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Vietnam's Communists, amid graft scandal, pick new leaders while keeping economic course

By TINI TRAN

HANOI Vietnam

Vietnam's ruling Communist Party is widely expected to reshuffle its top leadership when it convenes for the opening of its congress this week.

Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, 72, and President Tran Duc Luong, 68, are both likely to step down to make way for younger leaders. The meeting, held once every five years, will also decide whether Communist Party General Secretary Nong Duc Manh, 65, remains in the top post.

Who the new leaders will be is still a mystery, but what's not in question is the country's overall direction. Vietnam will continue marching down the path of reforms toward economic openness and global integration, say analysts.

"I don't see any deep ideological disputes. I see horsetrading and factional infighting but Vietnam has already made the tough decisions politically," said Long Le, a researcher and lecturer in Vietnamese studies at the University of Houston in Texas.

The once deep-seated battles over whether to open up Vietnam's entrenched state enterprise to outside competition have been buried as Hanoi pushes hard for accession to the World Trade Organization this year.

Vietnam's booming economic growth a record 8.4 percent last year and rising foreign investment have been proof positive that the country's shift toward market-oriented reforms was the right course.

A few years ago, "even to move one degree of reform brought in ideological objections and arguments. (But now) the main trajectory is done. Even allowing party members to engage in enterprise got through this year," said Vietnam expert Carlyle Thayer, who teaches at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

Instead, Vietnam's Communist Party is finding itself preoccupied with a different challenge: a spiraling corruption scandal at the Transport Ministry reportedly involving millions in funds earmarked for infrastructure projects being siphoned off to pay for luxury cars and gambling on European soccer matches.

The scandal has rocked the top levels of government, with Minister Dao Dinh Binh already forced to resign only the second minister in Vietnam ever thrown out over corruption charges and several in his ministry placed under arrest.

Though major corruption cases have been uncovered before, this case has had an international spotlight, since much of the money was apparently development assistance given by the World Bank and Japan, among others.

At a press briefing last week ahead of the meeting, Politburo member Phan Dien warned that corruption has become "a danger that even threatens the survival of our regime."

The country's normally restrained state-run media has taken aggressive aim in the current scandal, linking family members of senior officials to the corruption and printing public calls for the resignation of key leaders.

The scandal even provoked comment from Vo Nguyen Giap, the 94-year-old retired general who masterminded the defeat of the French and then the Americans in Vietnam, who urged the party congress to attack the corruption issue head-on.

"I do think that they are serious about corruption and what it means for the party," said Le, who spoke by phone from Texas. "They've had corruption campaigns before but this case is different because it deals with international money...In the long run, what the party wants is that no one up on top has any kind of connection with this."

Khais heir apparent is Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, who has been groomed for the role for years.

Another possibility is fellow deputy prime minister Vu Khoan, a seasoned diplomat and key figure in trade talks. Fewer names have been floated for the presidential post; National Assembly speaker Nguyen Van An is considered an up-and-coming leader with a skilled reputation.

In the end, which new leaders are chosen may come down to who has managed to keep the cleanest reputation amid a bureaucracy associated with graft

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Scandal overshadows upcoming Vietnam Communist Congress

Hanoi

When Vietnam's ruling Communist Party opens its national congress on Tuesday, the usual pageant of Ho Chi Minh ideology and behind-closed-doors political jockeying will take place under the shadow of a massive corruption scandal.

The growing scandal swirling around Project Management Unit 18 (PMU18), a state company believed to have siphoned off millions in public funds to fund a gambling ring, has so far seen Vietnam's

transport minister Dao Dinh Binh resign and his deputy minister arrested on corruption charges, joining PMU18's former director in jail.

Ever-heightening and unusually public demands to root out graft have some analysts predicting that the furore could prompt the party to make sweeping leadership changes - and possibly even open the door a crack to the inner workings of the country's only legal political movement.

"The party is going to want to be seen as more open, instead of being just behind closed doors and sweeping things under the rug," Carlyle Thayer, a longtime analyst of Vietnamese politics who teaches at Australia's National Defence Academy.

The 10th Party Congress is set to elect a new Politburo and also decide whether to keep on or to replace General Secretary Nong Duc Manh, whose son-in-law happens to be a division manager at PMU18, though he is not under any criminal investigation.

If Manh is replaced - possibly with Nguyen Minh Triet, the chairman of the Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee credited with spearheading the 2003 prosecution of 18 corrupt officials on payroll of the infamous gangster Nam Cam - the party could be sending a message, according to an analyst.

"The line could be, 'This corruption happened on your watch,'" Thayer said. "The public wants accountability. Anti-corruption is a perennial issue, but this latest scandal has just exploded."

Manh himself may stay on in the top job, but Thayer said he would then face increasing pressure to promote clean government.

Already, Vietnam has seen an unusual level of criticism and questioning in the lead-up to the Congress, which opens Tuesday and runs until April 25, gathering more than 1,700 delegates.

Last week, Vietnamese reporters peppered Politburo member Phan Dien with questions about rumours Central Committee candidates may have bribed their way onto the list.

A newspaper editorial even called for the party to publish the list of candidates before they were proved - an unprecedented call that has so far been ignored.

And on Thursday, revered General Vo Nguyen Giap, hero of the battle of Dien Bien Phu that gained Vietnam's independence from France in 1954, emerged from retirement to write a scathing critique of the party.

"The party has become a screen for corrupt people's activities," Giap, 94, wrote in Tien Phong (Pioneer) newspaper.

"The party is lucky to have detected the PMU18 case before the 10th Congress," Giap wrote, quoting Vietnam's late founding father Ho Chi Minh saying "A party that disguises its shortcomings is a decayed party. A party that dares to admit shortcomings and find ways to amend them is a brave, stable and true party."

Besides deciding on the 15-member Politburo and on a general secretary, the Congress will elect a new 160-member Central Committee, which in turn will make recommendations for the country's other two top posts of prime minister or president.

Triet is also widely mentioned as a replacement for President Tran Duc Luong, who is expected to announce his retirement at the congress, while Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung is a leading candidate to replace the current prime minister, Phan Van Khai, also expected to retire.

Though the Congress is expected to make recommendations for prime minister and president posts, it is actually the National Assembly that will elect them when the legislative body meets next month. Thayer said the National Assembly usually - but not always - follows the party's recommendation.

Whoever the new slate of Vietnamese leaders turns out to be, Thayer said they will face increasing pressure to root out corruption, which the party sees as the greatest danger to its legitimacy as Vietnam's sole political entity.

"There's a kind of creeping pluralism is developing and forcing them to open up," Thayer said. "Already, you are seeing a tendency for candidates to high office have to declare family assets and give detailed backgrounds."

"One way to show you are fighting corruption is to have more openness," he said. "This Congress could be the harbinger for making the party more open in its relations with the wider society." dpa kj sc