

Vietnam's Trong consolidates power with dismissals of deputy PMs

Xi Jinping meeting may have accelerated general secretary's anti-graft drive

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HANOI -- Vietnam party chief Nguyen Phu Trong appears to have further cemented his grip on power after parliament on Thursday approved the dismissals of two deputy prime ministers in an extraordinary session that opened the same day.

The decision was precipitated by the Vietnamese Communist Party last week stripping the pair of their Central Committee positions.

Pham Binh Minh was standing deputy prime minister in charge of overall diplomacy, and Vu Duc Dam was the deputy prime minister in charge of public health. The men are believed to have been replaced after being charged with allowing corruption to fester under their watches.

Minh's offense is said to be a lack of supervision when COVID-19 first ripped around the world and flights were being arranged to bring home Vietnamese nationals living abroad. About 40 people, including a deputy foreign minister, a former ambassador to Japan and a travel agency executive, have been arrested for allegedly taking bribes from passengers who were given boarding priority.

Dam was singled out for his oversight of how the government conducted bidding for coronavirus test kits. The process has since been revealed as being marred by rigging, giving way to a scandal that has resulted in the expulsions and arrests of a former health minister and a former mayor of Hanoi.

Neither Minh nor Dam have been arrested, and no official explanations have been given for their dismissals. A diplomatic source reacted with surprise when talking to Nikkei Asia: "They had clean images within the party," the source said, "and were popular among the people."

The dismissals mark an escalation of the yearslong anti-corruption drive being carried out by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, who is in his third term as party leader. It is the first time that Trong has gone after government officeholders at the highest levels.

Experts say the escalation shows Trong is further consolidating his grip on power, though he has already "almost converged the actual power of the state, the party, the armed forces, the judicial and supervisory systems," said **Dang Tam Chanh**, a Ho Chi Minh-based political analyst.

State-owned media in Vietnam calls the aggressive drive, with the so-called Central Steering Committee on Anti-corruption at the helm, "a burning furnace." Chanh regards it as "Mr. Trong's furnace."

While he moves forward with his anticorruption drive, Trong is also on the lookout for a successor.

Carlyle Thayer, emeritus professor of politics at the University of New South Wales Canberra at the Australian Defence Force Academy, said that Trong "failed to get his protege

Tran Quoc Vuong approved as the next party leader" at the party's 13th National Congress in 2021, when he was given an unprecedented third term in office.

"Trong will quietly canvass members of the Politburo, secretariat and other senior party officials about his successor," Thayer told Nikkei. "In the meantime, Trong will continue with his 'burning furnace' campaign because he knows that corruption in the party is the major threat to its legitimacy to rule Vietnam."

There has long been speculation that Trong, now 78, would be replaced in the middle of his third term, which runs to 2026, if other party members with enough power emerge.

But Trong's hold on authority has since become unshakable, experts now say.

"There is a large chance that Trong will stay in power until his health conditions do not allow it," said Alex Vuving, a professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Honolulu. "Although he may have created a lot of enemies, no other leader seems to be able to gather the support of a majority of Central Committee members."

"In this situation, Trong remains the default choice."

Party insiders told Nikkei that ulterior motives might be behind Trong's anti-graft drive.

Minh, one of the two dismissed deputy prime ministers, is said to have harbored prime ministerial or presidential ambitions, but Trong couldn't accept Minh's "favor of Western-style and support from Western-style groups," one insider told Nikkei.

"Trong was also pressured by [Chinese leader] Xi Jinping to limit the influence of the Western-favor faction, and Pham Binh Minh's name was directly mentioned," the source added. The phrase "Western favor" is believed to have been part of the discussions when Trong visited Beijing in the fall and met Xi, who used his own anti-graft drive to consolidate power in China.

When Trong returned from China, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh went to the plane to welcome the general secretary, according to Chanh, the Ho Chi Minh-based analyst. It is "a ritual that has almost disappeared since Vietnam entered the economic renovation era [in 1986]," the analyst added.

Despite the dismissals of two deputy prime ministers, it is widely believed that Chinh can survive Trong's anti-graft drive. "The dismissal of two deputy prime ministers would temporarily bring difficulties to Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh," Ha Hoang Hop, a visiting senior fellow at Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, told Nikkei, "but he should survive and continue his post-COVID recovery tasks."

There is also the possibility of Chinh coming under additional pressure. Chanh believes the prime minister "cannot delay in reforming" Vietnam's administrative system and civil service regime while also improving people's wages -- all of which were mandates the dismissed Minh had been responsible for.

Additional reporting by Kim Dung Tong in Ho Chi Minh City and Yuji Kuronuma in Tokyo.