

Vietnam's Anti-Corruption Drive Can Never Go Far Enough

In centralizing power to fight graft, Nguyen Phu Trong has created a system in which corruption has an even greater chance of flourishing once he's gone.

By David Hutt

Has the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV)'s anti-corruption campaign reached a peak? Early January saw the resignations of Politburo member and Deputy Prime Minister Pham Binh Minh, as well as another deputy prime minister, Vu Duc Dam. Weeks later, State President Nguyen Xuan Phuc *was resigned* (a better way of phrasing what happened) for "letting several officials... commit violations that caused severe consequences."

There are claims that this is an important divergence from the past. Ever since Nguyen Phu Trong, the CPV chief, started his "burning furnace" anti-corruption campaign in 2016, an untold number of officials have been sacked, dismissed from the party, or jailed for graft. For instance, then Health Minister Nguyen Thanh Long and Vu Hong Nam, an ambassador, were formally sacked last year for dodgy dealings around the country's COVID-19 pandemic response. Some pundits reckon the party now wants to foment a "culture of resignation," so that stained-fingered officials jump before they have to be pushed. Trong has suggested that those who resign will receive a lighter touch from the authorities. "It is not good to have all severely punished, or to remove all from office," Trong said recently.

Writing here in The Diplomat recently, the journalist Quynh Le Tran opined that this "indicates a recognition that not all officials who have engaged in corrupt practices should be punished severely, and that it may be in the best interest of the party and the country to allow those who willingly come forward to take responsibility for their actions to do so without facing harsh consequences."

Off the bat, the obvious point is that this creates a two-tier system. Those who resign (or, rather, those deemed important enough to be allowed to resign rather than being publicly disgraced) get off relatively lightly, while those officials who are less influential and have fewer friends get the book thrown at them.

Take Phuc's resignation, for instance. Just this week, he was allowed to say publicly that he quit because of violations committed by other officials, mainly his deputies, when he was prime minister between 2016 and 2021. He denied any personal corruption, and the Inspection Commission of the CPV Central Committee has said that none of his family members were connected to graft in any way (despite that being a rumor among Vietnam watchers for years). It's safe to assume that investigators have been told to stop sniffing around Phuc's family now that he has fallen on his sword.

As such, Phuc can claim some notability and (having to leave office anyway in a few years) retire without too much of a family blemish. But what message does this send to those lower down the pecking order or in the private sector? Many have been sacked and their prospects

tainted forever; some are sitting in jail, and a few have been sentenced to death. “Each party cadre and member needs to shoulder the responsibility of being a role model,” Trong [said](#) in a televised speech in early 2021. “The higher the position and rank, the more responsibility one must take.”

Where’s the good example when the higher ranks have more leeway to chart their own exit (and, indeed, to publicly extract themselves from culpability)? It may be a cynical statement, but no one who rises to the top of such a system is completely clean. Phuc’s prospective successor, the public security minister, To Lam, is also alleged to be dirty.

Your columnist has often noted that the corollary “morality” campaign is perhaps more important to Trong and his followers than merely weeding out a few corrupt officials. “Corruption is threatening the survival of the regime,” Trong said in 2018, but “political decadence is even more dangerous.” His intention isn’t merely to punish the corrupt but to cleanse the party, to build it anew in his austere and true-believing image. Perhaps that explains why he wants more officials to resign than be sacked; they can claim the party remains a moral force despite their own wrongdoings. Doesn’t it harken back to the “self-criticism” of yesteryear communism?

Alas, however, the anti-corruption drive is going to be a Pyrrhic victory, if one can call it a victory at all. The root of Vietnam’s endemic corruption is a one-party state in which officials are accountable only to their superiors (who now can receive a lighter punishment than their underlings), and where investigators and the courts won’t rule on anything the party doesn’t want them to. Indeed, the lesson of the purges is that the party is judge and jury, not any other institution.

As such, the anti-corruption campaign will only persist for as long as a true believer like Trong remains at the helm. More perniciously, it tends towards greater centralization of power within the hands of a party whose dictatorial rule is the reason in the first place for such corruption. Nguyen Khac Giang of the Vietnam Center for Economic and Strategic Studies was on the money when he said recently that the purge has mainly been of officials from the government, rather than the party apparatus. And, therefore, the anti-graft campaign is more accurately a battle by the party against the government, which in recent years has become gradually more independent of the CPV.

But that’s the inherent risk in all of this, given that Trong, 78, is almost certain to retire in three years, if not earlier. As one analyst [put it](#) in early 2020, Trong “has exercised power not for personal gain but to purify a Party decaying from corruption and abuses of power. However, a younger successor with a longer time horizon might not be as committed to such ideals. Instead, he might take advantage of his position to enrich his family and cronies, as most autocratic rulers are wont to do.”

What’s more, unless that successor is as committed as Trong, which was perhaps the reason why he took a near-unprecedented third term in office in 2021, because of the lack of candidates, that successor will inherit a system where the party has far more power than it did before Trong took office. And it has far more power over the sorts of institutions, such as the civil service, judiciary, or press, that are supposed to hold corrupt officials to account.

Put more starkly, Trong has created a system in which corruption has even more chance of flourishing once he’s gone. After all, if it’s only those at the top of the apparatus who hold

people to account (or the apparent “morality” of officials who have already climbed the greasy pole of communist power), what happens if that apparatus becomes corrupted? Trong’s cure could end up perpetuating the disease it purports to heal.



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