

The Final Victory of Nguyen Phu Trong

How Vietnam's communist party chief earned a surprise third term at this year's National Congress.

By Quynh Tran

When Nguyen Phu Trong assumed Vietnam's presidency following the death of President Tran Dai Quang in September 2018, he became the first Vietnamese leader since the 1980s to hold two of the country's four senior leadership posts.

Whether this foreshadowed Vietnam's path toward the model of one-man rule that was increasing seen in China under Xi Jinping, the country's "Chairman of Everything," was at the time unclear. At the very least, it reflected Trong's growing prestige and popularity inside the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). This was certainly helped by the anti-corruption crackdown that had been among the most notable policies of his seven years as general secretary of the Party. In a famous analogy, Trong likened the anti-graft crackdown to a "blazing furnace" that would incinerate even the freshest firewood.

Even the sudden explosion of the COVID-19 pandemic at the start of 2020 did not moderate the heat of Trong's campaign against graft. Two incumbent members of the Politburo, Hoang Trung Hai and Nguyen Van Binh, were disciplined. Former Hanoi Party Chairman Nguyen Duc Chung was sentenced to five years in prison for masterminding the appropriation of classified documents.

Interestingly, Trong's conservative stance on political control has proceeded in tandem with the government's post-2016 economic reforms. As authoritarian state control expanded, as evidenced by the increasingly harsh crackdowns on dissidents and pro-democracy activists, the state loosened its hold over the Vietnamese economy. By the end of 2018, Vietnam had 714,755 active firms, of which more than 99 per cent were domestic or foreign-owned private enterprises.

Vietnam's score in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index rose from 62.6 in 2016 to 69.8 (out of 100) in 2020. Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, in his inaugural address after his appointment in 2016, pledged to turn the "command government into an enabling government," one that was honest and worked for the people and for business.

At the same time Vietnam was able to maintain stable macroeconomic growth. Since 2015, the country maintained an average GDP growth rate of over 6 percent. Economic growth reached 7.08 percent in 2018, the highest figure since 2010, thanks to strong FDI inflows and growth in the services and manufacturing sectors, productivity, private consumption, and exports.

The issue of succession

With the successful anti-corruption campaign and a dynamic economy buoying up his second term, Trong seemed likely to dominate the selection process for the leadership transition in January 2021. Indeed, as the country approached the 13th National Congress scheduled for that month, most analysts expected him to step down from all positions due to the Party's age and term limits. Many saw Tran Quoc Vuong, the former head of the Central Commission for

Inspection, who had worked with Trong for more than 10 years, as Trong's favored choice to succeed him as party chief.

While leaving everyone guessing at his real intent, Trong initiated the publication of numerous documents aimed at strengthening the party's mechanisms of internal discipline. Chief among them was Central Committee Regulation 85, issued in 2017, which required 1,000 senior officials, including all members of the Central Committee, to provide annual declarations of their assets and the assets of their spouses and children.

"Nguyen Phu Trong's rule is illustrated by two contradictory tendencies," Nguyen Khac Giang, a researcher at Victoria University of Wellington, told *The Diplomat*. "While power is heavily consolidated in his hands, Trong has been laying the foundation for a more norm-bound succession politics by formalizing the selection process."

In addition, Trong promulgated Regulation 90 in 2017 (later revised in Regulation 214 in 2020), which formalized the candidacy criteria for senior leadership roles. To be eligible for the post of VCP general secretary, the regulation stated, a candidate must be a Politburo member for at least one term and have an "excellent" governance track record.

Specifically, the candidate must have the ability to "lead and manage the Central Committee, the Politburo, and the Executive Secretariat," which, according to researcher Nguyen Khac Giang, led to suggestions that the candidate must have previously served in one of the "four pillars" of the party: general secretary, prime minister, state president, or chair of the National Assembly. In hindsight, this detail seems to suggest that Tran Quoc Vuong, who was only a standing member of the Executive Secretariat, never stood much chance of succeeding Trong.

Le Hong Hiep, a fellow in the Vietnam Studies Programme at Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, said that Trong had "reportedly endorsed Vuong to be his successor because Vuong was seen to have a clean profile, which made him a suitable candidate to carry on Trong's most important legacy, that is the fight against corruption." However, Hiep also noted that despite Trong's endorsement, Vuong's problem is that he was a rather "faceless" politician whose support base within the Central Committee appeared insufficiently robust for him to secure the top position.

In April 2019, Trong suddenly suffered a stroke while on a visit to the southern province of Kien Giang. He was subsequently hospitalized and disappeared from the public scene for several weeks. Before long, Trong had returned to work and appeared to be focusing his energies on preparations for the leadership transition. However, speculation over the state of his health led to the prevailing opinion that Trong was likely to retire in 2021.

However, there was to be a major plot twist in the leadership race. About two weeks before the ceremonies marking the start of the 13th National Congress, a leaked list of candidates for the "four pillar" positions appeared on social media. Against most predictions, it indicated that Trong was set to stay on for an unprecedented third term as VCP chief, while Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc would be shuffled over to the post of state president.

Carlyle Thayer, emeritus professor of politics at the University of New South Wales, told the BBC that the surprise seemed to indicate that Trong had been unsuccessful in grooming his successor, perhaps due to opposition by members of the Central Committee. "Either he is re-elected for a third full five-year term or he is re-elected on the understanding he will step down before his term expires," Thayer said.

The news was controversial among many Vietnamese people. Outgoing general secretaries had previously always respected the norms of term limits. Some feared that this might set a precedent for future leaders, eager for loopholes that would allow them to govern for the longest possible period of time.

Conversely, other observers thought it was better for the country, given that Trong is widely considered the cleanest politician in Vietnam. Vu Minh Khuong, an economist at the National University of Singapore, told the BBC that Trong was dedicated to moving the country forward. “During his last five-year mandate, he was outstanding. Although his health is somewhat limited, but clearly his intellectual mind is still very lucid,” Khuong said.

Fully aware of the potential controversy of granting Trong a third term, the VCP tried to ensure that the five-yearly National Congress was carefully scripted. When there were political gaffes, attempts at damage control came swiftly.

As the Congress opened, an official, Hau A Lenh, told state media that Trong had been nominated to serve the rare third term. “The General Secretary and President is one of the over-age nominees and a special case,” delegate Hau A Lenh said. The online state media initially reported his words but then removed all references to Trong’s nomination. It seems the Party wanted to give the impression that Trong’s re-election was still to be discussed and approved by Congress.

It will be a long time before we know to extent to which Trong managed to convince his colleagues at the Politburo that he should stay. However, it probably worked to Trong’s advantage that the Party seemed to lack the “perfect” candidate to take his place. As Nguyen Khac Giang points out, most of the prominent choices have key weaknesses, and selecting one of them would have required some bending of the formal and informal rules of succession. In the end, allowing Trong to stay on for a third term seemed to be the least disruptive option open to the Party.

Chairing the opening session of the National Congress on January 26, Trong praised the burgeoning economic development and containment of the COVID-19 pandemic as significant accomplishments. “Our country has been developing rapidly and sustainably, consolidating people’s confidence in the party, the state and the socialist regime,” he said, reflecting on the party’s record since 2016.

It was true Vietnam has won accolades for its COVID-19 pandemic response. It is also one of the few countries that managed to post a positive growth rate in 2020, expanding by a projected 2.9 percent despite the ravages of COVID-19. The latest forecast by the Japan Center for Economic Research, a Tokyo-based think tank, paints a bright picture for Vietnam. It predicts the country to achieve upper middle-income status in 2023, with per capita income likely to exceed \$11,000 in 2035.

Observers agree that in the years ahead, Vietnam will continue to pursue deeper international economic integration and diversify its foreign relations. It is an open question whether there will be further changes in its domestic politics. “If the Party cannot evolve to meet the demands of a nation with global obligations and increasingly complex social and economic structures, the Party is likely to be seen, more and more, as a drag on growth,” David Brown, a former U.S. diplomat, told the BBC.

On January 31, after much rumor and discussion, the Party solemnly announced that Nguyen Phu Trong had been reelected. At the press conference, Trong promised that he would continue the anti-graft crackdown. “The fight against corruption will neither stop nor rest, no matter who it involves, and there are no restricted areas,” the leader said.

Some observers said while the popular respect for Trong was genuine, there was a danger that his tenure might begin generating the beginnings of a personality cult.

In 2019, the Party released a book about Trong bearing the title, “General Secretary and State President Nguyen Phu Trong: With the feelings of the people in the country and international friends.” The 600-page book consisted of 130 articles on Trong. As state media reported, the authors all affirmed that Trong is “a leader with far-sighted strategic vision and high sense of justice when dealing with specific matters.”

Some analysts speculate that Trong, who will be 81 years of age by the time of the 14th National Congress in 2026, may step down part way through his third term if a suitable candidate is identified. The next leader may be selected from among the new prime minister or the new parliamentary chair. Le Hong Hiep, the Singapore-based researcher, shared the same view, telling me that “the decision for Trong to stay on for a third term appears to be a temporary arrangement to help maintain the party’s unity and stability.”

Hiep also said that the party’s decision not to remove the two-term limit from its charter was telling. “Mr Trong may groom a successor and find the right time to hand over his position in the next few years to show that he agreed to stay on to save the party from a leadership crisis rather than to cling to power indefinitely,” Hiep added.

A Politburo member since 1997, Nguyen Phu Trong has often defied conventional wisdom to remain at the forefront of Vietnam’s elite politics. It looks like his continued power and popularity will continue to give him the capacity to surprise in the years to come.

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