

Thayer Consultancy
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Background Briefing:

Vietnam: New Purge of Academics and Intellectuals?

Carlyle A. Thayer

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David Hutt, *Asia Times*:

Q1. With the recent dismissal of Chu Hao and Tran Duc Anh Son from the Communist Party, and the closure of the Phan Chau Trinh Culture Foundation, as well as other cases, do you think that the Party is carrying out a new purge of intellectuals and academics; if so why?

ANSWER: The cases of Chu Hảo and Trần Đức Anh Sơn are directly linked to an internal effort by the Vietnam Communist Party, led by Secretary General Nguyễn Phú Trọng, to purify party ranks by drawing up regulations to dismiss party members for “self-evolution” or “self-transformation” – meaning the abandonment of their belief in communism and a lowering of their standards. These cases are not directly linked to Trọng’s anti-corruption campaign.

Since Trọng’s election as Secretary General, the Central Committee issued Regulation 47 (November 2011) on “Prohibited Practices for Party Members” (Quy định 47-QĐ/TW những điều đảng viên không được) and Politburo Regulation 102 (November 2017) on “Handling Violations of Party Discipline” (Quy định số 102QĐ/TW về xử lý kỷ luật đảng viên vi phạm). In a statement on the Chu Hảo case released by the VCP’s Central Inspection Commission on October 25, 2018, the Commission expressed concern over the “recession of political thinking” in Vietnam. According to Regulation 47 party members are prohibited to “speak, act against or refuse to execute the Political Platform, Statutes, resolutions, directives, regulations, decisions and conclusions of the Party” or “store, circulate or incite others to circulate information, documents in any form to spread views contrary to the Party’s lines.”

According to Regulation 102, party members who “deliberately speak or write in order to distort history and truth, or deny the leading role and revolutionary achievements of the Party... reject or negate Marxism-Leninism, Ho Chi Minh’s principle of democratic centralism... demand the separation of powers... civil society... political pluralism... a multiparty system... [or] founded and/or joined associations in contravention of law” will be expelled from the VCP.

In January 2019, the Law on Cyber Security came into force. That month the government accused Facebook of violating this law by permitting users to post antigovernment comments. The Law requires technology companies with users in

Vietnam to set up offices and store data in Vietnam, and disclose user data to the authorities without a court order.

The Case of Professor Chu Hảo

According to a statement issued by the VCP Central Inspection Commission, “Documents and evidence collected... revealed that Comrade [Chu] Hảo has deteriorated in his political ideology, morality and lifestyle... [Hảo] seriously violated party discipline” by criticizing the party’s monopoly of power and describing its attempts to build a market economy alongside socialism as “unrealistic.”

Hảo was accused of founding and/or joining associations, groups, forums, clubs and other organisations that spread views contrary to the VCP, such as the Institute for Development Studies, a private research think tank founded in 2002 that voluntarily dissolved itself in 2009 rather than comply with government restrictions, and the Phan Chu Trinh Fund.

Finally, the statement noted that Chu Hảo’s Publishing House released Vietnamese translations of books that contained content which was “politically and ideologically wrong” and “He deliberately committed his violations despite being reminded not to do so.”

Chu Hảo signed petitions and an open letter that were critical of the VCP such as “Recommendations on the Amendment of the 1992 Constitution” and “Open Letter to the Party Central Committee and all Party Members.” The petition called for the removal of Article 4 (on the VCP’s monopoly of power) from the Constitution and its replacement with a multi-party system, political pluralism and depoliticization of the armed forces. The Open Letter argued that the VCP had led the people down the wrong path of socialism.

In April 2011, Hảo signed a “Petition for the Release of Mr. Cù Huy Hà Vũ,” who was sentenced to jail for seven years for “conducting propaganda against the state.” In December 2012, Hảo signed another petition, “A Call for Concrete Implementation of Human Rights Stipulated in Vietnam’s Constitution.” This petition called for the repeal of Article 88 of the Penal Code that made it a crime to conduct “propaganda against the state” and the repeal of a Decree that was designed to prevent public demonstrations.

Chu Hảo was Director and Editor in Chief of Knowledge Publishing House (Nhà xuất bản Tri Thức). Between 2005-2009 it translated and published copies of:

- Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power*
- John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*
- Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*
- Alex De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*
- John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*
- John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*
- Peter Singer, *Marx: A Very Short Introduction*

The Phan Châu Trinh Cultural Foundation was established in 2007 and was registered under the umbrella of the Viet Nam Union of Science and Technology Associations.

Its purpose was to honour individuals and groups for their contributions to Vietnamese studies and culture through research and translation. In 2008, the Foundation inaugurated the Phan Châu Trinh Award. In February 2019, the Foundation officially closed “due to objective circumstances.”

In a letter dated October 26, 2018 Chu Hảo renounced his membership in the VCP. Nevertheless, he was formally expelled from the party. This prompted at least a dozen individuals, including well-known writer Nguyễn Ngọc, to publicly renounce their VCP membership. In addition, 155 intellectuals and party members signed an Open Letter (Thư ngỏ về việc TS Chu Hảo bị Đảng kỷ luật, October 27, 2018) asking VCP leaders to reverse their decision.

Chu Hảo’s father, Chu Đình Xương, was the head of the Public Security Bureau for northern Vietnam (Tonkin) in 1945. He was a bodyguard for Hồ Chí Minh when he declared Vietnam’s independence on September 2, 1945 in Hanoi. Hảo served as Deputy Minister of Science and Technology (1996-2005).

The Case Trần Đức Anh Sơn

Trần Đức Anh Sơn is deputy head of the Da Nang Institute for Socio-Economic Development. He is widely known for his academic research and his collection of historical maps on the East Sea (South China Sea). Prior to that he was Director of a fine arts museum in Hue and a specialist on Nguyễn Dynasty porcelain.

Sơn was expelled from the VCP for his postings on Facebook critical of the government’s handling of its maritime dispute with China in the South China Sea. Sơn told a western reporter that the Facebook post that got him into most trouble was a comment he wrote in September 2018 under a cartoon in which one of the characters said, “Seventy-three years ago they corralled people to a rally to listen to the Declaration of Independence. Seventy-three years later they forbid people to gather to celebrate Independence Day.” Sơn wrote, “Is this true?”

In another Facebook posting, featuring two articles from the state-owned media critical of the Minister of Education and Training, Sơn wrote, “How have things become this bad?”

According to a statement released by the government, Sơn was accused of “writing Facebook posts that were untrue and went against the party’s views and state policies and laws... [his] violations are very serious, causing negative public opinions... and damaging the prestige of the party.”

Q2. Trọng’s morality campaign has largely been directed at corrupt and incompetent officials inside the Party, but is his desire to now reassert political orthodoxy a sign of a larger crackdown, and how much do you think it has to do with preparations for the 2021 Party Congress, considering the important plenums for it will start this year?

ANSWER: All of Secretary General Trọng’s campaigns against corruption and against self-evolution and self-transformation – are being undertaken to purify the VCP prior to the 12th national party congress scheduled for early 2021. Trọng’s campaigns are much wider in scope and depth than campaigns that have preceded past national party congresses. Past campaigns largely were aimed at removing corrupt and

degenerate cadres; Trong's campaigns have a much wider aim of ensuring ideological orthodoxy and discipline in the Vietnam Communist Party.

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