

Anti-Intellectualism in Vietnam: The Case of Professor Chu Hao

Professor Chu Hao's fate is revealing of the Communist Party's priorities in Vietnam.

By **Cu Huy Ha Vu**
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On November 15, the Central Inspection Commission of Vietnam's only political party, the Communist Party of Vietnam, issued a press release announcing the expulsion of Professor Chu Hao, director and editor-in-chief of Knowledge Publishing House, as well as former deputy minister of science and technology, from the Party. Earlier, on October 26, Hao had declared his departure from the Party one day after the Committee announced it would discipline him for publishing books, articles, and statements with "contents contrary to the views and policies of the Party and State." Among the books Hao published are John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, Alexis De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, and Friedrich A. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*.



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Hao also signed petitions and open letters that are critical of the Party, including "Recommendations on the Amendment of the 1992 Constitution" and "Open Letter to the Party Central Committee and all Party Members." "Recommendations" requests the removal of Article 4 (on the dictatorship of the CPV), advocates for political pluralism and the multi-party system, and calls for depoliticization of the armed forces; "Open Letter" says that the Party has led the people into the wrong path that is building socialism.

The Commission also condemned Hao for founding and joining associations, groups, forums, clubs, and other organizations that spread views contrary to the Party's, such as the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) and the Phan Chu Trinh Fund, which "awarded American veterans who participated in the aggression war against Vietnam."

Trong's Influence

On the agenda of CPV Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong, a Marxist-Leninist ideologue, corruption and "self-evolution" or "self-transformation" within the Party — i.e, the gradual abandonment of communist belief and standards — are two key issues that must be addressed to maintain a one-party regime in Vietnam.

After deposing Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, under whom corruption had become catastrophic, at the 12th CPV Congress held in January 2016, Trong initiated the largest anti-corruption campaign in Party history. This campaign is known as "blazing furnace," based on Trong's famous statement, "When the furnace is hot enough, even green firewood will burn." At the present time, scores of high-profile officials, including one Politburo member and a dozen of police and military generals, have been prosecuted and imprisoned. As a result, Trong's prestige has risen sharply. On October 23, **the National Assembly elected Trong as state president** by nearly 100 percent of the vote, making him arguably the most powerful leader since President Ho Chi Minh. The halo brought by the success of his anti-corruption campaign has certainly strengthened Trong's belief that he would succeed in countering "self-evolution" and "self-transformation," especially with the Party rules established under his influence.

In November 2011, 10 months after Trong was elected Party Chief for the first term, the CPV Central Committee issued Regulation 47 on Prohibited Practices for Party Members. According to this rule, Party members are prohibited to "speak, act against or refuse to execute the Political Platform, Statutes, resolutions, directives,

regulations, decisions and conclusions of the Party” or “store, circulate or incite others to circulate information, documents in any form to spread views contrary to the Party’s lines.”

Six years later, in November 2017, the Politburo headed by Trong issued Regulation 102 on Disciplining Party members who violate Party rules. This rule states that expulsion from the Party will be applied to Party members who “deliberately spoke or wrote in order to distort history and truth, or denied the leading role and revolutionary achievement of the Party,” “rejected or negated Marxism-Leninism, Ho Chi Minh’s principle of centralized democracy,” “demanded implementing the separation of powers,” “civil society,” “political pluralism,” “a multiparty system,” or “founded and/or joined associations in contravention of law.”

In Contradiction With the Constitution and the Party’s Practices

Under the above-mentioned Party rules, Chu Hao’s expulsion from the VCP is not surprising. However, the rules themselves are problematic when viewed from the perspective of the Constitution and Party practices.

Article 4 Section 3 of the Constitution stipulates, “Organizations and members of the Communist Party of Vietnam shall operate within the framework of the Constitution and law.” The same supreme law is stated in Article 25: “Citizens have the right to freedom of speech and freedom of the press, and have the right of access to information, the right to assembly, the right to association, and the right to demonstrate. The exercise of those rights shall be prescribed by law.” Therefore, any rule by any CPV organization, including the Central Committee and Politburo, which eliminates freedom of speech or any other fundamental human right, contravenes the Constitution and such rule must be annulled.

In addition, these prohibitive rules conflict with the CPV practices, not to mention the principle of “self-criticism and criticism” stipulated in the CPV Charter. Marxist-Leninist socialism pursued by the CPV advocates the abolition of capitalism, which identifies with the private sector and the market economy. However, the CPV has practically abandoned that Marxist-Leninist doctrine. The 6th Congress held in 1986 launched an economic reform program known as “Doi Moi” that not only recognized but also strongly developed the market economy, especially by allowing Party members to become private entrepreneurs. According to Marxism–Leninism, these members should be “exploiters” or “class enemies” of the communist party. In other words, the socialism that the CPV declares it is continuing to pursue is “socialism with the core removed.”

Chu Hao and other CPV members of the same view are just citizens who adhere to the Constitution. Likewise, they are only continuing the work of revising Marxism-Leninism and related issues, which was initiated by the Party itself.

A Backlash Begins

Just two days after Trong took the office of the presidency, the discipline of Hao was announced. Recently, in a meeting with his constituents on November 24, Trong, as a member of the National Assembly, said: “Chu Hao was expelled from the Party was not for corruption, but ‘self-evolution’ and ‘self-transformation’... disciplining a few people is [intended] to save the most people.”

At least a dozen Party members, including famous writer Nguyen Ngoc, publicly announced their resignation to support Hao. Some of them believed their actions would begin a movement to abandon the Party. I myself do not see this as likely, because the number of Party members with democratic views is negligible. The expulsion of Hao could not weaken the Party in terms of organization. However, it undermines the Party’s anti-corruption efforts and can be perceived as an attack on the intelligentsia.

Given that corruption in Vietnam is institutional, fighting this evil cannot be a short-term work. Involvement by the whole society is required instead of relying solely on the political will of the non-corrupt persons, including Trong, within the Party and State apparatus. Moreover, once socialized, an anti-corruption agenda would help Trong avoid doubt that he used anti-corruption as an excuse to purge his political opponents. Obviously, such social involvement is only possible if people are equipped with the necessary social and political knowledge. This in turn only possible with the participation of the intelligentsia.

In addition, an indispensable condition for success in combating corruption is the existence of a fair and effective system of law. As objective and scientific critics, intellectuals would inevitably fill the gaps of the current legal system, which is built on systemic corruption. For example, the current land law allows the government to

arbitrarily take the land of the people and allocate it to well-connected private businesses, a concept that has been exploited to benefit members of government.

For the time being, the prestige of the Vietnamese government is due to the widely perceived integrity of the president and CPV general secretary, Nguyen Phu Trong. We cannot exclude the possibility that corruption could rise again, even with stronger intensity than before, after Trong has retired. If the CPV continues to pursue anti-intellectualism, considering intellectuals with critical views as “hostile forces,” the admirable results of the current anti-corruption campaign will be mere castles in the sand.

In another action to support Professor Chu Hao, more than 200 Party members and intellectuals signed an “**Open Letter**” asking Party leadership to retract its decision to discipline him. Joining the “Open Letter” signers, a group of 81 international scholars, academics, and researchers sent a **letter** expressing their “profound disagreement and disappointment with accusations directed at Professor Chu Hao” to the Vietnamese leaders. The letter reads, in part:

At the same time, we recommend that the government cultivate wide intellectual discussion of ideas on all topics in Vietnam, and we strongly urge the government to desist from any efforts to harass, intimidate or otherwise punish persons for peacefully expressing their views or opinions.

I myself know Professor Chu Hao personally. On September 2, 1945, his father and my father were both present at the grandstand erected in Hanoi’s Ba Dinh Square, from which Ho Chi Minh, chairman of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, proclaimed the independence of Vietnam, ending nearly a century of domination by France and then Japan. His father, Chu Dinh Xuong, director of the Tonkin Public Security Bureau, stood behind Ho Chi Minh as his bodyguard. My father, engineer and poet Cu Huy Can, then 26 years old, participated in the event as a government minister and a signer of the Declaration of Independence together with Ho Chi Minh and other members of the government. The first government of independent Vietnam had more famous intellectuals than any other government chaired by Ho Chi Minh.

Six decades later, along with nearly 3,000 others, Hao signed a “**Petition For the Release of Mr. Cu Huy Ha Vu**” after the April 4, 2011 trial of the Hanoi People’s Court sentenced me to seven years in prison and three years of probation for the “crime of conducting propaganda against the state of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.” During my imprisonment, my wife, lawyer Nguyen Thi Duong Ha, transferred to me several books published under Hao’s direction, including Alexis De Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, translated from the original French by educator Pham Toan. In turn, I signed the above-mentioned Open Letter to protest the Party’s repression against Hao.

It is not wrong to say that Professor Chu Hao and I supported each other because our fathers were companions-in-arms. But above all, we acted as intellectuals.

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