

General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's Thoughts on Preventing and Fighting Corruption and Negativity

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Abstract: *The recent book¹ by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, Chair of the Central Steering Committee on Anti-corruption is considered the ultimate guide the campaign against corruption and negativity in Vietnam. Studying General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's keynote speeches which were selected and published in the book, the article aims to provide an overview, refine and clarify the breakthrough ideology of General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong in his leadership on the fight against corruption and demonstrate some lessons learned from the practice of directing the fight against corruption and negativity in Vietnam during the period 2012-2022.*

Keywords: Nguyen Phu Trong, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, Corruption, Preventing and Fighting Corruption and Negativity, Communist Party of Vietnam

1. Introduction

Corruption is an eminent problem that exists in every country and regime. Corruption exists in different forms across different levels, according the stage of development of the country, the awareness of the ruling party, and the actions that the government takes. As General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong affirmed: “corruption is an inborn defect of power” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023b: 67); if power is under

control, corruption can be managed. During the process of leading the Vietnamese revolution, the Communist Party of Vietnam had soon recognized and identified the risk and damages that corruption could bring to the Party, the regime, and national development progress. The Party's awareness of corruption had developed gradually after every national assembly. Previously, anti-corruption approach only focused on embezzlement, appropriation, acceptance and handling of bribes, loss of government assets, and other wrongdoings in the public sector. However, the approach has now expanded to include preventing and fighting corruption, with an emphasis

¹ Nguyen Phu Trong (2023), *A resolute and persistent fight against corruption and negativity in the process of building an increasingly pure and strong Party and State of Vietnam*, Truth National Political Publishing House, Hanoi.

on preempting and combating deterioration in political ideology, morality, and lifestyle of cadres and party members (Nguyen Phu Trong 2023a: 19). The scope of the approach has also extended to the non-state sectors and to international cooperation in anti-corruption (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023d: 105). The Central Steering Committee on Anti-corruption (established in February 2013) has been given additional functions and tasks to direct the work of preventing and fighting corruption from September 2021, sitting under the Politburo and led directly by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong. Since then, the anti-graft campaign has made several breakthroughs and achieved many positive results. “This is the first time that the campaign been implemented in such a strong, synchronous, drastic, methodical and effective way as recently; this has left a great legacy, built high consensus in the society, as well as consolidated and strengthend the trust of cadres, party members and the people in the Party and the State” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023e: 126-127). The campaign was supported by the people and was nicknamed the “burning furnace”, a symbol that upheld the Party’s strength, the stability and development of the country. It is a real testament of the people’s firm belief in the campaign - “a rebuttal against some who are concerned that too much focus on anti-corruption, party-reconstruction and rectification would drag on leadership or slow down development; on the contrary, it is by reconstructing the Party and stepping up the fight against corruption that has contributed to promoting socio-economic development, strengthening security - defense and foreign affairs” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023c: 75).

2. Breakthrough ideology in the Secretary’s leadership on the fight against corruption

As the head of the Communist Party of Vietnam and a party member who has devoted his revolutionary career for the Party and the people in an impartial and righteous manner, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong has thoroughly understood and embraced Ho Chi Minh’s doctrine on embezzlement, wastage and bureaucracy. He has inherited, developed and reinforced the doctrine to adapt the fight against corruption to the new modern context. As the Chair of the Central Steering Committee on Anti-corruption, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong was always worried about the shortcomings and limitations in combating graft, which he frankly pointed out during 2013-2020: “The anti-corruption campaign in some localities, ministries and branches has not reaped any results. The detection and management of misconduct is still limited; the recovery of lost assets is still low; the self-inspection, self-detection and handling of corruption internally within agencies and units are still at a weak stage. The situation of bribery and negativity in the administration and public service sectors has not been effectively addressed. The corruption problem in many fields is still serious and complicated, with increasingly sophisticated manifestations, causing frustration among the public” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023d: 101). The leader of the Central Party Committee on Anti-Corruption has correctly identified the fundamental causes of these problems instead of avoiding them. He recognized limitations in awareness; the lack of exemplary behavior and bravery on the part of state committees, party

organizations, authorities, heads of agencies, organizations and units; the way power control mechanism is constrained while a large number of cadres and party members, including leaders, managers, and senior cadres, have degraded in political ideology and morality as well as adopted a corrupted lifestyle; or the way the enforcement of laws and regulations of the Party and the State on anti-corruption in some agencies, units and localities is not strict enough (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023d: 101-102). The General Secretary thus has affirmed his determination “to lock power within the institutional confines” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023d: 104), asserting that fighting against corruption must go hand in hand with addressing the degradation in political thought, morality, lifestyle, self-evolution and self-transformation” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023d: 109) because of the intimate and mutual interaction between corruption and negativity. With that view, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong directed the fight against corruption to go hand in hand with the prevention and combat of negativity, because “the prevention and control of negativity, which focus on countering degradation on political ideology, morality, and lifestyle among cadres, party members, civil servants and public employees, will root out corruption” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023a: 16). This is a breakthrough ideology that guides the fight against corruption, tackles corruption at its root, and ensures the thoroughness and sustainability of the anti-corruption campaign.

3. Some lessons learned from the practice of directing the fight against corruption and negativity in Vietnam

Based on the summary of 10 years of preventing and fighting corruption in

the period 2012-2022, the distillation of valuable lessons which are meaningful in both theory and practice, valuable to the fight against corruption and negativity in Vietnam through the leadership of General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong - Chair of the Central Steering Committee on Anti-corruption, the article emphasized some key lessons as follows:

i) Turning political determination into practical actions in the fight against corruption and negativity

All levels of party committees, organizations, all cadres and party members, especially heads of committees, organizations, agencies and units must affirm high political determination to the fight against corruption and negativity. Not stopping there, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong requested that “cadres, party members, civil servants, public employees and the people must turn political determination into practical actions, first of all the Party and State leaders, the heads of the Party committees, authorities, agencies, organizations and units must set good models and delivering according to promises in the fight against corruption” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023e: 129). He asserted that “there must be a very high political will, expressed in a resolute, uncompromising attitude and decisive, concrete, practical and effective action” so that “all powers are strictly controlled by institutional mechanisms and bound by responsibility...” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023d: 103).

ii) The prevention and fight against corruption and negativity must be carried out resolutely, persistently, restlessly and unyieldingly

General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong recognizes that the task of preventing and

combating corruption and negativity is a long-term struggle and that it is difficult to achieve absolute success and completely eliminate corruption and negativity. But he still insists on “implementing resolutely, persistently, continuously, persistently, non-stop, at all levels, branches and fields” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023e: 130). Determining the permanence and complexity of corruption and negativity, Chair of the Central Steering Committee on Anti-corruption requested that “we must build a strict prevention mechanism to not be corrupt, a strict deterrent and punishment mechanism so that officials do not dare to misbehave, and actually do not have the need to conduct wrongdoing in the first place” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023e: 130). This is a very profound lesson for the fight against corruption and negativity to become comprehensive, in-depth, layer by layer; not only fight directly against corruption and negativity, but also eliminate the root of corruption and negativity to ensure the sustainability of the results of the fight against corruption and negativity; must fight non-stop, constantly so that the “germs of corruption and negativity” do not have a chance to “sprout”.

iii) Focus on training the cadre in preventing and combating corruption and negativity

“The cadre is the root of all activities, the key to all locks, the cause of all causes” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023a: 38). The cadre is both the target of corruptive and negative behaviours, and is also one of the causes leading to corruption and negativity. General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong insisted on paying special attention to training the cadre, whereby “the prevention and fight against corruption and waste must be associated with Party reconstruction and

rectification. Cadres should study and follow the ideology and morality of Ho Chi Minh. We must also put a stop to degeneration in political ideology, morality, lifestyle, self-evolution and self-transformation within internal forces” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023d: 105). Although not a new concept, training the cadre is prioritized by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong. In order to prevent and combat corruption and negativity, it is necessary to strengthen propaganda campaigns and education; improve sense of morality; building integrity; and preventing corruption and degeneration. “We must thoroughly grasp, propagate and educate ourselves on the objectives, viewpoints, tasks, solutions and regulations of the Party and the State on anti-corruption and about the dangers of corruption, wastefulness, negativity, etc. We must create a high sense of self-discipline and unity in political will and action among officials, party members and the people on anti-corruption, first of all by leaders setting good examples and exhibit determination” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023d: 107). He also mentions that “we must persist in educating and training cadres, party members, civil servants and public officials on building integrity and constructing a culture of prudence, not corruption. All cadres and party members, especially leaders, must maintain dignity and honor, and be shameful when they or their relatives engage in corruption and wastefulness” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023d: 107-108). Leaders play important roles in the assessment, selection, planning and appointment of cadres. In addition, it is necessary to regularly educate, strengthen supervision, and prevent and combat degeneration in political ideology, morality, lifestyle, self-evolution, and internal

self-transformation. In the period 2012-2022, Party committees and inspection committees at all levels disciplined 7,390 party members on corruption charges, including many officials under the management of the Central Government, former members of the Politburo, members and former members of the Central Party Committee, general officers in the armed forces (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023e: 117-118). This valuable lesson further shows the correctness of General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's leadership when identifying the people as the center of the fight against corruption and negativity.

iv) Actively prevent, proactively detect and promptly handle violations

General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong affirmed that: "It is necessary to combine active prevention with proactive detection and timely handling of corruption and negativity; in which, prevention is the fundamental and long-term work; while detection and handling of corruption are decisive and important (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023d: 104), "the handling of corruption must take education, deterrence, prevention as the main basis, combining punishment with leniency" (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023e: 131). This profound guiding principle is the foundation for ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of the fight against corruption. Anti-corruption is not only about prosecuting and dismissing corrupted officials, because no one dares to claim that if they can "remove" the first class of corrupt officials, the next class of officials will not be corrupted. If there is no deterrence and early prevention, people holding positions of power will not be afraid and steer away from wrong, corrupt and negative acts. This does not only

completely eliminate the driving force of corruption, but also shows the humanity of General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong in protecting and keeping the contingent of cadres and party members from falling to the temptation of corruption and destruction. Chair of the Central Steering Committee on preventing and fighting corruption and negativity has repeatedly expressed his uneasy feelings, even pain, when he has to strictly handle many officials, including high-ranking officials, when they committed mistakes (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023e: 120).

v) Tighten control of power to improve the effectiveness of preventing and fighting corruption

From the correct identification of corruption and negativity as an inborn defect of power, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong said that "a new mechanism must be established to control the exercise of power for those in positions of high power and authority. All powers must be strictly controlled by that mechanism and authority must be bound with responsibility..." (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023c: 84). Power is the source of corruption and negativity, because only when there is power can there be opportunities to carry out corrupted and negative behaviors; in other words, corruption and negativity cannot exist without possession of power. Therefore, in order to effectively prevent and combat corruption and negativity, it is necessary to control the power of those who hold power to prevent the abuse of power, abuse of power, which creates loopholes for corruption and negative to emerge. "We must inspect, supervise and manage the use of power, so that it is carried out in an open, transparent, proper and honest manner; at the same time we

must assign roles according to rights and responsibilities. It is necessary to increase supervision over the use of power by leading cadres, especially the head, and strengthen supervision within the leadership cluster. We must also publicize the process of using power according to the law for the and the people to monitor” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023c: 83-84). Controlling power across levels and dimensions, with the participation of community groups, is one of the most effective measures in the fight against corruption and negativity.

vi) Promoting the core role and coordination of government agencies in preventing and combating corruption and negativity

The fight against corruption and negativity cannot be successful if only the Central Steering Committee on Anti-corruption operates alone. General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong has affirmed the core role and the need for close, synchronous, timely and effective coordination of agencies with the function of preventing and combating corruption and negativity under the leadership and coordination of activities of the Central Steering Committee on Anti-corruption. General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong requested that “The steering committee and each member must perform their roles correctly and know the rules by heart. That is, to properly perform the functions, tasks, responsibilities, and powers, not to step onto the work of other agencies” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023f: 145-146). Chair of the Central Steering Committee on Anti-corruption focused particularly on building a contingent of cadres with bravery, courage, loyalty truth, and integrity, to be in charge of the anti-corruption campaign. Each officer in charge of anti-corruption work is a representative

of the anti-corruption agency; they are the one who directly contacts, inspects, detects and handles the corruption cases, so it is easy for them to be manipulated and enticed to protect and cover up corrupt and negative acts. Therefore, it is very necessary to continuously toughen the cadre so that corruption and negativity cannot penetrate. “It is important to prevent and combat corruption and negativity first and foremost in the agencies that prevent and combat corruption and negativity” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023e: 140), so as to ensure the outcomes and operational efficiency of such anti-corruption agencies.

vii) Associate the fight against corruption and negativity with Party building; mobilize the synergy of the whole political system and the whole society

General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong directed that “preventing and combating corruption and negativity must be associated with building and rectifying the Party and a clean and strong political system, studying and following Ho Chi Minh ideology and morality, mobilizing the synergy of the whole political system and the whole society in the fight against corruption and negativity” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023a: 40). In reality, the more we expand the inspection and supervision mechanisms, the more people participating in inspection and supervision, as well as the diversity of forms of inspection and supervision, the more we can narrow the chances of corruption and negativity. The development of science and technology, especially the increasingly effective participation of the media, has helped to improve the capacity and level of supervision. General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong affirmed that “if we do not rely on the people, the fight against

corruption can hardly be successful” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023b: 66) and that “the press is one of the most effective tools in preventing and exposing corruption” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023b: 66). The fact that the Central Inspection Committee publicly held meetings to consider and conclude cases and violations with the participation of the media as an important highlight. The message affirming the correct policy of the Party in transparently reviewing cases and violations, affirming that there is “no forbidden zone” in the fight against corruption and negativity, encouraging both the political system and the whole society and the Central Steering Committee on anti-corruption and agencies with anti-graft functions unanimously fight against corruption and negativity.

viii) Measures to prevent and combat corruption and negativity must be tailored to the situation in Vietnam

Anti-corruption is the responsibility of every country, every government, every regime. Corrupted and negative behaviors are taking place unpredictably and becoming increasingly sophisticated and complex, in which in many cases there is a “handshake” between the state sector and the non-state sector, with connections beyond the national border. With the continuous change of the domestic and international situation, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong requested that “we must have mature perception, thorough ideology, strong determination, and accurate methods” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023e: 141), so that the fight against corruption and negativity is impartial, just and in line with the socialist-oriented market economy, our national cultural traditions, and international practices. “Depending on the period, it is necessary to identify key tasks

and breakthrough solutions according to the context of the country and the locality in order to focus on leading and directing the effective implementation” (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023d: 106). We should use a basic solution and adjust through each stage; this will improve the institutions and the power control mechanism to address corruption from the root and close any potential loopholes (Nguyen Phu Trong, 2023d: 108).

4. Conclusion

The fight against corruption and negativity is a long and complicated task that requires the combination of many efforts, including: i) the high determination and persistent efforts of the whole political system, under the wise and steadfast leadership of the Politburo and the Central Committee of the Party which is headed by General Secretary; ii) strongly and effectively promote the role of the system of agencies with Anti-corruption functions, taking the Central Steering Committee on Anti-corruption and negativity as the center; iii) the contingent of cadres, party members, civil servants and public employees, especially the heads of agencies and units, are deeply imbued with President Ho Chi Minh’s thought on fighting corruption and negativity, which has been inherited, developed and strengthened by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong in accordance with the new situation, the socialist market economy and the context of international integration; iv) the support and active participation of the community, the masses, social organizations and the media in the fight against corruption and negativity. Most importantly, the prevention and fight against corruption and negativity must be aimed at building the Party and developing the country. It is necessary to focus on the approach of

“preventing” rather than “fighting” through perfecting institutions and mechanisms so that corruption and negativity do not have the space to happen; control the power of functional agencies and staff responsible of preventing and fighting officers so that there is no abuse of power; and avoid taking advantage of the name of anti-corruption and anti-negativity to “destroy opponents” and hinder development. The contingent of cadres, party members, civil servants and public employees, especially the heads of agencies and units, are still worried and unmotivated because they are afraid of being reprimanded; in other words the mechanism is not really perfect. All of these issues have been mentioned and analyzed deeply in the statements at conferences on the anti-corruption campaign by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, together with lessons learned from the process of leading the anti-corruption campaign over the past time are articulated in the book “Resolutely and persistently fighting against corruption and negativity, contributing to building increasingly transparent and strong Party and State”, thereby confirming the value of the book as an ultimate guide on the prevention and control of corruption and negativity in Vietnam □

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