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# The Rise and Rise of Nguyen Phu Trong

**How Vietnam's party chief defied conventional wisdom and became his country's most powerful leader in a generation.**

By Quynh Tran

As the year 2021 began, observers of Vietnamese politics were busy wondering which candidates might be in line to succeed Nguyen Phu Trong following the completion his second term as Vietnam's ruling Communist Party chief.

According to Party rules, the general secretary's tenure is limited to two consecutive terms. Therefore, few people envisioned that on January 31, during the Party's five-yearly National Congress, Trong would be reelected for a rare third term in the country's most powerful political post. He was granted an exception to party rules which say people over the age of 65 should retire.

At a later media briefing, Trong said he didn't seek a third term, preferring to retire because he was "old and not in good health." But he claimed that the congress had wanted to re-elect him, and as a party member, had no choice but to oblige.

Whether one believes Trong's display of modesty, he has now become the most powerful Vietnamese politician since Le Duan, bolstered by a reputation as a frugal leader who serves the nation of 98 million people above all else.

Based on public information, scholars' research, and personal interviews, I have pieced together the story of how Trong rose to become the most powerful and popular leader in Vietnam in recent times.

## **A long and winding road**

A prominent Marxist theorist, Trong was born in 1944 in Hanoi, studied philology at university, and joined the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) in 1967. He was ingrained with Marxism-Leninism, thanks to his doctoral degree in party building, completed while he was studying in the Soviet Union between 1981 and 1983.

Trong then spent many years working at the party's Communist Review magazine, and in time, rose to become the editor-in-chief. In 1997, Trong was promoted to the Politburo and became head of the parliament in 2006 before rising to the top party job of general secretary in 2011.

Trong rose to the party's apex amid an uncertain economic climate. After the global financial crisis in 2008, Vietnam suffered a sharp economic slowdown. The World Bank noted that the banking sector was struggling, with the banks' average return on assets falling steeply since the crisis (from 1.8 percent in 2007 to 0.5 percent in 2012).

The Bank pointed to the cycle of moderate to high inflation, which reached a peak of 28 percent in August–September 2008, fell to single-digit rates from April 2009 to October 2010, and then rose to another peak of 23 percent in August 2011. Typical of the pessimistic tone of the period, a report by the Wall Street Journal noted that Vietnam's economy grew just 5.03 percent in 2012,

its slowest pace in 13 years, “due to weak global and domestic demand and a collapse in a property bubble.”

This climate of crisis provided the context for Trong’s rise to the VCP leadership. The Party felt it had to respond to the difficulties facing the country in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis, which ran the risk of undermining its legitimacy with the Vietnamese public.

Trong’s road to the summit of Vietnamese politics has been long and winding. While he was appointed party leader in 2011, he was forced to operate within the traditional system of collective leadership, in place since the death of the party founder Ho Chi Minh in 1969. Under this system, decision-making process in the Party and government is based not on a single person, but is instead vested in the so-called “four pillars” of the party: the general secretary, prime minister, president and chair of the National Assembly. The VCP governs in consultation with a 17- to 19-member Politburo. Working in this system, leaders of different factions would balance each other out and refrain from centralizing power under one person.

The rivalry between Trong and then Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung during the former’s first five years in office has been well documented. Selected as prime minister in 2006, Dung’s opening of the country to more foreign investment and pursuit of stronger ties with the United States won him plaudits, though his administration was dogged by reckless expansion at many state-owned companies and a graft-ridden state sector.

Since the doi moi (renovation) policy of economic reform was adopted in 1986, socioeconomic performance has become the primary source of legitimacy for the VCP. As long as the country’s economic growth remains solid and the fortunes and incomes of its citizenry continue to rise, other issues, including corruption, are less important. However, as bad debts and slowing growth rates threatened to put an end to what had been one of Asia’s brightest economic success stories at the end of the first decade of the 2000s, it became a matter of urgency for Trong to intensify the fight against corruption to boost popular support for the Party.

Trong’s first major appeal was to urge the Party to adopt Resolution No. 12 in early 2012, a treatise on party building which led to a campaign of criticism and self-criticism within the VCP’s ranks. He urged officials to lead by example and be held accountable for the corruption and waste. Soon, the Party removed the Central Steering Committee on Anti-Corruption from the government’s portfolio and placed it under the direct control of the Politburo. This initiative could be seen as an attempt to improve the effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts, but it also scaled back the power of Prime Minister Dung.

In October 2012, news agencies reported that the political future of Vietnam’s prime minister was at stake as the Communist Party’s 175-member Central Committee met to discuss the growing public dissatisfaction with the downturn in economic growth and problems in the banking system. At the end of the meeting, the Central Committee decided not to accept the Politburo’s recommendation to discipline the prime minister. The bruising battle served as a warning to Dung, and an opportunity for him to bring graft under control and stabilize the country’s economy.

Subsequently, Vietnam’s economic performance recovered during the last three years of Dung’s first term. Economic growth in 2013 exceeded the expectations of most analysts. In 2014, for the first time in three years, the country’s GDP surpassed the yearly target set by the National Assembly. Things were even better in 2015, when the economy grew by 6.68 per cent, the fastest

pace in five years. As 2015 progressed, and the economy returned to health, Dung recovered his image as a dynamic leader pursuing a pro-business agenda – just in time for the Party’s 12th National Congress in early 2016.

### **A master of intricate rules**

During this period, Trong also worked to enhance and consolidate his power within the VCP. In 2014, he was the driving force behind Decision 244, which established a more formalized process of political succession in Vietnam. The famous decree restricted the authority of party delegates in selecting members of the new Central Committee. As Professor Carlyle Thayer of the University of New South Wales has noted, historically, party delegates were allowed to propose to the Party Congress other candidates for selection to the Central Committee in addition to the official list approved by senior party leaders. But now, all candidates for the new Central Committee had to be approved by the outgoing Central Committee before their names were put on the ballots.

With respect to the race for the top post, Decision 244 prohibited Politburo members from nominating candidates other than those approved collectively by the Politburo. With these rules in place, those unsupported by the Politburo, now increasingly under the control of Trong and his allies, would be excluded from the contest, even if they obtained some support from the Central Committee.

As Vietnam’s economy continued to improve, the country was also successful in establishing and maintaining a balance between the United States and China, which were then becoming increasing strategic rivals. Trong is often perceived as being more friendly toward China, Vietnam’s largest trading partner. However, he also visited Washington and met U.S. President Barack Obama in 2015, becoming the highest-level Vietnamese leader to visit the U.S. since the end of the Vietnam War.

It was against this backdrop that the question of Vietnam’s future leadership came into play. The next party congress was scheduled to open on January 20, 2016, but there was no consensus about who would lead the party. As mentioned already, party rules impose both a two-term limit and an age ceiling of 65 years. Therefore, both Trong and Dung were seemingly ineligible and would need a special exemption from the Party in order to continue serving in high-ranking roles.

The outcome of the contest was only settled in late 2015, five weeks before the 12th National Congress opened in Hanoi. The Politburo recommended that among the “four pillars,” only party secretary Nguyen Phu Trong should be confirmed for a second term. The rest, including Dung, would be forced to retire. The recommendation was subsequently endorsed by the Central Committee.

However, as the Party Congress opened in January 2016, in an indication of the reach of Dung’s patronage network, his name was put forward by delegates to be a member of the next Central Committee. At this juncture, the rules set up by Decision 244 came into play. To stand a chance, Dung was forced to decline the nomination, then have a majority of the congress vote against his withdrawal. That would have paved the way for him to contest the leadership. In the end, Dung did not receive enough backing among the 1,500 delegates to the Congress.

As the Party unveiled its new Politburo to the media in January 2016, the 71-year-old Trong, in a foreshadowing of this year’s Congress, described himself as a reluctant leader. “My age is high,

health is limited, knowledge is limited,” Trong told reporters. “I asked to step down, but because of the responsibility assigned by the party I have to perform my duty.”

### **Firing up a “blazing furnace”**

At that stage, most observers expected Trong would support economic reforms and the further deepening of ties with the West, both of which proved to be true. What few predicted was that Trong would soon launch an unprecedented campaign against the corruption that was flourishing at the heights of Vietnamese politics and business.

Over four years, from 2017 to 2020, Trong’s Politburo took disciplinary action against 110 senior Party members, including three Politburo members, one former Politburo member, 10 Party Central Committee members, and 17 former members of the Party Central Committee. In addition to internal disciplinary measures, which range from reprimands to expulsion from the Party, some of these people have also faced criminal charges.

The anti-corruption campaign gathered force soon after Trong’s re-election in 2016, resulting in several high-profile arrests and prosecutions. The arrest in December 2017 of Dinh La Thang, the former VCP boss of Ho Chi Minh City marked the first time in decades that a Politburo member had been prosecuted. Thang also became the first Politburo member to be dismissed for economic mismanagement and was later sentenced to a total of 30 years in prison. Banking tycoons Tram Be and Pham Cong Danh were jailed, while scores of high-ranking officials were charged in connection with corruption scandals at the state oil giant PetroVietnam.

For his involvement in the shady purchase of private television firm AVG, Minister of Information and Communication Truong Minh Tuan was stripped of his post in July 2018 and sentenced to 14 years in prison. His predecessor, Nguyen Bac Son, received a life sentence for receiving an estimated \$3 million in kickbacks.

The fight against corruption also extended into the army and the police. Around 38 senior officers, including 23 generals, were disciplined or prosecuted. Most notably, a former deputy minister of national defense, Adm. Nguyen Van Hien, was sentenced to four years in prison, accused of allowing three plots of land in Ho Chi Minh City to be illegally transferred to private investors.

Then, in September 2018, just as Trong’s anti-corruption campaign was reaching its apogee, Vietnam’s President Tran Dai Quang, died of a viral infection in Hanoi. In the aftermath, instead of promoting a successor to hold the position for the remainder of Quang’s term, the presidency was handed to Trong, now 74 years of age, making him the first person in Vietnam to hold both titles since 1986. Half way through his second term in power, Trong’s grip on the party seemed more secure than ever.

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