

## Is Vietnam Creeping Into a Succession Crisis?

Health rumors aside, the big question remains who will follow in Nguyen Phu Trong's footsteps.

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By **Nguyen Khac Giang**  
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A rumor about the health of Vietnam's supreme leader, Nguyen Phu Trong, has **stormed** the country's vibrant social media landscape in recent days. Trong, 75, was alleged to have suffered from a stroke during his visit to the southern Kien Giang province on his birthday. The awkward silence from state media only threw more fuel onto the fire, as conspiracy theories wandered from an assassination attempt by Trong's former rival Nguyen Tan Dung (Kien Giang is seen as Dung's stronghold and his son is currently the provincial party chief) to Trong's inability to continue his tenure.

We've been here before. Last year, Vietnamese netizens shared rumors regarding the health of then-President Tran Dai Quang, which was also received by silence from the authorities. When the state media finally made an official announcement, it was when Quang passed away in September.

Of course, that is not to say Trong's path will follow that of Quang. In the end, it is nearly impossible to verify such information in a strictly controlled authoritarian regime like Vietnam, where an expert's insight might be no more trustworthy than the gossip heard in countless Vietnamese coffee shops.

But public concern over Trong's health — whether the basis for that concern is true or not — has significant implications for Vietnamese politics, as the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) is preparing for the 13th VCP National Congress in 2021. Trong — who will be 77 by then — will be too old to lead, not to mention the unofficial two-term limit. The health issue — in case he has one — will further deter any attempt he could make to stay longer. In early 2018, the Politburo under his guidance issued Regulation No 90, which made "healthiness" a condition to hold key positions. The move was then seen as an effort to ward off Quang's influence; it will bring some sense of irony if the regulation comes back to bite Trong so soon.

The big question is who will follow in Trong's dual position of the VCP secretary general and the country's president, if that current status remains. At the present, there is practically no candidate who fits in the Party's regulations and norms. Expert predictions vary from **Tran Quoc Vuong** — the anti-corruption czar — to the current prime minister, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, and Pham Minh Chinh, a former vice police minister turned head of the powerful Central Organization Commission. But those three alleged choices are not perfect. To be eligible for the post, a candidate must hold at least one term of Politburo membership (ideally, two terms), be under 65, have governance experience, and be theoretically well-grounded with Marxism-Leninism (this term is vaguely defined, although this might associate with regional faction: all VCP secretary generals are from conservative North Vietnam).

Vuong has never held a governance post, be it as provincial party chief or chairman of the People's Committee. The only candidate promoted to be the top post without such experience was Le Kha Phieu in 1997. However, Phieu was by then already among the five members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo (which is now dissolved), and held a key position in the military. Vuong does not have that background, and his age — which will exceed the Party's limit of 65 by 2021 — will further weaken his position.



Vietnamese President Nguyen Phu Trong applauds on a visit to the Peace Palace before a meeting with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Tuesday, Feb. 26, 2019.

Image Credit: AP Photo/Heng Sinith

As an experienced technocrat and a two-term politburo member, Phuc is a clear frontrunner, but not without detractors. He will reach 66 by 2021, and more importantly, he is originally from the South (below the infamous 17th parallel that divided the country during the Vietnam War). No one from the former South Vietnam has ever become the VCP's supreme leader. Sustained rumors about his alleged corruption since the last Congress might also deteriorate his potential candidacy.

Chinh is a younger candidate with a strong record in economic and administrative reforms, which was achieved when he was the Party chief of one of the country's richest provinces, Quang Ninh. Nevertheless, he will only have served one full term of Politburo membership by 2021. His current position might also be a weak point: There has never been a secretary general who previously worked as the head of the Central Organization Commission. There is a clear logic for that, as such a person will be seen as too powerful when holding the top post and securing all the senior personnel files. That would amount to a figure who comes close to the Soviet Union's notorious Lavrentiy Beria. Besides, his inability to convince and put forward the Law on Special Economic Zones, which caused a violent protest in Vietnam last year, will undermine his credibility.

Accordingly, promoting any of those three candidates will require the Party to break its formal and informal rules in selecting the leader. Furthermore, because there is no clear favorite, the balance of power among the three dominant candidates — not to mention others — might result in a fierce game of thrones before 2021. If that happens, one of the four pillars of authoritarian resilience suggested by Andrew Nathan, norm-bound succession politics, will collapse. Vietnam, like other authoritarian regimes in transition, will creep into a succession crisis.

To avoid such a turbulent scenario requires the VCP leadership to further institutionalize the succession process. First, they must deter any temptation to consolidate power as their **Chinese counterpart** has done under Xi Jinping's rule, and Vietnam, perhaps, could seek under Trong's second tenure. Collective leadership and intraparty democracy are the distinctive characteristics that contribute to VCP's sustainability and to some extent, make Hanoi a more benevolent regime than Beijing. Frank Brandenburg explains how the Mexican Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) "avoids personal dictatorship by retiring their dictators every six years"; the VCP can surely follow that path. Several check and balance mechanisms — such as confidence voting for party leadership, which was brought in last year — should be promoted and expanded.

Second, it is time for the VCP to consider a direct voting method among VCP Congress members to choose the secretary general. Such a move has been applied at the grassroots party cell level since 2009, but not yet implemented at higher levels (district, province, and national congresses). This modest practice of democracy, despite its obvious limitations, can help set up a clear succession rule for contenders, and create a higher probability to choose "good leaders" among the elites.

No matter how the succession process turns out in the end, Vietnamese politics will not be the same after Trong's rule. Uncertainty over the next leadership generation will cast doubt on a wide range of issues, from the ongoing anti-corruption campaign to the country's economic development strategy, as well as its foreign policy in the era of the increasing superpower **tug-of-war** in Asia. The longer the succession process lingers, the more likely the VCP will jump into a state of instability, at a time that requires them to be much more stable and focused.

*Nguyen Khac Giang is a PhD candidate at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, and a senior research fellow at the Vietnam Institute for Economic and Policy Research (VEPR), Vietnam National University, Hanoi. He writes regularly for major Vietnamese news media such as VnExpress, Vietnamnet, and Saigon Times. His work also appears on Asia & Pacific Policy Studies and the East Asia Forum.*

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