

# USALI Perspectives

## Concentrated Power

Vietnam's Communist Party elbows the state aside

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When Vietnam's ruling Communist Party (VCP) and National Assembly abruptly [voted President Nguyen Xuan Phuc out of office](#) days before the Lunar New Year, [international observers](#) were astonished. The president is one of the country's "four political pillars" (*tư trụ*), together with the VCP secretary general, the prime minister, and the chairperson of the National Assembly. Each of the four controls his own political apparatus, effectively checking and balancing one another's powers. Despite the state-run media euphemistically portraying Phuc's exit as a [voluntary](#)

[resignation](#) by which the president took political (but not legal) accountability for the wrongdoings of numerous Cabinet members back when he was the prime minister between 2016-2021, it was in fact the first ever ouster of an incumbent president in mid-term.

Shocking as it was, the development was consistent with the VCP's [concentration of political power](#) to itself in recent years. A review of VCP rule changes over the past two years shows that Phuc's removal was actually a show of force by aging Secretary General

Nguyen Phu Trong, a [convention breaker](#) who is serving his third term in violation of the two-term limit entrenched in the VCP constitution since 2001.

Such resubordination of the state to the party undermines the “four pillars” model under which Vietnam has experienced robust economic growth for three decades. It signals a dangerous shift from a [democratic](#) authoritarian regime that embraces pragmatism in its foreign policy and conservative gradualism in its domestic sphere, toward an unchecked autocracy whose leader has [led a crusade against civil society, liberalism, and political pluralism](#).

Under the country’s written constitution, [only the National Assembly has the power to remove the president](#). But this norm has never been written into an implementable rule. Instead, from 2009 until 2021, the VCP gave itself the ultimate power to decide if top party or government officials could be removed. Under the now-repealed VCP [Decision 260-QD/TW](#) a senior official could only be removed for seriously violating both the law and VCP rules. Even a voluntary resignation could be quashed if the VCP deemed that it could negatively affect the country’s normal business. This rule protected the president and the prime minister, who usually delegated formal decisions (and personal liability) to their

subordinates while retaining practical decision-making powers. One [notable demonstration](#) of this rule in action occurred in 2012 when the scandal-plagued Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung successfully resisted a call by members of the National Assembly for his resignation with the argument that only the VCP could let him go.

But even under Decision 260, the National Assembly’s affirmation was needed to oust a senior leader. Without much notice, the landscape changed in 2021 when the VCP Politburo adopted [Decision 41-QD/TW](#). At first glance, it simply allows state leaders [to be held accountable for poor performance or violations](#) of law by the government body for which they are responsible. When Cabinet members are dismissed, the prime minister as the Cabinet head may also be subject to removal. Decision 41 calls this framework “leadership accountability.” Interestingly, while the three other “pillars” may feel themselves targeted by the new rule, Decision 41 does not implicate the VCP secretary general, who neither in the [VCP’s constitution](#) nor party rules is formally designated as the head of any organ. It is arguable that Decision 41 was carefully designed for the secretary general to hold the other “pillars” accountable, while exempting himself. Decision 41 also allows senior officials to voluntarily resign.

Most significantly, the new rule effectively strips the National Assembly of its power to play any meaningful role in the decision to remove a state leader. Thus it facilitated President Phuc's sudden ouster. Under the old Decision 260, before the decision to remove a state leader was made by the "competent authority" (*cấp có thẩm quyền*), meaning the VCP organ in charge of supervising that official, such authority would need to ensure that the dismissal decision was "in line with the country's laws." In theory, that would require any decision to remove a state leader to have input from a state body such as the National Assembly. Such "party rule through state organs" has been a signature feature of Vietnam's politics and gives the National Assembly a platform to occasionally moderate the VCP's political will. Decision 41 eliminates this nicety in personnel matters by removing the reference to "in line with the laws" during the decision-making stage of removing a state leader. Once the VCP decides to remove an official, other "relevant" bodies must execute such decision "in accordance with the VCP's rules and country's laws." That means that government bodies and legal considerations may begin to play a role only at the execution stage, rather than at the decision-making stage as before.

As if Decision 41 is not incredible enough, only days after the Lunar New

Year break, the VCP issued [Decision 96-QĐ/TW](#) subjecting every top state and party leader to a mid-term vote of confidence – by the VCP Central Committee, for the party leader, and by both the Central Committee and the National Assembly for state leaders. Those bodies will be asked to fill in ballots indicating they have "high confidence," "confidence," or "low confidence" in each leader. A "low confidence" vote by more than two-thirds of the respective bodies will trigger mandatory removal. Granted, when it comes to the president, the prime minister, or the chairperson of the National Assembly, the National Assembly could disagree with a removal vote by the Central Committee. However, in practice, if the National Assembly ever voted contrary to the wishes of the Central Committee, the party body could be expected to assert its de facto power to have the final say.

President Phuc's removal signals that even a head of state is no longer exempted from the tight control of the VCP, and what is presented as a collective leadership is, in fact, controlled by the party secretary general. From a constitutional perspective, it also indicates Vietnam's deviation from the model it has followed since the beginning of its "Doi Moi" or "Renewal" era in the late 1980s, in which the state apparatus at least in theory has a voice in the decision-

making process led by the party. Rather, we can now expect a more direct and aggressive rule by the VCP, or more precisely, the VCP secretary general, in government personnel matters. It is unclear whether this is a short-term measure to bring home the anti-graft campaign before the next VCP Congress in 2026, or a permanent trajectory. Only time will tell, but Vietnamese politics will not be the same if constitutional conventions keep changing.

Not long after Phuc's removal, VCP Secretary General Trong once again surprised the country when he appeared on national television during the Lunar New Year Eve in place of the acting president to deliver the ceremonial New Year greetings. It was the first time a party secretary general performed this political ritual, rather than the head of state.

Another convention was broken.

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