

Is Vietnam Going the Way of China?

The Communist Party of Vietnam seems, in some ways, to be following the path laid down by Beijing.

By Nguyen Khac Giang
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Despite being its communist peer, Vietnam's one-party regime is widely regarded as relatively **more democratic than China's**. The praise is grounded on Vietnam's consensus-based leadership, intraparty democracy, and arguably less repressed civil society. Nevertheless, these factors have markedly deteriorated since the incumbent Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) boss, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, was re-elected in early 2016. This tendency has been accelerated as the CPV is preparing to hold its midterm meeting this spring, the 7th Plenum, at which significant decisions on leadership and internal reforms will be made.

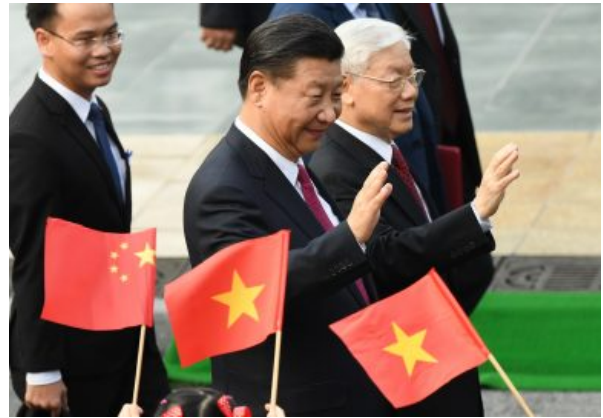
When the Communist Party of China (CPC), under the rule of President Xi Jinping, started its fearsome anti-corruption campaign to crack down on both “tigers and flies” after the 18th National Congress in 2012, Vietnamese internal politics remained a tug-of-war between Nguyen Phu Trong and the then-Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung. This balanced rivalry helped CPV sustain its peaceful environment since the country embraced market-oriented reform policies (or *Đổi mới*) in 1986.

However, as soon as Trong emerged as the winner, the conservative apparatchik seemed determined to follow his Chinese comrades and clear out “bad roots” inside the Party. After a year of settling down, 2017 saw an unprecedented shake-up in Vietnam's elite leadership, as the CPV purged many high-profile officials for corruption, economic mismanagement, deliberate violations of state regulations, embezzlement, and abuse of power.

The spotlight was sharpest on the dismissal of Dinh La Thang, a member of the all-powerful Politburo and once considered a rising political star. After the first trial of two charges against him, he was sentenced to **13 years in prison**, becoming the first ever Politburo member to suffer such severe punishment. The “hot furnace” — Trong's metaphor for the anti-corruption campaign — has also scorched other prominent figures, both incumbent and retired from local governments, ministries, and state-owned enterprises.

While it seems the campaign has brought some justice for Vietnam's infamous corruption problem, on the other hand it has also helped consolidate dictatorial power into the hands of Trong and his protégés, most notably Chairman of the Central Inspection Commission Tran Quoc Vuong — Vietnam's equivalent of Chinese anti-corruption czar Wang Qishan. In addition, after two years in charge, Trong has already taken complete control over the military and public security forces. Already the secretary of the Central Military Commission, he managed to secure a place in the Central Party Committee for Public Security, the actual leadership of the police forces, in 2016. This is the first time in Vietnamese politics that a general secretary has been allowed to join the Committee.

On another front and perhaps with a longer term strategy in mind, Pham Minh Chinh, another Trong ally and the head of CPV's Central Organization Commission, is piloting a program to “unify” government and Party posts at the same administrative level. To put it simply, the aim is to reduce the burden of Vietnam's dualistic governance system by merging the local Party chief (for now at the district and commune levels) with the elected chairs of the



Chinese President Xi Jinping, center, and Vietnam Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, right, wave during a welcoming ceremony at the presidential palace in Hanoi, Vietnam Sunday, Nov. 12, 2017.

Image Credit: Hoang Dinh Nam/Pool Photo via AP

People's Committee. Many expect the pilot program to be the first step toward finally “unifying” the two highest positions in Vietnamese politics: the president and general secretary. This is the tradition practiced in China since 1993, when CPC General Secretary Jiang Zemin was confirmed as Chinese head of state, while it has not been seen in Vietnam since the death of its founding father Ho Chi Minh in 1969.

All these moves have inevitably established Trong as Vietnam's most powerful leader in decades. Within such a context, Vietnam is slowly crawling from one-party to one-man rule, just like China under Xi.

In addition, and perhaps more worryingly, it is not only procedural similarities but also thuggish tactics that the CPV has learned eagerly from Beijing's playbook. This is well illustrated in the “Cold War-style abduction,” right from the heart of Berlin, of Trinh Xuan Thanh, a senior government official and former SOE executive linked to Dinh La Thang. The case shocked Germany and caused a serious **diplomatic furor** between the two countries. One might as well take reference of Chinese security police's various abductions, whether in **Hong Kong** or **Thailand** (though Germany perhaps is at a different level).

Civil society activists in Vietnam might have not been shocked, however, as they have suffered unusually **tough treatment** in the two years of Trong's renewed tenure. The police arrested 19 and 21 activists in 2016 and 2017 respectively, **compared to just seven in 2015**. The long-awaited Law on Associations, which could have made the precarious environment in Vietnam safer for civil society, has been suspended indefinitely. The situation is also bleak for Vietnam's news media, which is theoretically state-owned and already under the Party's heavy control. In 2016, for example, more than 150 media houses were fined for “misguided reporting” by the Ministry of Information and Communication, the biggest number ever recorded. Although not all of the punished reports are political, this shows the regime's willingness to add more pressure to **one of the toughest press environments** in the world.

Trong is seen in Vietnam as a clean, uncorrupt leader, which gives him huge support both inside and outside the Party to carry out the anti-corruption campaign. The “hot furnace,” despite being alleged as a mask for political purges, has had positive impacts on Vietnam's public governance, which has long suffered from the lack of an efficient accountability mechanism, as one might expect in any authoritarian regime. However, this top-down approach depends tremendously on “good leaders,” who can execute the plan relentlessly and without any thought for vested interests

There is little disagreement that Trong, now 73, will step down at the next CPV Congress in 2021. By then, if all of his tactics for power consolidation, under the name of the “democratic centralism” principle, are institutionalized, his successor will be gifted a strong hand to squeeze Vietnam's “collective leadership” if he wishes to. If this happens, it will override modest **political reforms** that have taken years and consequently set back the country's prospects for democratization. Perhaps only their comrades in Beijing will be happy with **such scenario**.

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