

Thayer Consultancy
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Background Brief:

Vietnam: The Next 5 Years Under Nguyen Phu Trong

Carlyle A. Thayer

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In a few hours we will have the formal announcement of the 13th National Party Congress leadership election results. We request your assessment of the following:

Q1. What do you think are the most compelling reasons that enabled Mr. Nguyen Phu Trong to stay in office for another term, broking the party's own rules?

ANSWER: There are two main factors that explain why Nguyen Phu Trong was re-elected for an unprecedented third term as Secretary General of the Vietnam Communist Party – structural and factional.

The structural factor may be likened to arterial sclerosis where the pathway to leadership selection is increasingly restricted. The solution is to change the party's rigid management of generational transition similar to a human being to change lifestyle in old age due to arterial sclerosis.

Nineteen members were elected to the Politburo at the 12th national party congress in 2016. By 2020 this number had been reduced by five due to death, ill health, disciplinary measures, or expulsion from the party. Two of these five were tipped as future leaders, Tran Dai Quang (who would have been under 65) and Dinh The Huynh (age exemption required).

Of the fourteen remaining Politburo members, eight were slated for retirement either because they were over 65 years of age and/or had completed two terms in office.

In other words, if no exemptions had been given, there were only six Politburo members qualified to fill the “four pillars” – party Secretary General, state President, Prime Minister and Chair of the National Assembly.

The second factor “factional” is perhaps best characterized as competing wings of the party. One wing is comprised of senior party officials whose careers has been within the party apparatus. The other wing is composed of senior party officials whose career has been in the government and/or state bureaucracy.

Nguyen Phu Trong was given unprecedented exemptions on age and term in office because his protégé and nominated successor, Tran Quoc Vuong, could not attract commanding support in the Central Committee. Trong unsuccessfully cast about for a substitute. When the “government wing” promoted Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc as future party leader, they encountered pushback by the party wing.

The final “grand compromise” can be explained as follows. Vietnamese party members view the office of the president as ranking above prime minister in protocol terms. Only Phuc had the background experience and prestige to assume this post. This meant he had to forgoe a second term as prime minister with an age exemption. The two wings of the party balanced each other out by cross posting their candidates. Vuong Dinh Hue, from the government wing, will become Chair of the National Assembly and Pham Minh Chinh, from the party wing, will become prime minister in June following the national elections in May for the National Assembly.

Q2. How do you think this will affect young Vietnamese people thinking of the election process in their country? And how does it explain that the young people seem more interested in following the U.S. election?

ANSWER: This question was precisely the topic that was put to speakers at a Webinar hosted by the Fulbright University Vietnam. The two speakers included myself and Nguyen Khac Giang a PhD scholar in New Zealand.

The Vietnam Communist Party membership stands at 5.1 million or roughly 5% of the total population. Thus, 95% of the country plays no direct part in selecting members of the Central Committee or Politburo. However, they do get to vote in selecting deputies to the National Assembly which has responsibility for electing its Chair, state President and Prime Minister.

The party sets age quotas on nominees for election to the Central Committee and Politburo. Seventy percent of the allocation goes to those aged between 50 and 60 years. Ten percent is set for those 61 or over. So only 20 percent is left for those under 50. The party sets a 12 percent quota on women, thus severely disenfranchising the majority of the population.

A person must serve one full five-year term on the Central Committee before he/she can be considered for the Politburo. And they must serve an additional five-year term on the Politburo for selection to one of the “four pillars.”

It seems clear, as party documents to the 13th congress make clear, Vietnam’s life expectancy is now rising. Surely it is time to revisit party rules governing age requirements and limits on terms in office to involve the participation of younger members of society. Jacinda Ardern, prime minister of New Zealand, was born in 1980.

Young Vietnamese are so fascinated by the elections in the United States because Donald Trump is a commanding personality, in contrast to the “grey” collective leadership of Vietnam. Young Vietnamese are attracted to him because of his anti-China rhetoric.

Q3. How do you think Nguyen Phu Trong’s retention as party leader for a third time will affect Vietnam in the next five years, with respect to treatment of dissidents, the South China Sea, and with its Vietnam’s relations with China and the U.S.?

ANSWER: It is an open question whether Nguyen Phu Trong will complete another five years in office. Aside from health, there is the possibility that there is an informal understanding that if consensus is reached on his successor, Trong will step down before completing his term. This would follow the rough precedent set in 1996 when

Do Muoi was re-elected party leader only to step down after in year in office in favour of Le Kha Phieu.

Under Nguyen Phu Trong's stewardship Vietnam has backed down three times in the face of Chinese threats and pressures over disputes in the South China Sea. In July 2017 and March 2018, Vietnam halted oil exploration by Repsol of Spain in the Vanguard Bank area. In 2019, after a four-month confrontation in the same area as well as the Red Orchid Block operated by Russia's RENEFT, Vietnam cancelled a contract with the Noble Corporation for the services of a survey ship. This precedent makes it very difficult for Vietnam to resume oil exploration in this area.

The "grand compromise" has entrenched the influence of the party wing. They seek to preserve Vietnam's one-party regime and socialist orientation. In other words, on-line pro-democracy activists will continue to be repressed. If the Biden Administration reasserts U.S. concerns for human rights and religious freedom this will not augur well for online dissidents and other pro-democracy activists. Vietnam is likely to limit the areas it is willing to cooperate with the United States.

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