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ABN # 65 648 097 123



Background Briefing:

Vietnam: Death Sentence for Corruption ex-PetroVN Chair

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September 29, 2017

We are reaching out to you to seek an assessment of this morning's sentencing of former PetroVietnam chairman Nguyen Xuan Son and former chairman of Ocean Bank Ha Van Tham. Son was given a death sentence for several charges including corruption and Tham received a life imprisonment for various charges including corruption.

We request your evaluation on these sentences. What do such strong punishments mean for the corruption crackdown and what are the political implications, if there's any, in this case?

ANSWER: These sentences were expected because the Hanoi People's Procuracy made public their recommendations fifteen days ago. It is normal for Vietnam to hand down death sentences to the leading culprit in a high-profile corruption case that has caused major losses to the state. Tham's sentence for life was an aggregate of various charges against him. We can expect more of the same as corruption cases are brought to the courts.

These harsh sentences are mainly for public effect to show the population that government leaders are serious about ending large scale corruption. These sentences will have little deterrent effect on endemic corruption in Vietnam because the root cause is the lack of good governance including an independent system of audit, investigation and prosecution that is free from political influence. The shock of these sentences, like a booster inoculation, will wear off over time.

The anti-corruption campaign and the attendant court cases with heavy penalties is designed to mitigate the impact of corruption on the legitimacy of Vietnam's one-party state. For well over a decade, top party leaders have spoken publicly that corruption was the major challenge to their legitimacy. High-profile trials and harsh sentences are carried out to assuage public anger over corruption. However, these high-profile cases will not address everyday corruption encountered by the ordinary Vietnamese citizens in dealing with government officials and traffic police.

Because Vietnam lacks an effective independent system of governance, every corruption trial raises the question is there any political motivation behind them? In other words, are the prosecutors acting "without fear or favour"?

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam: Death Sentence for Corruption ex-PetroVN Chair," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, September 29, 2017. All background briefs are posted on Scribd.com (search for Thayer). To remove yourself from the mailing list type, UNSUBSCRIBE in the Subject heading and hit the Reply key.

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