

Not in My House: Corruption in Vietnam

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“Lying has become an everyday habit” as officials ignore fraud at home.

Earlier this month, Vietnam’s top anti-corruption agency, the Government Inspectorate, completed its annual investigations in the country’s central, central highlands, western and southern regions, and to no one’s surprise, nobody found dust in his own home, although they found plenty elsewhere.

“The higher levels only detected corruption in lower levels. Provinces detected corruption in districts, districts did the same with communes. No one said they had found corruption in their own organization,” Bui Ngoc Lam, Deputy Head of the Government Inspectorate, told the press. Apparently in the minds of many state officials, if there are problems, they must exist elsewhere.

This attitude has become pervasive. Last year, in a similar investigation 28 ministries and sectors as well as 58 provinces and cities submitted their reports to the central government. The result? Only six of the units reported corruption. The rest happily declared, “No corruption here.!”

At that time, Prof. Nguyen Dinh Cu, the lead author of Vietnam’s first corruption survey, said he was surprised that so many ministries and provinces were “immaculate.”

“There are only two cases that can explain this: first, there is corruption but it is not detected, or there is no corruption so of course corruption is not reported. I myself believe in the first case: corruption exists but it is not detected.”

According to international monitors, corruption is rife in Vietnam. In its 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index, the monitoring group Transparency International placed Vietnam 111th of 163 countries. Even the Communist Party’s leaders have warned of the danger posed to its legitimacy by corruption. Corruption “threatens the survival of our regime,” As Party Chief Nong Duc Manh told party members at the National Congress last year.

“Leading officials must be responsible for the shortcomings, corruption and wastefulness in their branches, localities and units,” Manh told a party plenum in 2004. “Driving back corruption and wastefulness is an important task to consolidate the people’s confidence and promote the strength of the great national unity for the cause of national construction and defense.”

But despite such fierce rhetoric, party officials seem to be in a blissful state of denial. Anti-corruption begins at home, yet many government agencies prefer to point at others and few are willing to clean up their own act.

Many lawmakers have lamented the lack of will to confront dishonesty in state agencies. Last November, when the National Assembly discussed the implementation of Vietnam’s one-year-old anti-corruption law, just over half of the country’s 64 provinces and cities had worked out an action plan. A National Assembly Deputy commented that some local leaders “plainly pretended there was no corruption at all in their agencies.”

One man’s corruption....

But what is corruption in the eyes of state employees? The official salaries of Vietnam’s public

officials are notoriously low. In October last year minimum salaries for state employees were raised by nearly 30 percent — but the minimum is still only 28 dollars per month. As a result, many workers on the government payroll resort to getting money any way they can.

...Is another's livelihood

"We are living in a society where we have to lie to one another. Everyone receives salaries but no one lives on them. Lying has become an everyday habit," lamented Tran Quoc Thuan, vice chairman of the National Assembly, in an interview with Thanh Nien, an official publication of the Vietnam Youth Association. In this context, Thuan said, it is taken for granted that a state official can take a "commission" for whatever he does in his job.

"The current state structure and mechanism are creating loopholes for corrupt people to loot the state budget," the official said. "It would be amazing if a single official is not corrupted."

While people at all levels may not like it, when corruption permeates all institutions, they learn to live with it as it gradually transforms itself into a simple fact of life. Vietnam's first systematic survey of corruption, released in 2005, showed that three quarters of the respondents listed corruption as the country's most serious problem. However, according to the World Bank's Vietnam Development Report of 2006, few companies see corruption as an obstacle to their business. Most enterprises appear to have simply adapted to reality.

That doesn't mean there isn't a flurry of activity aimed at combating the problem. Periodic executions take place, such as that of Phung Long That, a former senior customs official who was shot by a firing squad in March 2006 for abetting one of the country's largest smuggling rings. That, the former head of the anti-smuggling investigations squad, helped to smuggle US\$83 million in goods, mostly electronics and cars, into the country. Some 72 other defendants, many of them customs or police officers, were given lengthy jail terms. Since the beginning of 2007, at least 33 others have been sentenced to death, 24 for drug trafficking, according to figures compiled by several news outlets from officials and state media. Four have been executed.

The government inspectorate established a new anticorruption department in December. According to an upcoming government decree, heads of agencies and units will be held responsible for any corruption cases occurring under their watch. But it will be not surprising if anti-corruption initiatives fail to achieve their objectives. The reality is that the laws in Vietnam look good on paper, but that's by and large where they remain because of weak enforcement.

The attitude seems to be that playing the game by the rules never works for ordinary people. The clean-up strategy targets lower governmental levels, while clans with powerful connections are rarely touched.

Thus while people acknowledge corruption is rampant and that the fight against graft needs strengthening, real change is proving elusive.

P.S.

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