

POLITICS & POLICY

Vietnam

Dishing The Dung

Party veterans accuse powerful leader of graft

By Faith Keenan in Hanoi

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Doan Nhan Dao doesn't look the sort who would take on one of the most powerful figures in Vietnam. Clad only in blue-and-white striped boxer shorts, the 73-year-old Communist Party veteran quickly pulls a singlet over his head to greet unexpected guests. Yet despite his humble appearance, this feisty old man with Ho Chi Minh whiskers has helped trigger a corruption probe against Pham The Duyet, one of five members of the politburo's elite standing committee.

Allegations against Duyet were aired during the Communist Party plenum in July and are now being investigated by party leaders. That information didn't come to light, however, until an unknown sender recently faxed to the REVIEW a copy of the source of the allegations--a letter that Dao and 10 other elderly comrades wrote to party chiefs in May.

Dao confirms that he and his comrades wrote the letter, but stresses that none of his group had sent it to the REVIEW. In it, the group allege that Duyet used state money to acquire homes in Hanoi for himself and his children, and let others in the capital's bureaucracy do the same. They also demanded that he and Dinh Hanh, a Hanoi official, be the first to declare their assets as the law requires. The letter also gripes that in the time it takes the bureaucracy to deal with such complaints, "buffalo dung turns to mud."

Although the party has been loath to discipline its senior members for living apparently beyond their means, it will have to take this complaint seriously. Dao's group, many of them party members for 50 years or more, join a growing band of people outraged over government corruption. Because of their prestige and their numbers, "the party would ignore them, or attempt to humiliate them, at its peril," says Bill Turley, a Vietnam specialist at Southern Illinois University.

Their complaints, at any rate, are being studied. "The party's central control commission is considering these questions," a top government official says, adding that they "can't conclude immediately." Duyet couldn't be reached for comment. The Foreign Ministry, which handles foreign reporters' queries, said there wasn't enough time to respond.

Charges of abuse of power for personal gain among Vietnam's top officials are not new. But punishing one of them would be.

"The state calls corruption a national disaster," Dao says, punctuating his sentences with a pointed finger. "We struggle from the grassroots publicly against people who abuse their rights, break the law, get land from people and the state and trade land illegally." He says he worked for many years as an expert on the Hanoi People's Committee and knew Duyet, who headed the Hanoi party committee until May 1996.

When Duyet resigned his post that year, many felt he would lose his politburo and central committee seats at the party congress in June. His

performance was deemed lacklustre, and he had failed to narrow the economic gap between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, says Carl Thayer, a Vietnam specialist at Australian National University. Instead, he held on, though his politburo rank dropped to 18 (out of 19) from 11.

It was therefore a surprise to many that Duyet soared to the top in December when the party chose a new chief and reshuffled politburo positions. He jumped to No. 5 and joined the standing committee--an apparent reward for coping with peasant protests in northern Vietnam last year.

But he didn't take over the seat without a struggle. Politburo rivals backed Nguyen Van An, considered a clean reformer and more intelligent than Duyet. (An currently ranks 11th.) The most likely explanation for the leak of the Dao group's letter is that opponents of Duyet have yet to yield, and disclosed the allegations for their own purposes.

