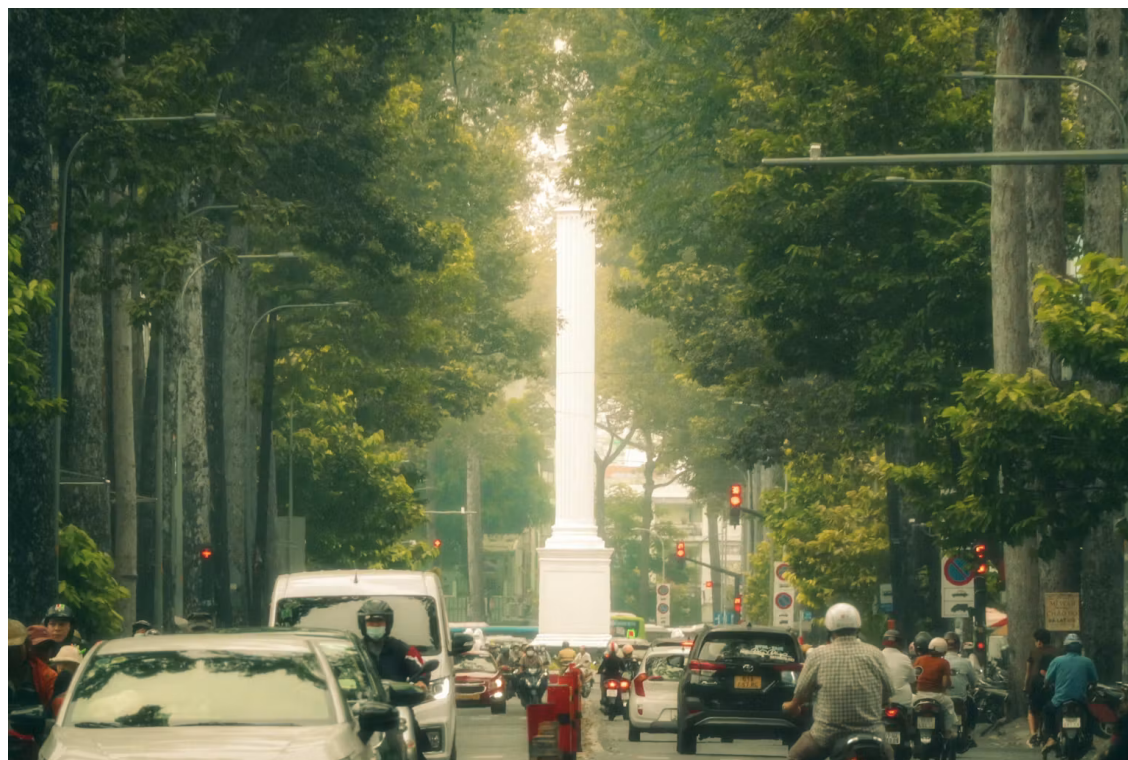


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Trees in some Vietnam streets are currently the site of protest. Andy.vietnam/Shutterstock

'Tree of justice' protest: how Vietnamese youth are mobilising online to hold the powerful to account

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<https://theconversation.com/tree-of-justice-protest-how-vietnamese-youth-are-mobilising-online-to-hold-the-powerful-to-account-290076>

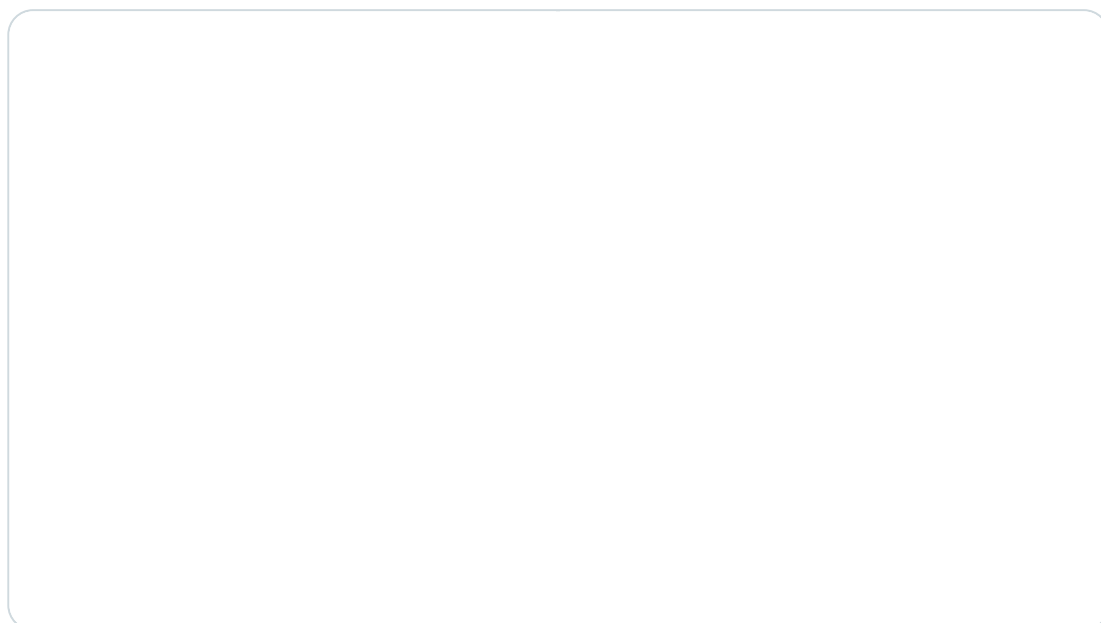
A fatal car crash and a censored rap album, seemingly unrelated and a year apart, have sparked what could be the largest revolt of Vietnam's youth in living memory. Over the past ten days, millions have mobilised around the death of an 18-year-old student, caused by a former National Assembly deputy who walked away without charge. What began as isolated outrage has since put the country's political system on trial.

On the evening of August 14, uniformed police cleared away bunches of flowers at the base of a tree near the centre of Hanoi. Later that night, groups of young people came back and laid more. Where these were removed, they started laying them at other trees and outside police stations. Then they started wearing white ribbons on their backpacks.

Viet Tan @viettan · [Follow](#)

[1/2] On May 30, 2025, in Hanoi, Đỗ Ngọc Phương Thùy—an 18-year-old who had just finished her studies—was struck and fatally injured by a large BMW on Nguyễn Huy Tự Street. She passed away a few days later, on June 8.

What particularly outraged the Vietnamese public was the [Show more](#)



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This tree – “Memorial tree 55” on Hanoi’s Nguyễn Huy Tự Street – is at the centre of a growing protest for gen Z in Vietnam. It marks the spot where, in May 2025, a black BMW crossed into oncoming traffic and [hit a motorcycle](#) carrying a father and his 18-year-old daughter, Do Ngoc Phuong Thuy. Mina, as she was widely known, lost her leg and died days later, shortly before she should have graduated from high school.

Over the next year there appeared to be no progress in the investigation of the incident, except that the driver was identified by the initials N.S.C. But social media users flooded into the information vacuum, starting to [link these initials](#) to former National Assembly deputy Nguyễn Sỹ Cường. There was much online discussion of a government cover-up.

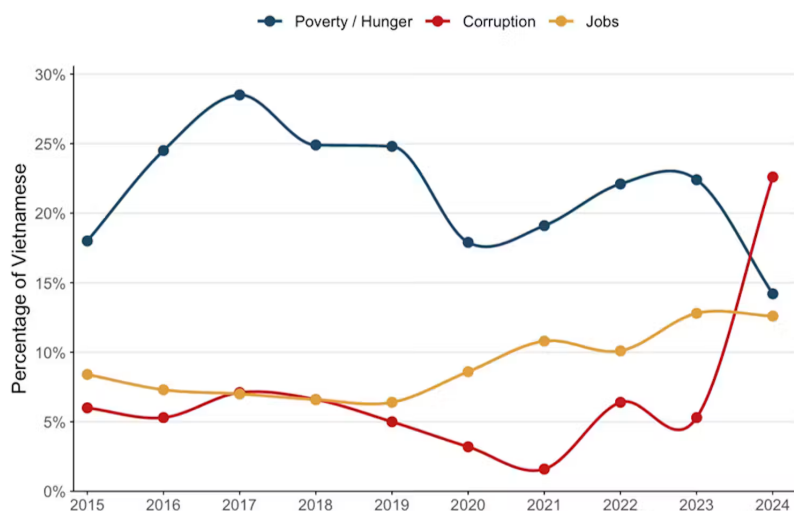
But by August 2026, the car crash and Mina’s death had almost faded from public memory. It may have stayed that way if hadn’t been for the heavyhanded decision of Vietnam’s minister for culture, Lam Thi Phuong Than, to all but ban a new album by rap artist “MCK”. This censorship against the most popular rap singer among Gen Z drew scrutiny to the culture minister – and from there attention moved to her husband, Nguyễn Sỹ Cường.

Within days, more than a million posts naming Cường spread across Threads and TikTok. One local person I spoke to, who for security reasons only wishes to be known by their pseudonym “Tam Khien”, says that young people across the country are outraged.

But, Tam Khien told me, it would be a mistake to view this sequence of events as outrage over one fatal crash, or even a single case of alleged corruption. Rather, it was the spark that lit up grievances with the state that had been present for years.

This is borne out by data from the Vietnam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI), which shows how public attitudes have changed. For more than a decade, when asked which problems they view as the most urgent policy challenges, nationally representative samples have named poverty and hunger. But in 2024, corruption overtook these problems – named by 22.6% of respondents, up from under 5% the year before.

Top three issues of concern to people in Vietnam



Issues of highest concern among the Vietnamese public (top three shown). Vietnam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index 2024, Author provided (no reuse)

While this number does not measure levels of corruption in Vietnam, it shows how it has come to dominate public debate. Combined with consistently low levels of confidence in the accountability of the government towards its citizens – rated as low as 0.47 out of 10 – the conditions were ripe for a single event to galvanise protest.

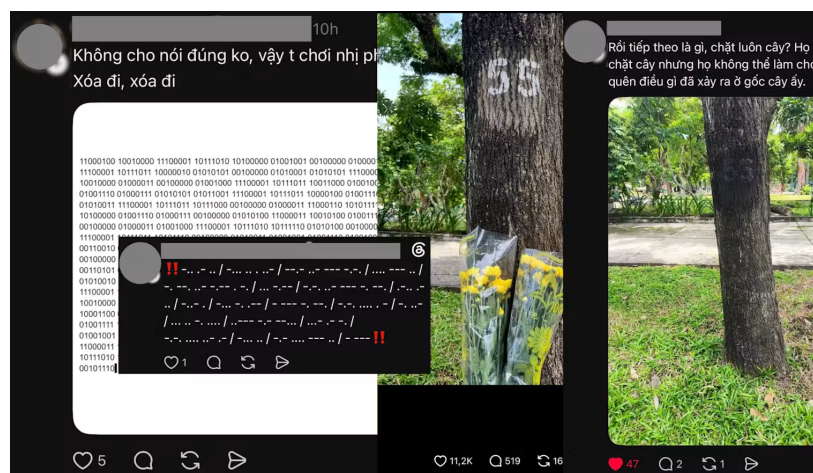
Creative protests

Vietnam’s constitution grants a right for public demonstrations, but the law needed to exercise it has never been passed. In its place, a 2005 decree requires gatherings to be registered in advance – and protesters are routinely arrested and prosecuted for “disturbing public order”.

So it is clear to protesters in Hanoi that mass rallies are not a realistic option. Publicly accusing a powerful former official is risky, Tam Khien told me. Instead the emerging movement turned to more creative forms of protest, which confront the state with acts that are hard to prosecute.

They pinned the “Tree of Justice” – as Tree 55 has become known – on Google Maps (although pins have been deleted). They continued to lay in defiance of the authorities removing them – and when the flowers were removed they laid them at other trees. They also mark these other trees with the number 55 – an easily recognisable reference which is ambiguous enough to retain plausible deniability.

People changed their profile pictures to memes taunting officials, made paintings and artistic drawings of the crash victim to commemorate her loss and created a virtual “justice tree” that cannot be cleared away. When posts started being taken down, they switched to displaying their messages in Morse code or binary.



Social media posts showing encrypted messages to evade content restrictions in Vietnam. Right: A tree in Ho Chi Minh City used as memorial site before and after it was painted over by city workers. Threads (accessed Aug 17, 2026), Author provided (no reuse)

Each of these actions was an adaptation to extensive efforts by the government to crack down on the movement: scrubbing the internet of related content and increasing the police presence at the crash site. Authorities were ordered to paint over the number 55 on trees. This has failed to quell the protests.

What next?

On the evening of August 17, state television VTV aired a rare public statement about the crash. Hanoi police confirmed that Cường had indeed been behind the steering wheel of the BMW. The statement announced that prosecutors had determined no criminal liability, but were vague as to the exact criteria for this decision.

Neither Nguyễn Sỹ Cường nor his wife have made a public statement about the crash. Meanwhile, the victim's father appeared on camera saying he fully agreed with the government's decision and had no complaints. But this was greeted by the protesters as scripted.

Vietnam is not Nepal, where a Gen Z movement occupied the streets and burned the parliament. But the resemblance to the youth movements that upended authoritarian politics from Nepal to Indonesia to Madagascar last year is undeniable.

Each began with a local trigger that would have gone nowhere without years of accumulated frustrations with their elites. Each was leaderless and mobilised quickly online. The groundswell of Vietnam's Gen Z protest continues to grow and, as the protest is taking forms that are not easily policed, the state appears at a loss as to how to deal with them.

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