

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 19 July 2024

---

## **Governance and Power Consolidation under Nguyen Phu Trong: An Analysis of Four Strategic Tools**

*Tran Le Quynh\**



*Vietnam's Communist Party general secretary Nguyen Phu Trong (top) at the National Assembly's extraordinary session opening in Hanoi on 15 January 2024. (Photo by Nhac NGUYEN/AFP).*

*\* Tran Le Quynh is a Researcher at Amnesty International, London, and a former Senior Journalist at BBC Vietnamese Service.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong has used four key tools to reshape the country's political landscape: a rigorous anti-corruption campaign, comprehensive regulatory reforms, strategic adjustments in regional representation, and a nuanced blend of personal ties with formal party rules.
- The anti-corruption campaign has led to the unprecedented removal of high-ranking officials, consolidating power into Trong's hands and enforcing party discipline. Regulatory overhauls, including Decision 244 and Regulation 80, have centralized power and standardized leadership selection processes.
- Under Trong's leadership, qualifications and party loyalty have been prioritized over regional considerations. The dynamics of personal ties and party rules, as seen in the case of former Chairman of the National Assembly Vuong Dinh Hue, highlights the importance of adherence to regulations.
- The four strategic tools are interconnected and build on one another. This approach aligns with Trong's vision to strengthen the Party's integrity and stability, while setting the groundwork for future leadership transitions.

## INTRODUCTION

Vietnam's political landscape has been rocked by an unprecedented wave of high-level departures, driven by Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's uncompromising anti-corruption agenda. Since the 13<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2021, seven Politburo members—Nguyen Xuan Phuc, Pham Binh Minh, Tran Tuan Anh, Vo Van Thuong, Vuong Dinh Hue, Truong Thi Mai and Dinh Tien Dung—have been forced out. These dramatic dismissals exemplify Trong's multi-pronged strategy to reshape the CPV, which centres around four interconnected tools that he has persistently employed since first becoming party chief in 2011:

1. A sweeping anti-corruption campaign, which has led to the unprecedented removal of high-ranking officials;
2. Regulations to centralize power and standardize leadership selection processes;
3. A nuanced approach to regional representation that prioritizes qualifications and party loyalty over strict geographic quotas;
4. A strategic blend of personal ties and adherence to formal party rules.

As of 18 July 2024, Trong's health had reportedly deteriorated, leading to the temporary appointment of To Lam, a Politburo member and State President, to oversee the Party's central operations. This unexpected transition raises questions about the continuity of Trong's leadership strategies and brings about a new period of uncertainty in Vietnam's political landscape.

This essay will examine each of the four tools to see how they have functioned over the course of Trong's unprecedented three terms in office.

## THE ANTI-CORRUPTION DRIVE

Since 2016, the Vietnamese government has been actively cracking down on corruption. This has become a defining aspect of Nguyen Phu Trong's leadership and earned him respect and legitimacy within the Party. His re-election for a third term in 2021 was largely due to his success in leading this campaign and making it an integral part of Vietnamese politics.

What is particularly remarkable is Trong's ability to coordinate his comprehensive anti-corruption strategy involving key party and state institutions. The Ministry of Public Security (MPS), the Central Internal Affairs Committee (CIAC), and the Central Inspection Commission (CIC), the three key organizations involved in implementing the campaign, all work closely under the direction of the Party.

While the MPS has been involved in high-profile corruption cases, they operate under the centralized leadership and strategic direction of the Party's anti-corruption efforts. In fact, the campaign is not driven by a single institution, but is rather a coordinated effort led by the Party's Politburo and Trong himself.

The CIAC, which advises the Anti-Corruption Steering Committee chaired by Trong, plays a significant role in this campaign. They also have formal collaboration with the CIC, as mandated in Decision 243 issued by the CPV Secretariat in 2014.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, they work with provincial party committees to develop and execute a unified anti-corruption strategy. This partnership involves sharing information and aligning regional efforts with national goals. The CIC is responsible for investigating and punishing party members for corruption, and works alongside the MPS who enforce the law. A notable instance of this collaboration is the investigation into the “Dai Ninh eco-urban area”, which involved both the MPS and the CIC.<sup>2</sup> This joint effort resulted in the arrest of several prominent figures, including Mai Tien Dung, the former Chairman of the Government Office, and Tran Duc Quan, the Secretary of the Lam Dong Provincial Party Committee.<sup>3</sup>

The coordination between these key party institutions has been crucial to the success of the anti-corruption campaign. However, the stringent measures taken in this campaign, while promoting ideological unity and alignment with Trong’s vision, have also had unintended consequences. Recent reports have raised concerns from foreign governments and donors that Vietnamese officials may be hesitant in their decision-making due to fear of being scrutinized.<sup>4</sup> To maintain both effective governance and economic progress, a balanced approach that allows for decisive decision-making while upholding anti-corruption principles will be crucial for the Party.

## **INSTITUTIONALIZING POWER BY STRATEGIC REGULATIONS**

Alongside the anti-corruption campaign, new regulations were introduced under Trong’s tenure, rewriting the rules of the game in Vietnamese politics.<sup>5</sup> These regulations form a comprehensive framework for selecting, managing, and dismissing party leaders and cadres.

One of these regulations, Decision 244, was issued by the Party Central Committee in 2014 and set guidelines for nominating party leaders through internal electoral processes.<sup>6</sup> In 2020, Instruction 03 was issued by the Party Secretariat and an amendment was introduced that held nominators accountable for the qualifications and suitability of their nominees.<sup>7</sup> This change raised the stakes for nominating candidates outside the formal framework, arguably leading to fewer unexpected nominations at the 13<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2021. In addition, Regulation 41 was issued in 2021 which outlined the principles, authority, and procedures for dismissing or accepting resignations from party leaders and officials.<sup>8</sup> It clarified the grounds for removal, such as disciplinary issues or poor performance, and specified conditions for voluntary resignations. These regulations, introduced between 2014 and 2022, show Trong’s consistent efforts to refine and tighten control over the Party’s human resources, from candidate selection to dismissal and post-resignation arrangements. They also give central party organs, particularly the Politburo, more power in personnel decisions, giving Trong and his supporters greater control over key leadership positions.

Moreover, the process by which new Politburo members were selected at the latest 9<sup>th</sup> Plenum in May 2024 indicates the centralization of power and the strategic use of formal party mechanisms under Trong’s leadership. Four new members were appointed to the Politburo following a vetting process that highlights the application of democratic centralism in the Party. According to private sources, the Politburo first conducted a vote among themselves to shorten

a long list of nominees which included candidates from various branches of the Party and the state, such as two nominees from the MPS. The four individuals who made it through this initial vetting—Le Minh Hung, Nguyen Trong Nghia, Do Van Chien, and Bui Thi Minh Hoai—were then put forward for the Central Committee to vote into the Politburo.

Notably, all four successful candidates were previously Secretariat members, suggesting a preferential pathway from the Secretariat to the Politburo. This pattern, which also occurred in 2021 when all 2016 Secretariat members were promoted to the Politburo, reflects a consolidation of influence and a new norm in leadership transitions favouring established insiders.

These developments demonstrate how Trong uses formal party structures to reinforce his vision, ensuring that those promoted to the highest ranks align with his ethos. The elevation of Secretariat members to the Politburo, even amid a depleted leadership due to recent purges, underscores the structural changes Trong is promoting to solidify his control over the Party's direction.

## **SHIFTING REGIONAL DYNAMICS**

Over the past decade, there has been a notable shift in the representation of different regions in the highest echelons of the CPV. An examination of the Politburo and Central Committee shows a gradual decrease in the number of members from the southern regions of the country. From 2001 to 2006, the South had five members in the Politburo, making up about one-third of the total. This number increased during the leadership of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung from 2006 to 2011, to six, or 40 per cent of the Politburo. This level of representation remained steady until 2016.

However, there has been a significant shift under the leadership of General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong from 2016 to 2021. During this period, the South's representation in the Politburo decreased to four members, accounting only for 21 per cent of the total. This trend has continued during Trong's third term, with the South now having only three seats, or approximately 17 per cent of the Politburo.

Some see this as a deliberate effort to promote northern dominance. However, Trong's approach focuses on selecting candidates based on their qualifications, ideology, and loyalty to the Party rather than adhering to strict regional quotas. The decline in southern representation can be seen as a result of this emphasis on broader criteria, with the anti-corruption campaign and new regulations providing a means to remove problematic officials regardless of their regional affiliations. This strategy seems designed to strengthen control over leadership selection while deflecting concerns about regional imbalances.

Nevertheless, the Party under Trong recognizes the importance of having some regional diversity. The example of former President Vo Van Thuong, a southerner who briefly gained prominence, suggests that regional balance is still a consideration, even if it is not the primary factor. The current composition of the Politburo also reflects this balancing act.

While northern members like Le Minh Hung, Bui Thi Minh Hoai, and Do Van Chien have been added, the elevation of Tran Thanh Man to the National Assembly chairman position and the inclusion of Nguyen Trong Nghia maintain some representation from the southern region. These moves highlight a strategic approach that values regional identities while prioritizing ideological alignment and qualifications.

## **PERSONAL TIES AND PARTY RULES: THE DUAL ROUTES TO LEADERSHIP ROLES**

In Vietnamese politics, personal relationships and networks have always played a significant role alongside the formal system of the Party in developing leaders. General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong has deftly combined these two aspects to strengthen his influence and shape the future direction of the Party.

Trong's approach is notable for his ability to exercise control over the leadership selection process from multiple angles. As mentioned above, through the introduction of new regulations, he has shaped the formal criteria and procedures for selecting leaders. These regulations pave the way for promoting individuals who align with his vision and meet the desired qualifications.

At the same time, Trong has leveraged his position as the top leader to cultivate personal relationships and mentor rising figures who support his agenda. By nurturing and supporting specific candidates who share his ideological commitments and policy goals, Trong can directly influence the leadership line-up and ensure that his preferred candidates are promoted. This is evident in Regulation 214, which outlines the requirements for the position of general secretary. The regulation states that the general secretary should have "the ability to lead and build a team of strategic-level cadres, especially successors and key cadres".<sup>9</sup> This implies that those in the top leadership position, like Trong, have both the interest and the capacity to prepare and nurture the next generation of leaders.

This dual approach of utilizing both formal party rules and personal relationships is important because it allows Trong to create a framework that supports his broader vision for the Party's future. By linking informal networks to formal party structures and regulations, he can control the leadership selection process in a way that goes beyond simply relying on connections.

The careers of former National Assembly Chairman Vuong Dinh Hue and former Permanent Member of the CPV Secretariat Tran Quoc Vuong, whose rise through the ranks coincided with Trong's tenure as general secretary, exemplify this dynamic. They advanced through the Party's evaluation process based on qualifications and performance, while their personal ties to Trong also played a significant role. However, Vuong Dinh Hue's resignation in April 2024, amid allegations of serious violations, highlights the nuanced application of the Party's disciplinary measures. His exit underscores a critical point: close relationships with top leadership do not guarantee immunity from the Party's enforcement of anti-corruption standards. This incident demonstrates that Trong's strategic tools operate regardless of an individual's status or connections, although unseen political developments, such as his or her involvement in a corruption scandal that is previously unknown to the Party's leadership, might also play a role.



## THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF THE FOUR TOOLS

The four tools appear to have been intentionally designed to work together in order to influence the power structure and succession planning within the Party. The recent high-level personnel changes demonstrate how Trong's efforts to combat corruption, centralize power through new regulations, balance regional dynamics, and blend personal relationships with party rules have all played a role in reshaping Vietnam's political landscape.

The anti-corruption drive remains the most visible tool, evidenced by the forced resignations of high-ranking officials, particularly presidents Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Vo Van Thuong, and National Assembly Chairman Vuong Dinh Hue. The centralization of power through new regulations has also played a significant role in streamlining leadership processes and changing expectations regarding the stability of top officials. The large number of dismissals has now become a "new normal", as codified by these regulations. Additionally, a balanced approach towards regional dynamics has been strategically utilized to maintain northern dominance while ensuring that regional diversity is respected. The blend of personal relationships and party rules has allowed Trong to shape the Party's leadership, but does not guarantee that those close to him are immune from disciplinary actions.

The recent dismissals of high-ranking officials such as Phuc, Thuong and Hue demonstrate how these four tools reinforce each other. The anti-corruption campaign provided the justification for their removal, while the new rules and regulations set the standards they were found to have violated. These actions highlight that regional affiliations cannot be invoked as a safeguard against serious evidence of corruption. The blend of party rules and personal relationships underscores the expectation that officials adhere to party priorities and maintain a good public image. This application of the four tools seeks to strengthen the Party by elevating integrity standards, which is distinct from Western democratic models. Instead of relying on institutional checks and balances, public elections, and competition between political parties, Trong's approach focuses on maintaining internal Party discipline and ideological unity, as well as centralized control, top-down accountability and internal mechanisms to combat corruption and maintain the CPV's legitimacy.

## CONCLUSION

By utilizing the four leadership tools, Trong has aimed to ensure the Party's stability by tackling corruption and promoting capable leaders. While Trong's initiatives have started to change the Party's leadership framework, the cases of high-ranking officials who were purged or forced to resign, even after being elected to top positions, highlight the mixed results of his reforms and the persistence of informal power structures.

With Trong's health reportedly deteriorating and the temporary appointment of To Lam to oversee the Party's central operations, Trong's strategic approach is facing an unexpected and critical test. This turn of events may significantly impact the ongoing anti-corruption campaign, the centralization of power, the regional representation strategy, and the balance between personal connections and party regulations.

As the 14th CPV National Congress in early 2026 approaches, the situation has become even more complex. The recent high-profile exits have already thinned the Politburo's ranks, and now the uncertainty surrounding Trong's health adds another layer of complication to the planning of leadership transitions. The short timeframe, combined with the unexpected developments surrounding Trong's health conditions, further challenges the process of identifying and training potential leaders who can continue Trong's agenda while addressing Vietnam's evolving needs. These needs remain pressing: finding a balance between fighting corruption and promoting efficient governance and economic growth, meeting the changing expectations for transparency and accountability in the Party's operations, and navigating the intricacies of leadership succession within the party structure.

The future of Vietnam's political landscape will be influenced not only by how the Party navigates this period of temporary leadership, but also by the ability of Trong's eventual successor to maintain their authority and the integrity of the reforms. It remains to be seen whether future leaders will continue to follow Trong's approach or chart a new direction in tackling the country's evolving challenges.

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Decision 243-QĐ/TW, issued on June 4, 2014, establishes the coordination regulations between Central Internal Affairs Committee and the Central Inspection Commission. Central Committee, "Quyết Định Số 243-QĐ/TW Ngày 4/6/2014 Của Ban Bí Thư Ban Hành Quy Chế Phối Hợp Giữa Ban Nội Chính Trung Ương Với Ủy Ban Kiểm Tra Trung Ương Trong Công Tác Nội Chính, Phòng, Chống Tham Nhũng và Công Tác Kiểm Tra, Giám Sát, Thi Hành Kỷ Luật Đảng" (Báo điện tử Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, 2014), <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/he-thong-van-ban/van-ban-cua-dang/quyet-dinh-so-243-qdtw-ngay-462014-cua-ban-bi-thu-ban-hanh-quy-che-phoi-hop-giua-ban-noi-chinh-trung-uong-voi-uy-ban-169>

<sup>2</sup> Linh Đan, "Ủy ban Kiểm tra Trung ương kiểm tra Dự án Khu đô thị sinh thái Đại Ninh," *Đầu Tư Online*, March 8, 2024, <https://baodautu.vn/uy-ban-kiem-tra-trung-uong-kiem-tra-du-an-khu-do-thi-sinh-thai-dai-ninh-d210319.html>

<sup>3</sup> Nhị Hà, "Nhìn Lại Siêu Dự Án Hơn 25.000 Tỷ Đồng Khiến Nhiều Quan Chức Vương Lao Lý," *Thị Trường Tài Chính*, May 6, 2024, <https://thitruongtaichinh.kinhtedothi.vn/tin-tuc/nhin-lai-sieu-du-an-hon-25000-ty-dong-khien-nhieu-quan-chuc-vuong-lao-ly-122497.html>

<sup>4</sup> Guarascio Francisco and Khanh Vu, "Exclusive: Vietnam Forfeits Billions of Dollars in Foreign Aid amid Anti-Graft Freeze, Document Says," *Reuters*, May 17, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/vietnam-forfeits-billions-dollars-foreign-aid-amid-anti-graft-freeze-document-2024-05-17/>

<sup>5</sup> Quynh Tran, "The Rise and Rise of Nguyen Phu Trong," *The Diplomat*, February 26, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/the-rise-and-rise-of-nguyen-phu-trong/>

<sup>6</sup> Central Committee, "Quyết Định 244-QĐ/TW 2014 Quy Chế Bầu Cử Trong Đảng" (Thư Viện Pháp Luật, July 1, 2022), <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Bo-may-hanh-chinh/Quyết-dinh-244-QĐ-TW-2014-Quy-che-bau-cu-trong-Dang-241280.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> CPV Central Secretariat Committee, "Hướng Dẫn Số 03-HD/TW, Ngày 20/3/2020 Của Ban Bí Thư Một Số Vấn Đề Cụ Thể Thực Hiện Quy Chế Bầu Cử Trong Đảng," March 20, 2020, <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/he-thong-van-ban/van-ban-cua-dang/huong-dan-so-03-hdtw-ngay-2032020-cua-ban-bi-thu-mot-so-van-de-cu-the-thuc-hien-quy-che-bau-cu-trong-dang-6236>



<sup>8</sup> CPV Central Committee, “Quy Định 41-QĐ/TW 2021 Miễn Nhiệm Đối Với Cán Bộ” (Thư Viện Pháp Luật, 2021), [https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Bo-may-hanh-chinh/Quy-dinh-41-QD-TW-2021-mien-nhiem-doi-voi-can-bo-493663.aspx?anchor=diem\\_10](https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Bo-may-hanh-chinh/Quy-dinh-41-QD-TW-2021-mien-nhiem-doi-voi-can-bo-493663.aspx?anchor=diem_10)

<sup>9</sup> CPV Politburo, “Quy Định Số 214-QĐ/TW, Ngày 02/01/2020 Của Bộ Chính Trị về Khung Tiêu Chuẩn Chức Danh, Tiêu Chí Đánh Giá Cán Bộ Thuộc Diện Ban Chấp Hành Trung Ương, Bộ Chính Trị, Ban Bí Thư Quản Lý,” accessed May 28, 2024, <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/he-thong-van-ban/van-ban-cua-dang/quy-dinh-so-214-qdtw-ngay-02012020-cua-bo-chinh-tri-ve-khung-tieu-chuan-chuc-danh-tieu-chi-danh-gia-can-bo-thuoc-dien-ban-6021>

<p><i>ISEAS Perspective</i> is published electronically by: <b>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</b></p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p> <p>Get Involved with ISEAS.</p> <p>Please click here: <a href="https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support/get-involved-with-iseas/">https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support/get-involved-with-iseas/</a></p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Editorial Committee: Terence Chong, Cassey Lee, Norshahril Saat, and Hoang Thi Ha</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: William Choong, Lee Poh Onn, Lee Sue-Ann, and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
---	---	---