods overnight and the tourist industry was hit hard as the water was not safe for recreation. The Vietnamese government was slow to put responsibility for the disaster on Formosa and to provide compensation for the loss of livelihood. Over the course of a year, the affected communities led by their local Catholic priests and

urban-based environmental activists staged nationwide protests, led an online campaign, and filed lawsuits against the company.

Several immediate precursors combined with broader contextual factors to grow this mobilization. First, the character of the trigger—an environmental disaster with widespread consequences for people’s health and lives—as well as the slow reaction of the Vietnamese government undermined particular claims the government makes to underpin its legitimacy. This legitimacy was largely based on the government’s promise of economic development and defense of the nation against foreign interests. When

the source of livelihood for multiple communities was severely damaged and the government did not decisively intervene to protect the people against a foreign entity, it was perceived by the activists involved as a government violation of its unwritten social contract with the people.

## Local Catholic priests used their leadership skills and public authority to lead the mobilization that included Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Second, the country had a community of civil society activists, mostly in urban centers, who had gained experience mobilizing citizens: in 2011 there were anti-China protests, and in 2015 the Trees Movement advocated for the protection of urban ecology. This activist community had its own Facebook group focused on a patriotic/nationalist political agenda, as well as personal online networks that were instrumental in spreading information about the ecological disaster. The activists used their

access to journalists and academic experts to produce an investigative report about the disaster. They drew on English-language sources on movement building and their own experience with nonviolent resistance tactics to write and disseminate guidance for new activists that helped sustain the movement and minimize state repression.

Third, the presence of an alternative to government authority in rural areas—the Catholic church—allowed protests in the areas affected by the disaster to be larger and better organized than they might have been in other authoritarian contexts. Local Catholic priests used their leadership skills and public authority to lead the mobilization that included Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Churches became the places to discuss the issue and organize. The priests also helped prepare the lawsuits, hundreds of which they personally delivered to courts.

Finally, access to social media, especially to Facebook, allowed for the rapid spread of information once the disaster happened. Although during the initial protest wave in May 2016 the Vietnamese government blocked access to Facebook, some movement participants were able to access it through VPN and it still served as the platform that helped spread information and coordinate the domestic and international efforts of this campaign.

## About the research project:

### HOW CIVIC MOBILIZATIONS GROW IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS

This case study is part of [a larger project](#) examining when and why citizens mobilize to challenge the state in hard authoritarian contexts. The project compares 21 recent episodes of mobilization in order to understand the factors that contributed to the mobilization's growth. Four mobilization episodes (Ethiopia in 2015-2018, Vietnam in 2016, Sudan in 2018-2019, and Belarus in 2020) were selected for in-depth case studies. The summary presents a brief description of the episode and the main factors that contributed to the mobilization's growth.<sup>1</sup>

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