

POLITICAL ELITE IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM: THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF THE DOMINANT STRATUM

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First version received November 2019; final version accepted September 2020

Michael Voslensky's concept of *nomenklatura* has three main features: comprehensive state authority, monopoly of wealth, and a hierarchical personnel system. Such features were found in party-state leaders in pre-reform Vietnam. In the *doi moi* period, the environment in which party-state leaders operate has changed greatly, but ambiguities remain under the names of the socialist-oriented market economy and socialist law-governed state. With the party-state personnel system essentially unchanged from the pre-reform period, party-state leaders have taken advantage of the ambiguous nature of such reforms and consolidated their dominant position in society through acts of corruption and nepotism. The intensive anti-corruption drive by the 12th tenure party leadership dealt a blow to those who committed such deviations. Nevertheless, it did not fundamentally change the situation of political elite dominance, as it aimed to strengthen the concentration of decision-making power and added more requirements for would-be officeholders.

Keywords: Political elite; Socialism; Corruption; Nepotism; Vietnam

JEL classification: D73, P29

I. INTRODUCTION

IN China, which shares many socioeconomic traits with Vietnam while generally being ahead of it in terms of various indicators, the process of social stratification has been the subject of sociological studies and public interest for the last 20 years. Sonoda (2008, pp. 174–76) summarizes the impacts of the marketization of the economy on disparities and inequalities in Chinese society as follows: (1) some fundamental changes occurred, such as the emergence of entrepreneurs and private businesses and a widening of income disparities due to academic qualifications and other factors; (2) in some areas, inequalities remained basically the same as before, though were partially modified, such as the dual structure of the rural–urban divide and the role of women in supporting

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household income; and (3) a trend that did not change (or rather intensified despite marketization) was the monopolization of social resources by managers working for state institutions (who were mostly party members).

This view of continued dominance of political elites is echoed by other analyses on Chinese social structure. Sonoda (2008) refers to a widely cited report on social stratification in China written by a group of leading sociologists from the Institute of Sociology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Lu 2002, cited in Sonoda 2008), which positioned “state and social administrators” at the top of 10 social strata or classes. Goodman’s (2014) analysis of class and social stratification in contemporary China takes issue with the overall schema of this 2002 report, but seems to agree with it in that the membership of “the dominant class” comes largely from the political leadership, referring to a number of previous studies. Although Goodman (2014) also notes the emergence of economic elites in the reform era as another component of the dominant class, he observes that many entrepreneurs have emerged from within the public sector, and those who do not have their roots in the party-state have been involved in political activities such as participation in legislative and representative bodies.

This paper focuses on party-state leaders as a dominant stratum in contemporary Vietnam. Compared with their equivalents in China, party-state leaders in Vietnam have so far been less subject to scientific scrutiny. However, available literature as well as official documents and media reports seem to point to the same direction as the literature on China, suggesting that this “class” has, indeed, maintained its distinct position in society, or even strengthened it, since before the beginning of the *doi moi* period. The shortage of information on the issue could, to a certain extent, be explained by its association with informal or illegal practices, such as corruption and nepotism. The 12th tenure leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has named these problems and declared war against them, issued various documents to squarely deal with them, and punished those who have committed these errors. Despite these groundbreaking initiatives, however, no fundamental break from the past has yet taken place in terms of the party-state personnel system, which is seen to underpin the persistent dominance of the elite.

Relying on the concept of *nomenklatura*, this paper examines the impact of market reforms on the position of party-state leaders in Vietnamese society. Here *nomenklatura* is understood as the class of political elites in communist countries with a centrally planned economy, following Voslensky’s (1984) definition.¹ Reference is also made to the intensive anti-corruption drive of the 12th tenure party leadership and its impact, or the lack thereof, on the functioning of the

¹ The term *nomenklatura* is also used to mean the party-state personnel system specifically. There are in-depth studies of *nomenklatura* in China in this sense (Burns 1987, 2006; Chan 2004).

party-state's established personnel system, which tends to distinguish the political elite stratum from the rest of society.

II. NOMENKLATURA IN VIETNAM BEFORE *DOI MOI*

A. *The Concept of Nomenklatura*

Nomenklatura is the term to which special meaning was attached by Soviet writer Michael Voslensky. Literally, it means "a list of names," or in the Soviet political context: (1) a list of key positions, appointments to which are made by the higher authorities in the party; and (2) lists of persons appointed to those positions or held in reserve for them (Voslensky 1984, p. 75). Voslensky referred to what he saw as the "Soviet ruling class" by this name.

Even before his book was published in 1980, as the author notes, different terms had been used to describe the same phenomenon (i.e., the emergence of the ruling elite class in communist countries). Compared with other terms, such as "new class," "central political bureaucracy," and so on, however, nomenklatura has the advantage of succinctly demonstrating who they are and where they come from. While the description of Soviet nomenklatura by Voslensky (1984) is extensive and detailed, its major features can be summarized as follows.

First, the nomenklatura has absolute monopoly of state power under a totalitarian one-party dictatorship. That is, "[t]he whole power of the socialist state is concentrated in its hands" (Voslensky 1984, p. 71). Regardless of whether it is related to industry or agriculture, internal or external affairs, economic, military, or social policies, ideology, culture, or sports, all decisions are made by the nomenklatura. With regard to the economy, all major means of production are under the control of the nomenklatura, thus creating an ultramonopoly that can never be matched by any capitalist monopoly (Voslensky 1984, p. 127).

Second, the nomenklatura exercises economic power as a consequence of the seizure of political power. Contrary to the Western bourgeoisie, the nomenklatura "is the ruling class, and that makes it the property-owning class" (Voslensky 1984, p. 72). Unlike the political elite in the West, the nomenklatura is the privileged class whose members enjoy a wide range of material benefits and immunity from any legal or political responsibility for acts of corruption, as long as they act in the interest of their own class. The status of a *nomenklaturist* is inherited in the sense that the children of the nomenklatura are educated in special schools and institutions reserved for them and are appointed to important positions afterward.

Third, as its name suggests, the nomenklatura is established on the basis of a comprehensive and hierarchical personnel system in which all key appointments in the political-administrative apparatus are made by higher authorities in the

party. Here the selection of candidates is primarily based on such criteria as reliability and political attitude, followed by qualifications for the job and administrative ability, as stipulated by Lenin and put into practice by Stalin (Voslensky 1984, p. 76). Also, “[a] candidate for a leading position must show real ambition and goodwill. To be worthy of climbing in the social scale he must show willingness to do anything” (Voslensky 1984, p. 76). Accordingly, factionalism and patronage prevail: “[i]t is impossible to make one’s way in the nomenklatura class without a great deal of support, so it is essential to join a faction in which everyone helps everyone else while at the same time trying to undermine rival factions” (Voslensky 1984, pp. 249–50).²

In the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the nomenklatura system was officially abolished with the dissolution of socialist regimes.

B. *Party-State Leaders in Central-Planning Vietnam*

Apparently, Vietnam had its share of nomenklatura during its central-planning period, but it was less developed than in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe in terms of concentration of power and wealth, in part because of the long-lasting wars. One of the harsh critics of the CPV, Bui Tin, admitted that those party leaders were “originally stained with the same blood and sweat as their compatriots during the war” (Bui 1995, p. 184). It was after the end of the war with America that a rapid accumulation of wealth by this group began in earnest.³

After the war, the CPV accelerated the reunification of the country in order to carry out centralized planning over the entire territory. Economic planning came with control over various areas of social life. Forming associations outside the mass organization structure was not permitted; people’s movements were restricted; the media was tightly controlled; and the people had to rely on food rationing and job allocation by the state (Gainsborough 2010, p. 164; Nguyen 1983, pp. 150–52). In the 1980 Constitution, Article 4 declares that the CPV is the only force leading the state and society.

Regarding the concentration of wealth, even during the war, official privileges for high-ranking cadres already existed (Bùi 1993; Bui 1995; Nguyen 1983). The rationing system is a case in point. The official ration of rice for ordinary

² Based on a close analysis of the nomenklatura system in China, Burns (1987) also observes that the nomenklatura encourages the development of patron–client relations among the leadership.

³ According to Bùi (1993), the nomenklatura in Vietnam included high-ranking officials from the deputy director level up in various offices of the party, state, military and police, and mass organizations. It included not just those at the center but also the leaders of offices at provincial and district levels. According to his rough calculation, at the beginning of the *doi moi* period, the size of the nomenklatura was estimated at over 50,000 persons. When their families were included, it accounted for 50,000 families or one in 200 households across the country.

citizens was not enough to cover their basic needs, and even that amount was not always guaranteed, or its delivery could be delayed, thus creating a major cause for worry for the people. High-ranking cadres, on the other hand, were receiving more than enough rice of the best quality, without any delays or need to queue in line. In addition, they were permitted to shop in special stores for additional foodstuffs. Other things were also available for them in special stores, such as clothing and foreign goods.

According to the official salary scale, since the introduction of a salary system in Vietnam, the ratio between the salaries of the top positions (state president and party general secretary) and those of the lowest positions (minimum wage for unskilled workers) had been seven to one (Bùi 1993).⁴ However, Bùi (1993) notes that there were a number of material benefits allocated to high-ranking cadres in practice that made the actual differences in income far greater than the salary scale suggested. Such benefits included expensive clothes, newspapers and journals, books, theater tickets, and so on. Central committee members had cars with drivers, so they and their families could go out for leisure during weekends and summer holidays. Each Politburo or Secretariat member could even charter an airplane to attend conferences or to go on vacation to summer resorts. In contrast, workers and low- and mid-level officials at that time could only use old bicycles to go to work (Bùi 1993; Porter 1993, p. 62).

Thus, available sources suggest that when the ordinary people were experiencing shortages and inconveniences of various kinds, high-ranking cadres and their families were enjoying not just sufficient but abundant material lives. While we may not expect total equality between the lives of manual workers and those of state leaders in any society, some of these privileges were apparently unreasonable or even illegal.⁵ Bùi (1993) asserts that the top elites lived in large houses and managed to arrange similar housing for their family members. Also, when overseas trips were restricted and strictly controlled by the party-state, high-ranking cadres utilized such opportunities to smuggle large quantities of goods, and accepted precious gifts from their counterparts in foreign countries.

The elite status was virtually hereditary. Kolko (1997, p. 121) observes that “[t]he party after 1954 created a system that was both organized and informal for retaining social and political power in the hands of its original members, their families, and their descendants.” The children of the party elite were given preferential access to advanced educational opportunities both at home and abroad,

⁴ After the introduction of *doi moi*, the ratio was set at 10 to one, and then at 13 to one.

⁵ The fact that Politburo members had their special villas transferred to state-owned tourism companies in the early days of *doi moi* indicates that they were afraid of criticism for having such luxuries (Bùi 1993).

which, in turn, qualified them to enter the bureaucracy and take up prestigious positions. The children of party cadres seldom became workers or artisans, and the percentage of children of high-ranking cadres in the military was reportedly lower than that of ordinary families (Porter 1993, p. 63).

III. ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES IN THE *DOI MOI* PERIOD

In the time of *doi moi*, not only was the central-planning system abolished, but also the political and administrative systems have been reformed and increasingly modernized, which has affected the political elite in one way or another. This section will look at some major elements of continuity and change in the economic and political spheres, respectively. The ambiguous nature of the reform is reflected in terms such as “socialist-oriented market economy” and “socialist law-governed state.”

A. *Economic Sphere: From Central Planning to Socialist-Oriented Market Economy*

In the economic sphere, the Vietnamese economy has shifted from one dominated by state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and collectives to a so-called multi-sectoral economy via the expansion of non-state sectors. SOEs became less subject to state directives and gained greater autonomy in business-related decision-making, while the state subsidies to these enterprises were cut back. Land is still seen as collectively owned by “the people,” but individuals and organizations are given rather comprehensive land use rights. Other major means of production are now subject to private ownership, which is guaranteed by the Constitution. These changes have made it possible for individuals to achieve economic and social success by means other than acquiring wealth from power. In practice, after 30 years of *doi moi*, an increasing number of private enterprises are entering the rank of the largest enterprises in Vietnam, and some entrepreneurs have come to be recognized as billionaires at the global level by *Forbes* magazine.

On the other hand, the gradual approach to marketization adopted in Vietnam has led to the persistence of the substantial state-owned sector to this day. In the early days of *doi moi*, the number of SOEs was drastically reduced by merging and dissolving small and inefficient ones, but its effect on the scale of SOE activities on the whole was marginal. Also, while the progress of international economic integration resulted in the further reduction of preferential or protection policies toward SOEs, these enterprises are still seen as having advantages over their private sector counterparts in terms of access to essential resources, such as credit and land. As of 2017, the state sector still accounted for nearly 30% of the country’s GDP, and of the 10 largest enterprises in terms of revenue operating in

Vietnam, nine were SOEs, while the remaining one was a foreign invested enterprise.⁶

Regarding the private sector, while the promulgation of the 1999 Enterprise Law was certainly a turning point in the substantial development of the private sector in Vietnam, profitable private operations tend to be associated with party-state interests. Officially, party members have been allowed to run private businesses since 2002, and private business owners have been allowed to become party members (on a pilot basis) since 2011. However, in many cases the connections between party-state interests and businesses are less visible. Although the Law on Cadres and Civil Servants prohibits civil servants from engaging in the establishment or management of private enterprises (and, especially in the case of those in leading positions, their family members are also prohibited from doing business in related sectors), in practice not a small number of civil servants are involved in private economic activities in one way or another.⁷

B. *Political and Administrative Sphere: Building a Socialist Law-Governed State*

Corresponding with economic reforms, the political and administrative system has also been reformed. Major elements of the reform include a clearer distinction between the roles of the party and the state, realization of a “law-governed state,” streamlining the state (and party) machinery, and building a modern civil service. A symbolic move is the re-emergence of the National Assembly as the law-making body, which also exercises supervisory authority over the government.

The government has been restructured to reflect the changing role of the state in society and the economy. The number of ministries and ministry-level agencies was 34 (26 and eight, respectively) in 1981; the equivalent number in 2019

⁶ “Công bố Bảng xếp hạng VNR500—Top 500 Doanh nghiệp lớn nhất Việt Nam năm 2017” [VNR500 ranking announced: Top 500 largest enterprises in Vietnam in 2017], *Vietnam Report*, December 5, 2017, <https://vnr500.com.vn/Cong-bo-Bang-xep-hang-VNR500-%E2%80%93-Top-500-Doanh-nghiep-lon-nhat-Viet-Nam-nam-2017-7504-1006.html>. In 2018 and 2019, the largest private enterprise in Vietnam, Vingroup, entered the top 10 list.

⁷ Despite the annual salary raise, civil service salaries are not yet considered enough to ensure a decent standard of living for civil servants and their families, thus prompting many to engage in economic activities outside public office (Nguyễn Hữu Hiệp, “Công chức làm giàu bằng cách nào?” [How do civil servants get rich?], *VnExpress*, June 29, 2011, <http://vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/cong-dong/cong-chuc-lam-giau-bang-cach-nao-2198813.html>). As long as their “outside” activities remain secondary and supplementary and are not in conflict with their official duties, these activities are regarded as legitimate (Quốc Phong, “Hiểu thế nào về ‘chân trong, chân ngoài’?” [How should one understand “inner leg, outer leg”?], *Kinh tế & Đô thị*, November 30, 2019, <http://kinhtedothi.vn/hieu-the-nao-ve-chan-trong-chan-ngoai-358912.html>).

was 22 (18 and four, respectively).⁸ Specialized agencies at local levels have also been restructured accordingly. In addition, the number of leadership positions in the government and administrative bodies has been rationalized; for instance, the number of deputy prime ministers was reduced from eight in 1987 to three in 1992 (and stood at five in 2019). The party organization is also under reform: the number of party committees at the center was reduced from 11 to six in 2007, although two of the committees merged then were re-established in 2012, thus bringing the total to eight.

Significantly, the idea of a modern, merit-based civil service system has been put in place. Decree 25 of 1993 stipulated the basic salary system for civil servants, abolishing various in-kind benefits and merging them into cash wages. The Law on Cadres and Civil Servants was promulgated in 2008, stipulating the definition of cadres and civil servants, their rights and obligations, and other basic principles of civil service recruitment and management. For instance, the law prescribes that civil servants must meet certain standards and conditions required by their respective positions, and they are, in principle, to be recruited through competitive examination.

There have been some changes to the party's policies on cadre management, too. At the Ninth Party Congress in 2001, age limits for party leadership positions, such as Central Committee and Politburo members, were introduced to prevent monopolization of offices by individuals and to promote an orderly generation change in the party-state leadership.⁹ In the Party Charter revised at the same Party Congress, Article 17 clearly states that the general secretary can hold his/her position for no more than two consecutive terms. Resolution 11 of 2002 issued by the Politburo urged the strict implementation of a rotation of cadres across the party, the state, and mass organizations, based on proper personnel planning, in order to improve the training of cadres and the allocation of human resources and to prevent negative practices associated with slack personnel management.

Despite these efforts, the fundamental principles of “the party leads the state and society” and “the party guides cadres’ affairs and management over the entire political system in a unitary manner” remain intact. A party caucus called *ban cán sự đảng* is established in each state organization, consisting of party members in leading positions (such as the minister, deputy ministers, the party

⁸ For instance, between 1987 and 1995, five ministries were merged into one Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. Similarly, four ministries and three general departments were merged into one Ministry of Industry, and three ministries and three committees were merged into one Ministry of Trade, which were further merged into the Ministry of Trade and Industry in 2007.

⁹ The age limit for Central Committee and Politburo members was originally set at 65 at the time of appointment. In 2006, it was lowered to 60 for newly elected Politburo members and re-elected Central Committee members, and 55 for newly elected Central Committee members.

secretary, the director of personnel affairs department, and the chair of the labor union in the case of a ministry). *Ban cán sự đảng* guides the organization to ensure that party lines and policies are properly implemented. A ministry is a state organization, but making decisions with regard to its personnel affairs is the prerogative of its *ban cán sự đảng*.

IV. PARTY-STATE LEADERS UNDER *DOI MOI*

This section focuses on the first two of the three features of nomenklatura discussed earlier in order to consider how party-state leaders have been affected by and cope with the structural changes. It seems that, while the Vietnamese political elite has been transformed to adapt to the changing environment, their essential features remain unchanged or are even more pronounced in some ways.

A. *Nature of State Power*

In the *doi moi* period, as people's socioeconomic activities have been liberalized in many areas, the state power has become less interventionist than it was previously (Gainsborough 2010, pp. 166–68). The state ceased to monopolize major means of production, and the space for social activities outside state guidance and management has been expanded. The state is no longer the dominant employer, although state employment still tends to be seen as privileged. There is a greater variety of non-state organizations, although they need to be affiliated with an organization in the formal political system. In general, state surveillance over people's everyday lives is much less obvious than it was in the pre-reform period.

Nevertheless, the party-state still retains the power “to clamp down on individuals or groups it deems a threat” (Gainsborough 2010, p. 167). Thayer (2014, p. 136) points out that the Vietnamese state devotes enormous resources to monitor and repress a rather tiny group of political dissidents and pro-democracy activists. According to his estimation, the security forces, including the army and police, employed 6.2 million officers, which is equivalent to 11.7% of the total working population in Vietnam (Thayer 2017). It came as little surprise that a senior lieutenant-general in the Vietnam People's Army revealed the existence of a cyberspace troop unit called “Force 47” consisting of 10,000-strong experts with a focus on combating “wrong views” on the Internet in 2017.

In addition, despite the party's continuous emphasis on “building a socialist law-governed state” and the claim that “the party organizations and members operate within the framework of the Constitution and laws” (Article 4 of the 2013 Constitution), the laws themselves are sometimes not clear enough or provide for discretion that is too broad to effectively restrict their arbitrary application by officials. The 2013 Land Law retained a provision that allows the state to expropriate land for broad socioeconomic development purposes, despite the fact

that there are many outstanding legal disputes between landowners and local authorities. The country's Criminal Code contains provisions punishing such acts as "dissemination of anti-state propaganda" (Article 117), "overthrowing the state" (Article 109), and "abuse of democratic freedoms" (Article 331), the definitions of which are vaguely worded.

Thus, while the state power in contemporary Vietnam does not seem to be as absolute or monopolistic as before, it still has considerable room to intervene in people's lives in a way not bound by reasonably clear legal provisions. Kerkvliet's observation in 2001 still holds true today:

The tendency during the last twenty years, resulting in part from societal forces and activities, has been to reduce and change the scope of what the state should do in the economy and other aspects of society. The outcome thus far has been more space in which people can live without directly interacting with agencies of the state. At the same time, the state remains in control of the media. State institutions still, despite pressures from within and outside them, allow citizens only a little room to establish their own organizations in order to speak and act publicly on important issues. (Kerkvliet 2001, p. 269)

Gainsborough (2010) attributes this state of affairs partly to the state's strongly paternalistic self-image, which continues to manifest itself in a strong belief that "the party knows best" (pp. 165, 168).

B. *Features of a Privileged Class*

In order to examine whether the political elite in contemporary Vietnam can be seen as a privileged class, we need to determine whether they are economically well-off and whether they monopolize or dominate public positions.

1. *Wealth accumulation*

Official statistics from the Vietnamese government do not show an association between public officeholders and particularly high incomes or sizable assets. According to Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey (VHLSS) data, the consumption level and other economic indicators of "leaders" are higher than the social strata average but not very high in relative terms (Đỗ 2012, pp. 47–48).

On the other hand, several analyses of the results of the Vietnam Access to Resources Household Survey (VARHS) demonstrate a correlation between public office or party membership on the one hand and the level of investment or socioeconomic well-being on the other in rural areas of Vietnam (Markussen and Tarp 2014; Markussen 2015; Markussen and Ngo 2019). Markussen and Tarp (2014) found that rural households that had government officials among their relatives made more land-related investments and had (de facto) more secure land property rights and better access to credit and monetary transfers than those households without such connections.

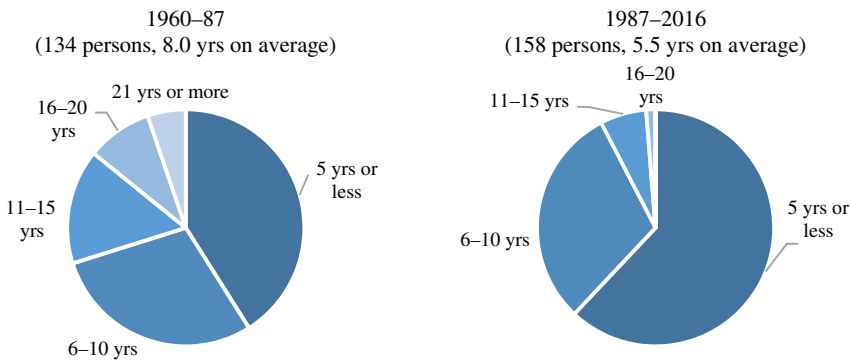
It would be difficult, however, for any survey to capture even an approximate amount of wealth amassed by senior party-state leaders, due to its informal nature. Kerkvliet (2014, p. 105) introduces figures that the country's former top leaders were alleged to have gained through corruption, which amounted to billions of US dollars per person. Media reports on accidents or criminal cases sometimes revealed that some senior officials were incidentally found possessing large sums of cash or other properties, the sources of which could not be accounted for by the official income level of the owner.¹⁰ While such instances may have renewed public anger, the fact that high-ranking cadres in general were well-off seemed to be old news to the people.

Another approach to the question of wealth accumulation by the political elite would be to focus on how they have adapted to the new environment and strengthened their positions through that process. Gainsborough (2010, p. 35) found that the proliferation of "new state business interests" in Ho Chi Minh City during the 1990s mainly took three forms: (1) existing state enterprises diversified their business into new sectors, (2) new state enterprises were established by party-state institutions, and (3) new state business interests set up private companies. When operating conditions became less hospitable for the state sector and more attractive for the private sector in the 2000s, SOEs began to accelerate equitization. However, Gainsborough (2010, pp. 105–6) argues that "[e]quitization represents a new form of state interventionism" not just because state officials were buying shares but because the state continued to exert a hold over the equitized companies (referred to as "private indirect government"). Equitized companies often continued to report to state institutions and respond to their other demands in return for certain benefits.

Two studies that explore social inequalities in rural communities found that local cadres taking advantage of their positions was one of the major factors affecting the increase in inequality during the reform period. Tran (2004, p. 147) states that "when liberalization began, cadres were involved in the distribution of new and important resources, such as land and credit, with which came opportunities to appropriate resources for themselves." With privileged access to information, connections, and resources, local cadres of a rural village in northern Vietnam in her study not only allocated land or preferential loans to their families and friends, but also ventured into the production of new crops that were expected to be highly profitable (but not necessarily successful). Nguyen (2004, p. 281) focuses attention on increasing inequality in land access since decollectivization in the Red River Delta province of Bac Ninh, and observes that "the assets position of some key cadres of the commune increased tremendously

¹⁰ Templer (1999, pp. 132–33); Dien Luong, "Vietnam's Corruption Problem," *The Diplomat*, February 29, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/02/vietnams-corruption-problem/>.

Fig. 1. Tenure Length of Cabinet Members



Source: Prepared by the author based on Vietnamese government website information.
[Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

within a short time-span” in the 1990s, allegedly by taking a large sum of money from selling or renting communal land.

2. *Monopoly of offices*

Regarding the monopolization of offices, due to the implementation of age and term limits for officeholders, today no single person stays in a leading party or state position for very long unlike in the pre-reform period. The average office tenure of 158 cabinet members from 1987 to 2016 (29 years) was about 5.5 years, whereas that of 134 cabinet members from 1960 to 1987 (27 years) was about eight years (Figure 1). The number of those who remained in office for 11 years or more was 40 out of 134 (30%) before 1987, compared to 12 out of 158 (8%) after 1987. Prior to 1987, seven cabinet members stayed in office for 21 years or more; the figure dropped to zero after 1987. This shows that there was actually more regular reshuffling of cabinet members during the *doi moi* period.

On the other hand, some studies have tested the impact of “political capital,” such as party membership or connection to the state sector of a household, on the educational attainment or occupational choice of its children. Kim (2004), based on data from the 1995 panel of the Vietnam Longitudinal Survey conducted in three northern provinces, shows a significantly positive effect of a father’s party membership on his children’s appointment to administrative jobs. Coxhead and Phan (2013) found a widening gap in educational investments and achievements between children of two types of households: those with members employed by the state sector and those without, in favor of the former (Coxhead and Phan 2013; Phan and Coxhead 2020). Such educational gaps are thought to

lead to a situation in which children of state-connected households are likely to get lucrative state-sector jobs, thus continuing economic inequalities between the two groups. Phan and Coxhead (2020) also posit that behind observed educational achievement gaps lies state households' privileged access to college enrollment and state-sector jobs.

Here, again, it is difficult to grasp the actual magnitude of such practices, but anecdotal evidence abounds on the importance of family ties in obtaining prestigious jobs. There is a saying, “Thế nhất hậu duệ / Thế nhì quan hệ / Thế ba tiền tệ / Thế tư trí tuệ” (of first importance is descent; second are relations; third is money; and fourth is intellect), or “con ông cháu cha” (COCC), meaning “children or grandchildren of some important person.” One prominent example of COCC is a former Politburo member's 24-year-old daughter who had a master's degree in international business and was appointed as CEO of a real estate sector SOE in 2012. A *VietNamNet* article in 2015 featured some “youngest-ever” local leaders, including two 39-year-old provincial/city party secretaries, a 27-year-old provincial party executive committee member, and a 30-year-old provincial department director, all children of current or former top leaders at the central or local level.¹¹ The phenomenon is not limited to the upper levels. There are reports of cases of “cả nhà làm quan” (the whole family works as officials)¹² at commune and district levels, too (see Table 1).

V. REFORM UNDER THE 12TH TENURE PARTY LEADERSHIP AND ITS PROSPECTS

A. *Breakthrough in the Fight against Corruption*

The previous section suggests that the persistence or strengthening of the privileged position of the political elite in contemporary Vietnam is largely supported by corruption and nepotism. The 12th tenure party leadership (2016–21) claims that these problems are negatively affecting people's confidence in the current political regime, which may even threaten its survival. In 2017, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong made a famous statement that “when the furnace is hot, even green firewood will burn,” urging intensification in the fight against corruption. Actually, the 12th tenure leadership of the CPV has come to be known for its anti-corruption drive, which is claimed to have no

¹¹ “The Faces of Vietnam's Young Leaders,” *VietNamNet*, October 21, 2015, <https://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/special-reports/144346/the-faces-of-vietnam-s-young-leaders.html>.

¹² The original saying is “Một người làm quan, cả họ được nhờ” (when one person works as an official, the whole family can rely on him/her). A revised version more frequently mentioned recently goes “Một người làm quan, cả họ (nhà) làm quan” (when one person works as an official, the whole family work as officials).

TABLE 1
Major Cases of Suspected Nepotism in Recent Years

Persons Involved	Issues and Consequences
Center	
Vu Huy Hoang, former Minister of Industry and Trade	In November 2016 and January 2017, dismissed from his past party and state positions for scandals including appointments of his son, Vu Quang Hai (born in 1986), to leadership positions in SOEs.
Nguyen Xuan Anh (born in 1976), Secretary of the Party Committee of Da Nang City; son of former Politburo member Nguyen Van Chi	In October 2017, dismissed as secretary of Da Nang Party Committee and removed from the Party Central Committee for violations of party regulations and dishonesty in using degrees awarded by an unaccredited educational institution.
Province	
Nguyen Nhan Chinh (born in 1984), Secretary of Bac Ninh City Party Committee; son of Nguyen Nhan Chien, incumbent Secretary of Bac Ninh Provincial Party Committee	On July 22, 2020, appointed to the position for the term 2020–25. On August 5, 2020, transferred to the position of Deputy Director, Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs Dept., Bac Ninh Province.
Le Phuoc Hoai Bao (born in 1985), Director, Planning and Investment Dept., Quang Nam Province; son of Le Phuoc Thanh, former Secretary of Quang Nam Province Party Committee	In December 2017, Central Inspection Committee instructed Quang Nam Province Party Committee to annul the decisions related to Bao's appointment and expel him from the party (implemented in March 2018). In February 2018, the Party Secretariat decided to strip Le Phuoc Thanh of his status as the Party Secretary of Quang Nam Province in 2010–15.
Dinh Van Thu, Chairman of the Quang Nam Province People's Committee	In January 2018, received a warning from the Central Inspection Committee for appointing his two sons (born in 1982 and 1988) to provincial offices.
Trieu Tai Vinh, Secretary of Ha Giang Province Party Committee	In September 2016, confirmed Internet rumors that eight of his family members and relatives were holding key positions in provincial offices but said proper procedures had been followed for their promotions.
District	
Nguyen Truong Son, Deputy Chairman of the People's Committee, An Duong District, Hai Phong City	Four siblings and one nephew work as leaders in the District People's Committee offices and the District Party Committee. In January 2018, the Secretary of An Duong District Party Committee was reprimanded; some of the six family members had been transferred to other positions.
Nguyen Huu Tien, Secretary of the Party Committee, Kim Thanh District, Hai Duong Province; son of former Secretary of Kim Thanh District Party Committee	Two siblings and two other relatives work as leaders in the District People's Committee offices and the District Party Committee. In July 2017, the Standing Committee of the District Party Committee decided to transfer Tien's brother-in-law to another position.

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Persons Involved	Issues and Consequences
Ho Xuan Trang, Secretary of the Party Committee, A Luoi District, Thua Thien-Hue Province	In April 2017, Department of Home Affairs, Thua Thien-Hue Province, criticized two leaders of the district for being involved in one of the seven appointment decisions related to Trang's relatives, which was not in accordance with regulations.
Le Van Sang, Secretary of My Duc District Party Committee, Ha Noi City	In September 2015, Ha Noi City Party Committee admitted that My Duc District had appointed six officials, who were relatives of district party and state leaders, to its specialized agencies, but no power abuse was found after a review of procedures.
Commune	
Truong Van An, Secretary of Ha Son Commune Party Committee, Quy Hop District, Nghe An Province	As of January 2016, the Party Secretary, People's Committee Chairman, and Deputy Chairman are relatives, and nine other officials are also related to them. Up to 80% of the commune population is made up of ethnic minorities.
Do Dinh Hung, Secretary of Que Long Commune Party Committee, Que Son District, Quang Nam Province	In May 2017, media reported that, out of the commune's 19 staff, eight were Hung's relatives, many of whom held key positions. Hung explained that it was a coincidence as a result of his marriage, and many of them had worked as commune leaders for many years.
Le Viet Huong, Secretary of Hong Tien Commune Party Committee, Huong Tra Town, Thua Thien-Hue Province	In August 2017, Huong admitted that almost all leadership positions of the commune were held by his relatives, which he claimed was due to the low educational standard of the local population, 70% of whom were ethnic minorities.
Luong Thi Hong, Deputy Secretary of the Party Committee, Chairman of the People's Committee, Thong Thu Commune, Que Phong District, Nghe An Province; daughter of Luong Phieng, former Secretary of Thong Thu Commune Party Committee	In October 2017, a petition was made about Hong's eight relatives working in leadership positions in the commune. Que Phong District Bureau of Home Affairs attributed the situation to the small number of people finishing compulsory education in the commune.
Ly Thi Nam, Permanent Deputy Secretary of the Party Committee, and Vang A To, Chairman of the People's Committee, Nam Xe Commune, Van Ban District, Lao Cai Province	Nam's three brothers and To's brother and sister hold key commune positions. In November 2019, Van Ban District Bureau of Home Affairs explained that Nam Xe is a special case, as it is a small commune with a unique ethnic minority population.

Source: Prepared by the author based on various media reports.

prohibited zones. At the 11th Central Committee Plenum in October 2019, Trong boasted that, since the beginning of the 12th tenure, the party had disciplined more than 70 high-ranking officials under central management, including one Politburo member and four Central Committee members of the 12th tenure, 14 former Central Committee members, one former deputy prime minister, five ministers and former ministers, two provincial party secretaries, five former provincial party secretaries, and 17 military officers. In addition to the party discipline, which ranges from reprimand to expulsion from the party, some of these individuals were also subject to criminal charges.

One prominent case is that of Dinh La Thang, a Politburo member of the 12th tenure, who was relieved from his positions as Politburo member and Ho Chi Minh City Party Secretary in May 2017 for violating regulations on economic management while he was chairman of the country's largest SOE, PetroVietnam (PVN). He became the first-ever Politburo member dismissed for economic mismanagement (which borders on corruption). Subsequently, Thang was arrested and sentenced to a total of 30 years in prison. Related to Thang's case was Trinh Xuan Thanh, former chairman of PetroVietnam Construction (PVC), a subsidiary of PVN. Thanh had fled the country for Germany and sought asylum there, when he was allegedly abducted by Vietnamese agents and repatriated to Vietnam in July 2017.¹³ Thanh was sentenced to life imprisonment for embezzlement and economic mismanagement.

In the same vein, the 12th tenure leadership has issued numerous documents aiming to tighten the party's cadre management and improve the moral and professional quality of its members. Central Committee Regulation 85 of 2017 requires about 1,000 high-ranking party cadres, including the Central Committee members and Standing Committee members of provincial-level party committees, to annually provide information on their assets and the assets of their spouses and underage children. Central Committee Regulation 98 of 2017 on cadre rotation prohibits rotating those who were disciplined or incompetent between the center and provinces or between different provinces. Under Regulation 98, renewed emphasis has been placed on the policy which dictates that local leaders should not be natives of the locality in which they serve, nor should they have spent a significant portion of their careers in that locality.

On behalf of the state, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc also sent messages to the public that the 12th tenure leadership was serious in grappling with the problems of corruption and nepotism. In August 2016, in the first government meeting Phuc presided over as prime minister, he reportedly said that "the selection and appointment (of cadres) are to find talented people, not family

¹³ Vietnamese authorities asserted that Thanh had returned to Vietnam and surrendered himself to the police voluntarily.

members.”¹⁴ Phuc’s comments on the shady connections between party-state officials and enterprises made at the conference on SOE reform in November 2018 were quoted in some newspapers: “I know that some people have not only one but 14 or 15 ‘backyards’ ... Don’t think that the Prime Minister doesn’t know about this problem.”¹⁵ The revised Anti-corruption Law of 2018 expanded the list of subjects who were obliged to declare their assets and incomes to all civil servants, and prohibited officeholders in non-state entities from acts such as embezzlement and receiving or giving bribes to gain advantages for their enterprises or organizations or for personal gain.

B. *Party-State Personnel System*

It may be said that the anti-corruption fight in Vietnam has entered a new stage under the 12th tenure party leadership with the arrest and imprisonment of a number of high-ranking officials, including former Politburo and Central Committee members and army and police officers, and removing “princelings” from positions they do not deserve. Certainly, there have been some unprecedented elements in all of this. Can we expect that it will lead to a decline in the significant presence of the party-state elite in society? That is not likely. There seem to be more continuities than changes in the politics behind the new trend. Above all, the basic operations of the party-state personnel system, which was the fundamental element of the nomenklatura, have been virtually untouched. Let us examine the institutions and practices regarding elections and appointments of high-level political and administrative leaders in order to shed some light on major features of the party-state personnel system in contemporary Vietnam.

1. *Election of party leaders at the center*

The starting point in the process to elect key party leaders at the center is the five-yearly Party Congress, but its preparations begin more than two years prior to the meeting. Take the 12th Party Congress in January 2016, for example. The 11th tenure Central Committee decided on the establishment of five subcommittees in its eighth plenum held in October 2013, including one on personnel affairs. The subcommittee on personnel affairs prepared the draft list of Central Committee member candidates to be proposed to the Party Congress, based on the guidelines by the 11th tenure Central Committee and input from localities and sectors, and under the direction of the Politburo. The Politburo put the draft

¹⁴ “Thủ tướng: ‘Không mua xe mới, không nhận hoa chúc mừng’” [Prime minister: “Not to buy new cars, not to receive congratulations flowers”], *VnExpress*, August 1, 2016, <https://vnexpress.net/thu-tuong-khong-mua-xe-moi-khong-nhan-hoa-chuc-mung-3445684.html>.

¹⁵ “Thủ tướng: ‘Có những anh có tới 14 sân sau’” [Prime minister: “Some people have up to 14 backyards”], *Báo điện tử Pháp Luật thành phố Hồ Chí Minh*, November 22, 2018, <https://plo.vn/kinh-te/thu-tuong-co-nhung-anh-co-toi-14-san-sau-804005.html>.

list and a proposal on the 12th tenure Politburo member candidates to debate at three Central Committee plenums from the year before the Party Congress and achieved a consensus on these proposals.

At the Party Congress in which 1,510 representatives of party branches participated, deliberations were made on this list of Central Committee member candidates and on nominations or self-nominations of additional candidates from the floor of the Party Congress; the draft candidate list was finalized after some modifications and supplementations and voted on by the representatives. Additional nominations and self-nominations of Central Committee member candidates from the floor have been permitted since the 10th Party Congress, but in practice these additional candidates rarely win a seat.¹⁶ In the three Party Congresses from the 10th to the 12th, the number of candidates (including official and alternate members) proposed by the Central Committee of the previous tenure was about 1.1 per seat. The number increased to not more than 1.2–1.4 per seat, even when additional candidates were included. This means that the new Central Committee members are virtually appointed by the Central Committee of the previous tenure.

The first plenum of the 12th tenure Central Committee elected the members of the Politburo and other key institutions from its members, and the general secretary from the Politburo members, based on a proposal by the 11th tenure Central Committee. At the time of the Party Congress, the tasks to be assigned to each Politburo member had not yet been fully decided, but at least the top four Politburo members (the so-called four-pillars), including the general secretary, the state president, the prime minister, and the National Assembly chair, were virtually fixed in accordance with the proposal by the 11th tenure Central Committee, although the three state positions had to be formalized by subsequent votes at the National Assembly.

There have been calls for the direct election of the party secretary by the Party Congress, but those calls have not been answered, while at the provincial level and below, there are already some cases where the party secretaries were directly elected by the Party Congresses. Thus far there has always been only one candidate for the general secretary (and other key positions), and that candidate has never failed to secure the confidence of the Central Committee.¹⁷ In that sense, the Central Committee and its core organ, the Politburo, of the previous tenure

¹⁶ At the 12th Party Congress, 25 candidates were added to the final list of Central Committee member candidates (including 21 official and four alternate member candidates); none was elected.

¹⁷ At the 10th Party Congress of 2006, it is said that, upon the request of some delegates, a list of multiple candidates for the position of general secretary was prepared and a reference vote was organized. However, as the rival candidate to the incumbent withdrew after the reference vote, there was no election of the general secretary by the Central Committee.

have substantial authority over the selection of the party secretary and other top leaders.

2. *Election and appointment of state leaders by the National Assembly*

The initial step in the election and appointment of state leaders is the National Assembly election, which takes place every five years.¹⁸ The National Assembly election in Vietnam is a direct election based on the principle of universal and equal suffrage and is held by secret vote. Candidates for National Assembly deputies (members) are nominated by the party, state, or social organizations (including mass organizations), or they nominate themselves, but not all applications for candidacy are approved. The would-be candidates must pass the qualification-screening process led by the Fatherland Front, an umbrella organization for all political and social organizations in Vietnam.

Before the election, the Standing Committee of the National Assembly projects the National Assembly deputies' structure based on their personal attributes (e.g., ethnicity, gender, and age) and their sectoral affiliation. Based on this projection, the number and attributes of candidates allocated to each political or social organization is determined, and each organization selects its own candidates and nominates them accordingly. Candidates are nominated by either central or local institutions. Centrally nominated candidates include high-ranking party-state leaders and those who are supposed to assume permanent positions in the National Assembly committees upon winning the election. Centrally nominated candidates tend to have a very high likelihood of being elected.¹⁹ In the 14th tenure National Assembly election held in May 2016, while about 57% of all candidates were elected, the proportion for the centrally nominated candidates was about 92%.

In contrast, the chance of winning for self-nominated candidates is very narrow. In the 14th tenure National Assembly election, out of 154 initial applicants for nomination, only 11 managed to get their names included in the official list of candidates, and only two were elected. The maximum number of self-nominated candidates elected in one National Assembly election was four in the 13th tenure National Assembly election. In the *doi moi* period, the candidate-seat ratio in National Assembly elections ranged from about 1.5 to 1.8, which is higher than before. In that sense, voters have a wider choice, but in practice nearly 100% of the National Assembly members are elected from candidates nominated by political or social organizations based on the projection of the

¹⁸ Since 2011, the National Assembly election and local People's Councils election have been organized in the same year as the Party Congress.

¹⁹ Malesky and Schuler (2009) show that there is room for subtle maneuvering in the way candidates are allocated to particular electoral districts so that the centrally nominated candidates would have a better chance of winning without resorting to more blatant measures such as vote-rigging.

National Assembly deputies' structure by the Standing Committee of the National Assembly of the previous tenure.

The newly elected National Assembly elects the chair, deputy chairs, and other members of the Standing Committee from the deputies in the first session of its tenure, based on the proposal of the National Assembly Standing Committee of the previous tenure. Then the National Assembly elects the state president, based on the proposal of the newly elected National Assembly Standing Committee, and elects the prime minister, based on the proposal of the state president, and approves the proposal by the prime minister on the appointment of the deputy prime ministers and the ministers. These proposals are made in line with the results of the Party Congress held earlier in the year. Usually there is only one candidate for each position, and the candidate is approved by a large majority of the National Assembly deputies.²⁰ In this way, continuity from the previous tenure and consistency with the results of the Party Congress are achieved in the elections and appointments of top state leaders.

3. *Functioning of the personnel system*

Thus, Vietnam's party-state is built on a comprehensive and hierarchical personnel system, where decisions made in a small circle at a higher level are basically only implemented at a lower level. Let us go into some more detail on how the system functions.

Major elements involved in personnel decisions include the following:²¹

- Qualifications and conditions: a number of criteria considered necessary for conducting the assigned tasks are set for each position.
- Cadre planning: cadre plans (*quy hoạch cán bộ*) are established to ensure long-term capacity development of the cadres and objective personnel work.
- Appointment procedures: appointments are typically subject to votes of confidence by interested parties to ensure democracy.
- Party caucus: personnel decisions are guided by the party caucus in each organization so that the party lines and policies are properly implemented.

The appointment procedures and party caucus elements represent the two sides of the principle of democratic centralism, but as can be seen from above, the balance between democracy and centralism tends to tilt toward the latter. Democracy tends to be formalistic, while the real decision-making authority is

²⁰ There have been few exceptions in the *doi moi* period. In 1988, when the National Assembly was tasked to elect a new prime minister, two candidates ran for the position as a result of demands by the deputies. At the minister level, a candidate for transport minister and another for the state bank governor were rejected by the National Assembly in 1996 and 1997, respectively.

²¹ Đinh Duy Hòa, "Cả họ làm quan: Lỗ thủng ở đâu?" [The whole family work as officials: Where is the loophole?], *VietNamNet*, September 20, 2016, <https://vietnamnet.vn/vn/thoi-su/chinh-tri/ca-ho-lam-quan-lo-thung-o-dau-327592.html>.

concentrated in a small circle of people at the apex of an organization. With regard to the top leaders at the center, in both the party and the state, the highest personnel decisions are formally made by the representatives of the whole constituency, but, in substance, they are simply giving the nod to decisions already made by the leaders of the previous tenure; not that such formality is unimportant, though, for the sake of legitimacy.

The “qualifications and conditions” and “cadre planning” elements remind us of the two facets of *nomenklatura*: positions and candidates. In terms of qualifications and conditions, there is no doubt that specifying such qualifications and conditions is necessary for effective personnel management. What seems to be happening, however, is that increasingly high specs are required to assume public positions, either *de facto* or *de jure*. One example is academic qualifications. Of the National Assembly deputies of the ninth tenure elected in 1992, those holding a university degree or higher accounted for 56%. In 2016, out of the 496 deputies elected for the 14th tenure National Assembly, only six did not have a university degree, while 310 (63% of the total) had graduate-level degrees. Of the 19 Politburo members of the 12th tenure who were also elected in 2016, there were nine doctors, seven masters, and three bachelors.

Party membership is another case in point. There is no formal requirement for state officials to be party members, but the appointment of nonparty members to state leadership positions is rare. A decision in 2016 to appoint a nonparty member as the head of the Urban Railway Management Board of Ho Chi Minh City made the headlines. In the past, some cabinet members did not have party membership, but currently being not just a party member but also a Central Committee member seems to have become a norm for cabinet members. The 18 members of the Standing Committee of the 14th tenure National Assembly are also all Central Committee members, whereas there were four non-Central Committee members in the 13th tenure.

Regarding cadre planning, those who want to be promoted in the party-state system in the future must first be put in a cadre plan. They will then be considered for training and rotation opportunities, which will equip them with credentials for taking up greater responsibilities. The higher a position is, the broader work experience it generally requires; therefore, the rotation matters. The career patterns of cabinet members of the 13th and 14th tenures reveal that many of those who started their careers as local politicians had experience as ministerial cadres, and many of those who were originally career civil servants had experience as local leaders before becoming ministers (Table 2).

There are different career patterns among the cabinet members, but the baseline is that they are all from some part of the political system. The academics have worked in leadership positions at major national universities or public research institutions, and enterprise managers are all from major SOEs. With the

TABLE 2
Main Careers of the 13th and 14th Tenure Cabinet Members

	Local Politician (those with ministerial experiences)	Career Bureaucrat (those with local government experiences)	Military/ Police	Academic	Enterprise	Other	Total
13th tenure	10 (6)	7 (5)	3	3	3	1	27
14th tenure	9 (7)	7 (5)	3	3	2	3	27

Source: Prepared by the author based on Vietnamese government website information.

Note: “Other” includes those whose main career is not clear (Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng in the 13th tenure and Minister of Industry and Trade Trần Tuấn Anh in the 14th tenure); those whose main career is party cadre (Minister of Culture, Sport and Tourism Nguyễn Ngọc Thiện in the 14th tenure); or youth union cadre (Minister of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs Đào Ngọc Dung in the 14th tenure).

age limits for leadership positions, one needs to secure a place in the political system early in order to move up the ladder toward higher positions.

Such a concentration of decision-making power, requirement for higher qualifications, and emphasis on cadre planning tend to make connections all the more important in starting and advancing political careers. For those who are well connected, it is easier to become a party member or get a state job. It is not difficult for them to obtain academic qualifications, either. Many recent scandals in the education sector are related to party-state officials and their children.²² On the other hand, these conditions must lead to raising the bar for ordinary folks to enter and advance their careers in the political system. The 12th tenure party leadership has strengthened these trends by tightening control over personnel management and adding more requirements for potential officeholders.

²² Over 200 students taking high school exams in the three provinces of Son La, Ha Giang, and Hoa Binh had their results altered and received unusually high scores in 2018. Many of the cheaters were found to be children of senior officials of the locality, including a daughter of the Ha Giang Province Party Secretary. Hanoi-based Dong Do University reportedly granted 600–700 secondary diplomas from 2018 to 2019 for VND 28–35 million (US\$1,200–US\$1,500) each. The students were mainly cadres and civil servants who needed foreign language diplomas and certificates to be eligible for salary raises and promotions. In 2017, the titles of professor and associate professor were awarded to 1,226 persons, including prominent figures like the Minister of Health, which reflects a sharp increase of 60% compared to the previous year. Thirty-four percent of those awarded the professor title reportedly do not have any internationally published articles (Tien Phong, “Over 1,200 Professors, Associate Professors Appointed in Final Sprint,” *VietNamNet*, February 12, 2018, <https://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/education/195491/over-1-200-professors-associate-professors-appointed-in-final-sprint.html>). After an inspection, 41 persons were removed from the list of professors and associate professors.

VI. CONCLUSION

In today's Vietnam, compared with the Vietnam of the pre-reform period, the areas of people's lives out of state control have expanded, and association with the party-state is no longer the only path to achieving high social status or wealth. On the other hand, the party-state restricts people's political participation, while retaining broad discretion in its handling of public affairs. The socialist-oriented market economy and the socialist law-governed state have allowed the proliferation of negative phenomena, such as corruption and nepotism, among cadres and civil servants. The comprehensive and hierarchical personnel system, which is essentially unchanged, is closely associated with factionalism and patronage and is increasingly isolating the officialdom from the rest of society. In a way, the system seems rather competitive inside and between different factions and patronage networks, but entering the system is not easy for outsiders.

The intensive anti-corruption struggle of the 12th tenure party leaders has succeeded in punishing a number of individuals, but still it would not change the overall course of events or even accentuate it. Pointing to the increasing prosecution of big corruption cases observed since the second half of the 1990s, Gainsborough (2010, p. 69) warns that it is simplistic to view this phenomenon as an indication of the state getting tough on corruption. Rather, he argues that these cases are better understood as an attempt by the political center to discipline the lower levels of the party-state. Similarly, the current struggle against corruption can be seen as the party's attempt to discipline "the state," especially its government branch. However intense it may be, the ultimate goal is to defend the system, not to break it.

While we have less concrete information on the party-state personnel system and its consequences, the state of political elite dominance in Vietnam seems to have much in common with that in China. One of the issues to be explored further is the impact of the growing presence of entrepreneurs on the position of political elites in society and the interactions between the two groups, which is partially addressed by Fujita (2020) in this issue. The internal operation of the political system may demonstrate more continuities than changes, but it cannot stay away from dynamic changes in the outside world. However dominant today's political elites may look, their dominance is relative, not absolute, as in the age of nomenklatura.

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