

Costs of Trong's Crusade Against Corruption in Vietnam

David Brown

At 76, Nguyen Phu Trong is a man in a hurry, intent on saving Vietnam's Communist Party from corruption, backsliding and irrelevance. The implications for Vietnam are considerable, since the party's claim on a monopoly of political power largely rests on its presumed moral superiority.

Trong, a Marxist theoretician, is an unlikely leader. For decades, he toiled in obscurity, railing against party members' loss of Marxist-Leninist virtue and decrying the erosion of the party's revolutionary legitimacy. Then, three years ago, Trong orchestrated the dismissal of his bete noire, two-term Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung. Now he's head of state as well as party chief, the most powerful Vietnamese leader in decades and the scourge of high officials who have combined with unscrupulous businessmen to rip off the state.

Yet on April 14, Trong fell ill during an inspection trip to a Mekong Delta province. The state-supervised media were allowed to report that he had been hospitalized, but not why. Posts to online media speculated about the destabilizing consequences of the untimely incapacity or death of the general secretary and state president. And then, exactly a month later, national television broadcast a clip of Trong leading a carefully scripted meeting with his chief lieutenants. As the prime minister, the chairwoman of the National Assembly, and Trong's chief assistant, party executive secretary Tran Quoc Vuong, listened attentively, an apparently healthy Trong vowed to "continue the struggle against corruption and negativity with a resolute and steadfast spirit."

It was welcome news. Trong may not be especially popular in Vietnam, but his integrity and perseverance command respect.

When Trong was named general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 2011, it seemed a hollow victory. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and his cronies had gotten into the habit of ignoring party directives that didn't suit their purposes. But four years later, on the eve of the party's 12th Congress, Trong upended Vietnam's politics. As 1,200 delegates assembled in Hanoi late in 2015, a solid majority—fed up with cozy relationships between "the interests," as they are vaguely known, and government officials—pledged their support to Trong. Dung was dismissed along with his cronies. Trong was then reelected as the head of the party, this time with a reliable, largely hand-picked majority of supporters on a 19-person Politburo. Their backgrounds signaled the shift in perspective: Five members were from the Ministry of Public Security, and five more were drawn from the party's secretariat.

No less than elsewhere, the Vietnamese are used to politicians who promise to fight corruption but don't follow through. Trong is different, though. He and Vuong have made life hell for a coterie of corrupt officials and their business allies.

Trong and Vuong have taken on patronage networks headed by the former head of the state investment bank and by the former minister of transport, who before that was head of PetroVietnam, the largest and most profitable state enterprise. Both men were arrested, but since they were close to Dung, that was no surprise. More impressive to a skeptical public, Trong and Vuong have gone after other targets wherever they found them.

As of this month, according to the Central Steering Committee on Anti-Corruption, the state was “finishing investigation of 28 cases, [about to] prosecute 24 cases, bring 29 cases to trial, hear the appeals of seven judgments, and verify 36 other cases.” These include prosecutions of two former information ministers and the younger brother of the CEO of the sprawling conglomerate VinGroup, for colluding to use state funds to buy a minor cable TV provider for far more than it was worth. Senior officers of the Ministry of Security have been busted for setting up an online betting scheme and for facilitating the misappropriation of prime sites for luxury hotels in Danang. Allegations against a former deputy prime minister and the Hanoi mayor and party boss are apparently being investigated. Potentially the most consequential of all, a series of arrests of officials and real estate traders suggest that Trong’s noose is tightening around Le Thanh Hai, the long-time, now-retired party boss in Ho Chi Minh City.

The sweeping crackdown on corruption hasn’t been all good news. It stands to reason that a regime intent on stamping out corruption and advancing the careers of a morally straight “strategic cadre”—Trong’s self-described project to identify party members who are honest, motivated and talented, and therefore suitable to be jumped ahead of their not so honest, undermotivated, lamentably dull peers—would also take a dim view of criticism from any quarter. Since the party’s 12th Congress, Vietnam’s internal security forces have had a much broader mandate to stamp out political dissent.

The boundaries of tolerated speech had stretched considerably in the decade under Dung. On Facebook and other online media, Vietnamese freethinkers could join a heady debate on where Vietnam is going, or ought to be going. When ministers complained to Dung that they were being unfairly criticized by bloggers, Dung reportedly told them to launch their own blogs. It was possible then to believe that Vietnam, notwithstanding endemic corruption, might be evolving toward a more liberal and diverse politics, one in which the Communist Party, no less than the general public, was subject to the law.

Among close observers of Vietnam and its Communist Party, it’s not yet settled whether Trong personally is focused on stamping out heresies outside party ranks. Seditious speech was arguably of greater concern to Tran Dai Quang, Trong’s sometime ally and sometime rival as state president until Quang’s death in September 2018. It was Quang who championed the adoption of a strict cybersecurity law that has criminalized even sharing posts deemed “toxic” by the authorities. Quang may be gone, but it’s still considerably more dangerous to be a dissident now in Vietnam under Trong than in the Dung era.

With Trong seemingly again as fit as a 76-year-old man can expect to be, the short-term issues are who, when and how someone—or more likely several people—will fill Trong’s various roles after the party’s 13th Congress, which is less than two years away. Insofar as pundits can tell, Trong is keeping his thoughts to himself while a handful of hopefuls circumspectly advertise their availability. That includes Vuong and the head of the party’s Personnel Commission, Pham

Minh Chinh, who is the man responsible for spotting “strategic cadres” and arranging for their advancement. Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc is also frequently mentioned as a successor; though he is not as close to Trong, he’s been a loyal and competent head of government.

Nor is it clear that Trong will be ready to hand over all his jobs in 2021—he might elect to stay on in the less demanding role of state president. All that’s certain is that with an eye to his legacy, Trong will have the last word on these personnel decisions.

More important and more worrisome for Vietnam, the Trong era is likely to be remembered as a time of missed opportunities, the war on corruption aside. Fueled by massive foreign investment and a still-young workforce, Vietnam’s economy is booming. Meanwhile, modernization, globalization and crony capitalism have spawned urgent problems, including growing income inequality, environmental degradation and underfunded public health and public education systems. These kinds of challenges typically stymie regimes that stifle grassroots initiative and throttle public debate. Nor, in a political system that lacks checks and balances on the use and misuse of power, is systemic corruption going to be eradicated—no matter how large a “strategic cadre” Trong and his protégés manage to assemble.

David Brown is a freelance writer on contemporary Vietnam’s political and economic life, international relations, media culture and environmental challenges. Brown’s commentary frequently appears in Asia Sentinel, East Asia Forum and other publications of regional scope. He has also been published by Foreign Affairs, Yale Global and the Brookings Institution. His reportage also appears in translation on Vietnam’s leading political affairs blog, Anh Ba Sam.