

Diplomat  
23-2-21

## Why Communist Anti-Corruption Campaigns Never Work

**Ongoing anti-graft campaigns in Vietnam and Laos focus on officials' moral conduct without addressing the political structures that incentivize corruption.**

By David Hutt

Let us compare two articles from Radio Free Asia, the first published on February 18 and the second the following day. The first informs us that the new head of Laos's communist party, the former prime minister Thongloun Sisoulith, has ordered a provincial governor to cancel a deal to purchase a new fleet of cars for newly-elected local officials. The reason, it seems, is that the authorities want to be seen as tightening their belts and avoiding overt displays of graft amid the current economic downturn. After Thongloun became prime minister in 2016, he initiated a minor anti-graft campaign that ran out of steam around 2018 but now is likely to return to the fore.

The second article, however, informs us that two candidates up for re-election at the country's National Assembly ballot, which took place on Sunday, were removed from electoral lists last week because they criticized official corruption too strongly, including what happens at the top of the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). As in any communist state, the National Assembly in Laos is a rubber-stamp body with very little power and expected to be subservient to the Party apparatus – even though, as the country's only directly elected body, it is notionally given responsibility for keeping officials in check.

What are we to make of this? Communists have made grand claims about tackling corruption in recent years. In Vietnam, arguably the most far-reaching anti-graft campaign in decades began in 2016 when Nguyen Phu Trong was re-elected to a second term as the party chief at that year's National Congress. In China, too, President and Communist Party boss Xi Jinping has also staked his position on cleaning up the Party.

The headline figures suggest some success in the case of Vietnam. Speaking in December 2020, just before communist delegates met for their 13th National Congress, Trong said that investigators had looked into more than 11,700 cases. Of these, the courts have heard and prosecuted 88 cases involving 814 people. This includes a Politburo member, several ministers and former ministers, and a dozen or so senior ranking military officials. Even as early as 2019, the academic Hai Hong Nguyen observed: "Never before in the history of the [Communist Party] had such a large number of high-ranking government and Party officials been disciplined and punished."

Yet, the question isn't why but how. Trong, 76, won an near-unprecedented third-term at last month's 13th National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), a decision that meant the party had to ride roughshod over two of its long-standing norms designed to prevent dictatorial power – a two-term limit for party bosses and expected retirement after 65 – and now means that Trong is the most powerful figure the country has seen since Le Duan, the boss who led the party through much of the Vietnam War and then its conflict with Cambodia and China.

An observation made in November 2018 by Cu Huy Ha Vu, a dissident who was once an official in the foreign ministry, is worth considering now. “For the time being,” he [wrote](#), “the prestige of the Vietnamese government is due to the widely perceived integrity of... Nguyen Phu Trong. We cannot exclude the possibility that corruption could rise again, even with stronger intensity than before, after Trong has retired.” We cannot, even though almost every analyst thought that Trong would retire last month. But what Vu was driving at is the real nature of the anti-corruption campaigns: their inherent instability.

In Vietnam, the anti-graft campaign has gone hand in hand with a “morality” campaign that has purged reformist-minded cadre, cut down membership rolls, made ideological fealty the prerequisite for promotion and produced endless documents stressing that a new “strategic cadre” will be formed from those who show devotion to socialist principles, loyalty to the current gang of leaders, and ethical living.

Rather than tackling the systemic roots of corruption, they tried to perfect human nature. I’ve argued (and still do) that this reveals *idealism* in the anti-grafters; they focus on morality rather than institutions. Even if one tried one couldn’t design a more perfect system than Laos’s and Vietnam’s communist system if one wanted corruption to thrive: closed one-party states where there is no free media and no independent courts, and in which the only checks and balances come from the patronage one receives from one’s superiors.

Trong, for instance, on occasions appears to recognize the systemic nature of corruption. As part of an uncharacteristic hagiography for a communist leader, Vietnam’s state-run media burnishes Trong as “the great fireman” for his comment that corruption is like a forest fire; it will burn any piece of wood whether it is dry or not. At least by this comment he appears to recognize that corruption can also burn the most upright and honest official. So, in effect, it is nothing to do with the individual.

But then give ear to another of his comments. Speaking in 2018, Trong said: “A mechanism must be set up to control...people who are vested with power and authority based on the principle that all powers must be strictly controlled by the mechanism; power must be bound to responsibility, authority corresponds to responsibility, the higher the authority the heavier the responsibility.” What this means, in effect, is that the only way to curb corruption is if officials in higher positions are inherently more moral and ethical than their underlings. Forget about checks and balances.

“Much of the [Communist Party’s] rhetoric has focused on the need for ‘morality and ethics’ on the part of government officials,” the journalist and researcher Tran Le Thuy, wrote in 2019. “But it would be better to accept that self-interest is a powerful and inescapable human trait. By simply enjoining government officials to behave honestly out of a sense of public duty, the Party risks missing the opportunity to establish stronger and more rational corruption-monitoring mechanisms.”

But there is a very good reason not to do this. For starters, Trong noted very early in his anti-graft campaign that he isn’t prepared to “break the vase to catch the mice,” meaning that anti-corruption efforts will stop well short of weakening the VCP itself. But the second, often overlooked aspect, is that anti-graft campaigns allow those at the top of the communist hierarchies in Vietnam and Laos – as well as in China – to re-centralize power. If enforcing anti-corruption measures means only those in superior positions are given the responsibility of holding those in junior positions to account, anti-corruption then becomes a new means of

binding the disparate communist parties together: it restores power back to the apex of the hierarchy.

This brings us back to the two Radio Free Asia reports. In a way, they are a perfect example of anti-corruption being used to centralize power. The LPRP thought it decent to purge two parliamentarians – the only officials actually elected by the people, however useless that election may be – because *they* wanted to involve themselves in the anti-graft campaign. This was too much for the party bosses who, as Thongloun showed the day earlier, believe it to be only the purview of those at the very top of the party to dictate how the anti-corruption drive proceeds.

And that is why the anti-corruption campaigns in Laos and Vietnam will always eventually fail. Because they are inherently top-down and focused on curing individuals of the natural impulse towards graft in a system that is irremediably extractive, they'll either run out of steam once their proponents retire from office or run out of victims unless, as Trong put it, the vase is to be broken to catch all the mice. Worse, the cure is often worse than the disease. Since 2016, the VCP has now torn up almost every one of its internal separation of power norms in order to provide Trong with more and more authority. Meanwhile, in Laos, reformist voices within the party and National Assembly are being purged *in defense* of the anti-graft campaign.