

# **Blue Pawn Red Pawn**

**And the Communist Party of  
Vietnam's Gambit for Legitimacy**

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Vietnam's Gambit for Legitimacy**

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In Vietnamese, “Blue Pawn, Red Pawn” (*quân xanh* and *quân đỏ*, respectively) refers to selections with preordained outcomes. Blue pawns represent token candidates while red pawns represent candidates with guaranteed selection. Although commonly associated with elections, this concept permeates many aspects of life in Vietnam, from contract bidding and job interviews to entrance exams.

On the cover of the book, two senior voters in red and blue traditional Vietnamese *Áo Dài Khăn Đông* attire are seen examining the ballot before voting takes place. Voters of advanced age and high social standing are often invited by election officials to take on such roles.

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**To Mom, a most dedicated Party member, and a greater mother, still.  
*Gửi Mẹ, một Đảng viên kiên trung, và hơn thế, một người Mẹ vĩ đại.***



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# Preface

*The Party is absolute.*

Being born into a family steeped in communist traditions shortly after the initiation of *Doi Moi*, I, like most of the children of my generation, took certain truths for granted—one being “the Party is absolute.” Our textbooks were filled with narratives of the Party’s glorious victories and monumental achievements. Adults around us would scorn and even punish us for any perceived disrespect towards the Party’s leaders, even if unintentional. Stepping outside, banners in bright red proclaimed, “Long live the glorious Communist Party of Vietnam.” We spent numerous days each year celebrating the Party’s milestones like the birth of Ho Chi Minh, the foundation of the Party, the battle of Dien Bien Phu and the liberation of the South. Children as young as nine were required to join the Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneer Organization and don the red scarf, which represents the socialist ideology and the blood of those who fought and died for the country under the leadership of the Party.

As a naturally curious and somewhat troublesome child, I often found myself in hot water for asking questions or expressing myself in ways that were not welcomed. I vividly remember my grandfather, a veteran of the First Indochina War, furiously tearing up my innocent parody poetry about Ho Chi Minh. While my friends found it humorous, it was the first time I saw my grandfather that angry. That incident quashed my aspirations of becoming a poet.

In university, I was appointed as the political commissar of my class, likely due to my academic achievements and my family’s loyalty to the

Party. After graduating, I was invited to a “Party membership preparation class”, a stepping stone to becoming a full-fledged Party member. In my final report, I criticized the Party’s governance and economic policies. Only one person failed that class.

Moving overseas for higher education provided me with opportunities to speak with both refugees who had fled Vietnam post-1975 and foreign scholars studying the country. Their perspectives on the Communist Party of Vietnam starkly contrasted with what I had experienced back home as many among them considered the Party to be an oppressive, authoritarian regime that subjugated the Vietnamese people while yielding to China.

Even within Vietnam, support for the Party was not universal. My father, hailing from the South, would often rant about his disillusionment with communism when drunk. Whispers of high-ranking officials’ misconduct circulated within my family, especially from those in law enforcement, often surfacing even before any news coverage, if that misconduct was covered by state-run media at all. Yet, despite acknowledging the systemic corruption, there was a pervasive belief in the defence of the Party’s survival, summed up in the Vietnamese saying, “*còn Đảng, còn mình*”—the survival of the Party ensures our own.

I began working on this book in 2015 as part of my doctoral dissertation to find the answer to the question: Is the Party absolute? Much has changed since then, both in Vietnam’s political landscape and in my personal journey as a curious child seeking answer. I have been rejected interviews and endorsement many times due to the “reactionary” nature of my research. I have even been warned that going forward with this topic could get me in trouble. On the other hand, a reviewer once criticized my book as pro-communist propaganda, accusing me of lacking the courage to critique the Party.

In this book, I wanted to present the truth as it is, and let readers decide whether it is a piece of reactionary literature, pro-communist propaganda or something else.

# Acknowledgements

Although I stand as the sole author of this book, it is not solely my work. There are many people to whom I owe thanks for their contributions; without them, this book would never have been published.

Firstly, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my academic mentor, Professor Shiraishi Masaya, for his tireless guidance of my research, limitless patience and immense knowledge. Without his invaluable input, my dissertation would not have become the book it is today.

The draft of my book has undergone many reviews; each time, major changes were made, adding new layers of content. Looking back, I can hardly recognize the draft it once was, and for the better. For this, I have the reviewers at Waseda University Press and the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute to thank. Some of them, I believe, are more well-versed in many topics discussed in this book than I am, and their contributions have made the book much more worth reading and enjoyable to read.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology of Japan and the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute deserve my deepest gratitude for their financial support and the opportunity to make this book available to readers.

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to all the brave people who accepted my requests for surveys and interviews and provided me with invaluable information about the inner workings of the Party, the electoral system and the press in Vietnam. I believe that they all sincerely wish for the betterment of their country, although in different ways. I hope to make this book available to them in Vietnamese in the future.



Lastly, I would like to convey my gratitude to my mother and my wife. My mother, a veteran Party member and former government official, despite her fears about my work, sacrificed a great deal of her influence to help me secure priceless interviews and materials on topics which are considered taboo in Vietnam. My wife, a Vietnamese citizen, shared my mother's concerns but provided me with encouragement and companionship throughout my years of struggle all the same.

# Glossary

ANTD	An Ninh Thu Do, Lit. Capital Security, official mouthpiece of Hanoi Public Security.
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CAND	Cong An Nhan Dan, Lit. The People's Public Security, official mouthpiece of the Ministry of Public Security
CPV	Communist Party of Vietnam
EU	European Union
Nhan Dan	Lit. The People, official mouthpiece of the Communist Party of Vietnam
PAPI	Viet Nam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index
PAV	People's Army of Vietnam
VOA	Voice of America
VOV	Voice of Vietnam
VTV	Vietnam Television