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[>> Back to the article](#)

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Youngest Viet PM is full of dynamism

Nguyen Tan Dung lets nothing get in the way of reforms and is already making waves

By Vietnam Correspondent, Roger Mitton

HANOI - NO ONE epitomises the dynamic spirit of modern Vietnam more than the country's new Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung.

At 56, he is the youngest leader Vietnam has ever had and he is shaking things up the way a youthful teenager might shake up a party of old fogeys.

Indeed, there are still some old fogeys among the collective leadership of the ruling Vietnam Communist Party, but it is clear that the go-ahead Mr Dung is now in the driver's seat.

His name is pronounced 'Zung', and he likes to zoom along fast. And he is not afraid of taking risks if it will propel his nation forward faster.

Like his fellow reformists, PM Dung believes that booming Vietnam has not been accorded its proper place in the global community. He is determined to set that right as soon as possible.

Chosen Prime Minister just two months ago, he has already begun to make waves.

Said Mr Subinay Nandy, deputy representative of the United Nations Development Programme in Vietnam: 'Dung is definitely giving signals that he's going to do things differently.'

That is clear from his crackdown on corruption, his shake-up of the government's top advisers, his unabashedly pro-business stance, and his fearless belief that he can sweep the party's old guard along with him.

Most of his moves have won praise, but some have caused a shiver of concern even among his most avid supporters.

For while charming and charismatic, Mr Dung also has a blunt, authoritarian streak.

'Dung has gotten off the mark quickly and can be expected to make demonstrable gains in slashing red tape and weeding out corruption,' said Professor Carlyle Thayer, a noted Vietnam expert at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

Mr Dung is a law graduate who hails from the nation's southernmost province and he has cultivated a liberal reformist image.

At the same time, he has retained the firm no-nonsense attitude instilled in him during his long years in the armed forces and later in the so-called 'black hat' Interior Ministry.

He also spent a year as governor of the nation's central bank.

Carefully groomed for the post over the past decade, Mr Dung is widely expected to serve two five-year terms.

One of his early attention-grabbing moves is related to Vietnam's battle against endemic corruption.

When seven teachers were caught taking bribes to give pupils good grades, Mr Dung jumped into the fray to ensure the teachers were properly punished.

He gave a robust speech asserting that there would be 'zero tolerance' for the kind of academic cheating that for too long has been 'rampant in Vietnamese society'.

Whether he can deliver on that promise remains to be seen, but many believe he may have a better shot at it than his predecessors.

Said Professor Edmund Malesky, a noted Vietnam expert at the University of California: 'Dung has a track record of success in managing the complex Vietnam bureaucracy and is an astute politician. He may indeed know how to push his policy initiatives to the top of the agenda.'

He also showed he meant business when he abruptly disbanded two government think tanks.

After just one month in the job, he decided that the Prime Minister's Research Commission and the Foreign Affairs Economic Research Group were not delivering what he wanted.

So he got rid of them.

The move stunned many people, because the two independent advisory bodies were viewed as providing a necessary corrective to some of the whackier notions of certain party diehards.

But in Mr Dung's view, the veteran members of the groups had had their day and he wanted some vigorous new blood brought in.

While this kind of decisiveness has won him plaudits, it has also made some wonder if he is developing a tendency to ride roughshod over any criticism.

But that worry may fade if his forceful style leads to less corruption, less red tape, and perhaps even more openness and transparency.

Certainly, his government's move last week to grant an amnesty to thousands of prisoners, including two noted dissidents, suggests that Vietnam's economic liberalisation may be reflected in more cultural and political openness.

Said Mr Michael Marine, the United States Ambassador to Vietnam: 'The release is indicative of the movement in Vietnam to allow for some space for political discussion.'

So, while moves towards greater freedom of expression have proceeded at the glacial pace of a pig through a python during the past decade, there is now hope that they may speed up under the new Prime Minister.

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