

By Nguyen Qui Duc*

Take one taxi ride and you'll hear all sorts of stories about the greasing of palms both on the streets of Hanoi and outside the capital. One of the most frequent complaints is about policemen who take bribes instead of issuing tickets for traffic violations.

"It happens to me every few weeks," says taxi driver Nguyen Hiep.

Traffic offenses, such as speeding or riding a motorcycle without a helmet or a driver's license, are easily fixed by slipping a policeman anywhere between 50,000 and 500,000 Vietnamese dong (US\$3-US\$30), depending on what you drive and what your offense is.

Policemen have ample opportunities to earn extra cash. As Vietnam develops, urbanization and increasing wealth mean more cars and motorcycles. Laws are multiplying too, but people are still used to old habits: traffic-fine negotiations take place between drivers and police while red lights and laws are ignored.

Park your bike on the sidewalk at the wrong time while you get a cup of coffee, and the cops will put it on their truck and take it to the station. The café owner will have to pay a "fine" of about US\$5 to get it back, since in Vietnam shop and café owners are responsible for keeping their customers' motorcycles safe and unharmed. They are also responsible for keeping sidewalks in front of their shops clear. "It's the cost of doing business," one café owner says.

Vicious corruption circles

What most of us in Vietnam tend to forget is that policemen are also frequent victims of corruption. Getting a job issuing traffic tickets can be lucrative, but to get this job a cop needs to have connections and pay some dues. He also has to share what he takes with his superiors and colleagues.

The policeman, just like any other average person, also pays bribes for any number of things in daily life. To get a child into a good school, one has to pay the school administrators somewhere between 5 and 8 million dong (US\$300-US\$480).

It's not always about money. At the immigration office, I witnessed a woman trying to obtain visas for foreign

colleagues. She was an administrator at a small, private international school. The immigration clerk asked her to take a seat. A few moments later, he sat next to her and said, "I have a child. I am sure you can help me."

Neither he nor she seemed bothered that there were plenty of people around as they negotiated. It's always about "doing a favor" for someone. That's part of the cultural tradition. But it translates into corruption and abuse of power, and it's accepted as a part of life.

Most people will tell you that because salaries are so low, corruption is natural — and aside from the disdain reserved for cops on the take, it is seen as a convenient way to get things done.

As painful as it can get

The situation in hospitals can be galling: nurses will arbitrarily write anything on your admittance sheet: heart rate, pulse, blood pressure. They will only take your pulse and blood pressure and record them in your patient's intake form if you pay.

"They make it painful for you," says Nghiem Thi Thu, a woman in her late 40s who works as a caregiver. "You pay, and the nurses will give you shots without hurting you." Indeed, it is a frequent complaint that otherwise the nurses make it physically painful.

Within my first year of living here, I fell and cut myself deeply. At the hospital, I sat in the emergency room for more than an hour before a visiting neighbor asked, "Did you give them an envelope?" That's when I learned that in an emergency, you pack envelopes to take with you to the hospital. You put a few bills inside and hand them to intake clerks, nurses and doctors if you want to get any service.

Visiting a friend in a hospital recently, I saw a short woman getting in and out of bed every few minutes to pace the room, stepping over and around the mass of people. These people from the countryside had come into Hanoi seeking better medical related to their reproductive system. The woman was cursing out the nurses, the doctors and her husband in turn.

"I'm just a second class citizen," she said. "It's been five hours and they won't give me my shots."

The room had four beds — two patients per bed — and scores of relatives acting as caregivers. Several people

kept reminding her to hand over an envelope. She refused, and everyone else received their shots and medicines. Alone, she kept pacing the room and cursing.

Someone would open the bathroom door, and the smell of urine and blood was horrific. There were water puddles on the floor, and people would wipe their plastic sandals on a towel that looked like it had been soaked in engine oil. That demonstrated people's limit: the patients and their families didn't want to bribe janitorial staff for service. When I visited the next day, nothing had been cleaned.

Downstairs I saw lines of women sitting on benches on the verandah, all waiting for an abortion. Several were whispering about the amount needed to get a doctor to perform the procedure. I found out they had paid all the necessary fees: about US\$100 for the operation and related costs. But to actually get an abortion, they need to pay the nurses and the doctors an extra US\$70 dollars "under the table."

One woman told me, referring to one doctor: "Ten to 12 abortions a day, at a million dong (US\$56) each. He's raking it in."

Pervasive corruption

Twenty years after promulgating a policy of reform called *Doi Moi* (renovation), Vietnam's government has moved from a socialist "command" economy to a market economy. People are freer and conditions have improved. But the policy has not meant full reforms, as much as the government and party officials continue to proclaim that fighting corruption is a top priority.

To the average Vietnamese, living with corruption is unavoidable. It's about who you know. A business owner's visit to the tax office will be smoother and faster if it's accompanied by someone who can guide you to a connection — an official who will "sort things out" for you after receiving an envelope.

Sometimes, an envelope is handed over with a discreet muttering about a "gift" to the children. Other times, prices and "fees" are discussed directly, in the open. No matter what, you can expect to pay lower taxes if you know the right people and offer the right amount.

State utility employees will change your wires or fix your power meter after you make an initial "investment" of about

US\$60, but your monthly bill will be a third of what it was before.

If you wish to keep your shop open past official business closing hours, or if you want to use the sidewalk to park customers' scooters, a few envelopes passed into the right hands will do the trick.

An itinerant judge I met two years ago told me, "I could be living very well."

He travels from village to village, presiding over temporary courtrooms where there normally aren't any. When he returns to Hanoi, he lives with his wife in one room with a sofa and a double bed. There is a fridge and a cupboard in one corner. Their son studies at a small table in an adjacent space that doubles as the kitchen and dining area. The judge's wife works as an accountant, but their combined salaries don't allow for better conditions. I am made to understand that the only way this living situation could be changed is if he took bribes.

Big fish

As I am writing this, an architect visits. He has a hangover. The night before, he'd taken two police officials out for a visit to a "massage" parlor, followed by a drinking session.

"I spent 4 million dong (US\$220) entertaining these guys," he says.

The deal they were discussing was for the architect to develop a plan for "remodeling" a regional police office. The officials he was entertaining offered him 10 million dong (US\$560) in cash for the plan, which they would then give to higher ranking officials for approval — and the remodeling job would be his. Naturally, all costs involved would be inflated. The officials would pocket all profits from the inflated costs of buying materials (bricks, cement, construction equipment, electrical wiring, etc.).

"The guy's a major in the police force," says the architect, "but he talks like a gangster."

The construction would involve lining the office walls with expensive wood confiscated from lumber smugglers. The architect says the major wanted his office to look like a cabinet minister's office.

"Working with me," the official reportedly told the architect, "is like working with a king's man: I'll cover for you if you

know how to treat me right.”

“You can’t do an honest job in this country,” says the architect. “They’re all gangsters.”

This sort of situation has earned Vietnam a bad name abroad. A former member of Parliament, ambassador and de-facto face of Vietnam, Mrs. Ton-Nu-Thi Ninh, says Vietnam must combat the image of corruption. “The amount of money spent on marketing our image abroad is nothing compared to corruption and waste,” she said.

Ask any average citizen and he or she will complain about high-ranking officials making mammoth deals from selling land, awarding business contracts or facilitating major construction. They will talk about big companies siphoning off money rather than buying adequate construction equipment and materials.

“Bridges collapse; highways are left unfinished,” says a journalist friend.

Some of these corruption cases receive public exposure. “But just for show,” my journalist friend says. Exposure is often due to competition among factions in the government or within the ruling Communist Party.

“It’s the big guys jostling for power,” says a former businessman turned photographer. He had worked in the oil industry and witnessed how corruption works behind closed doors. “Most of us just live with a broken system in our daily life,” he says.

Citizen complaints have sometimes led to clean-up efforts — but everyone I talk to tells me it’s a temporary situation. With low salaries, an entrenched “tradition” and an ineffective or unwilling government, corruption will continue to rule people’s daily lives.

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