

SUCCESSION POLITICS AND AUTHORITARIAN RESILIENCE IN VIETNAM

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On his seventy-fifth birthday, on 14 April 2019, Nguyen Phu Trong visited the southern province of Kien Giang, a practice he had adopted since being re-elected as secretary general of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) in 2016. This time it did not go well; it was rumoured that Trong suffered a stroke, and he was subjected to a lengthy hospital stay.² He appeared fragile during his first public appearance a month later, and in June he had to delegate National Assembly (NA) chairwoman Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan to visit China on his behalf. There was only limited coverage of these events in the tightly controlled Vietnamese media, as they tried to downplay the significance of Trong's deteriorating health.

In 2021 the VCP will hold its 13th National Congress, at which Trong—who will be seventy-seven by then—is expected to step down. However, this is only a high possibility, not a certainty. When re-elected in 2016, Trong hinted that he would retire in the middle of his term to make room for younger leaders. In the two years following his re-election, however, he consolidated power to become the most powerful figure in Vietnamese politics in decades. The sudden health incident will have likely put an end to any wish of his to remain in power for longer. What is more important however is whether Trong's illness has any implications for Vietnamese succession politics. As the head of both the party and the state, Trong's preference will weigh heavily in the candidate selection process for the hot seat in 2021. The tradition in Vietnamese politics is for party elders to have strong opinions over who will assume their posts (or even who

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should step down). The rise and fall of Secretary General Le Kha Phieu vividly illustrated that. Phieu was promoted to the party's supreme position in 1997 when he gained the support of both Le Duc Anh and Do Muoi after a long tug of war between two camps. He was nevertheless dethroned four years later when the party elders opposed his re-election.³

Tran Quoc Vuong, the executive secretary of the party's Secretariat—the fourth most powerful member of the party—was considered Trong's right-hand man and his favoured candidate for the top post. Vuong, however, is not a perfect choice. In addition to his lack of governance experience, he will exceed the age limit by the time the 13th Party Congress takes place. If health issues prevent Trong from maintaining his influence, it would be difficult for him to push ahead with his selection. In addition, Vuong is competing with other strong candidates, most notably the prime minister, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, and the head of the VCP's Central Organization Commission, Pham Minh Chinh.

The situation will likely lead to a heated political struggle during the next congress, similar to what was seen in 2016. At that time the contest between the then prime minister Nguyen Tan Dung and Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong proved to be unpredictable until the very last minute. Both were over the age limit, but Trong secured the only exemption for an overaged candidate and won the race. The defeat exacted a heavy toll on Dung's allies; the anti-corruption campaign—known as the “hot furnace”—burned down many of their political careers. Dinh La Thang was dismissed as Ho Chi Minh City's party secretary and became the first Politburo member to be tried under criminal law for corruption. He was sentenced to thirty years in prison by a Hanoi court in 2018.⁴ A series of southern provincial leaders, former central officials, and managers of state-owned enterprises deemed to be Dung's supporters were also disciplined.⁵ A key technocrat under Dung's government, Nguyen Van Binh, was sidelined to the largely ceremonial position of head of the Central Economic Commission. Most of the new key posts were occupied by Trong's allies, giving him unprecedented power to impose his policy. It is not an exaggeration to say that, through the use of the “hot furnace”, Trong has transformed himself from an obscure theoretician into the most powerful leader in Vietnam since the era of Le Duan.

The rise of Trong illustrates how leadership change maintains its relevance even in a highly institutionalized mechanism of collective leadership. The communist state could not have gone through the Doi Moi era if the conservative Le Duan had lived long enough to exert his control over the 6th National Congress. The accelerating economic reforms of the late 1990s and early 2000s were mostly credited to the reformist prime ministers Vo Van Kiet and Phan Van Khai. Accordingly, the key

question is how new leaders are chosen in Vietnam and whether this could have any impact on the country's long-term prospects. This chapter first discusses the politics of succession in Vietnam with particular reference to the VCP's upcoming 13th Congress. It then evaluates Vietnam's leadership transition and provides a comparative institutional analysis with China, which has always been considered as the model for Vietnam's political development. Last, the chapter briefly examines the way forward to avoid the risk of a succession crisis in Vietnam.

The Institutionalization of Leadership Transition

Given the importance of leadership succession, it is surprising that the VCP has, since its establishment in 1930, only had a handful of vague specialized regulations on the issue. In each national congress, organized every five years, the VCP's top delegates review and suggest possible amendments to the Constitution (the VCP has passed constitutional amendments in all but two national congresses). However, there are only a few details pertaining to party elections, with the most prominent being the obscure principle of "democratic centralism", which dictates that all leadership positions of the party must be elected through "democratic elections" (*bau cu dan chu*).⁶

At the central level, the principle guarantees a voting procedure that is nominally democratic: congress delegates vote to select the Central Committee (CC), which in turn votes to select the Politburo and the secretary general among the newly elected Politburo members.⁷ However, because the party constitution stops short of giving detailed instructions, the rules of the game can be changed during each congress. The institutionalization of succession was not very important prior to the 8th Congress, as the top position had previously been occupied by the independence hero (Ho Chi Minh), the supreme leader during the Vietnam War (Le Duan) and revolutionary leaders (Nguyen Van Linh and Do Muoi), who were all powerful enough to arrange the top positions among themselves. However, the influence of the party elders gradually waned in the 1990s, particularly when the advisory commission to the CC—which consisted of retired leaders—was disbanded in 2001.

As there was no dominant figure arising from the new generation of leadership, the need for an institutionalized process of succession increased. In 2000 the Politburo issued Decision 77-QD/TW regulating intra-party elections (later replaced by Decision No. 220-QD/TW in 2009 with some minor changes). This document specifies the procedures for preparing for elections, the rules for nomination and self-nomination, the election and vote counting process, and disciplinary actions

for wrongdoings. It is important to note that these regulations were issued by the Politburo, which meant that they could only apply to the party cells under the supervision of the CC, and not to the Politburo or the CC themselves. For elections at the central level, regulations were still decided on an ad hoc basis by the CC. Nevertheless, the three congresses (8th, 9th and 10th) that followed the introduction of Decision 77 largely followed its procedure.

Decision 244–QD/TW, introduced in 2014, formalized such a procedure for high-level party elections. The decision was issued directly by the CC, which enabled it to cover all elections from the grass-roots party cells to the CC, as well as the elections of party members to positions in the state system and mass organizations.⁸ Decision 244 was seen as a game changer, not just because it eventually helped Trong to win the fierce race against Dung⁹ but also because it institutionalized the election process for the VCP’s high-level positions.

Decision 244 strictly follows the principle of democratic centralism embedded in the party constitution, while also providing more details for the process. Specifically, Decision 244 requires the election of the secretary general to have two candidates, who would be nominated by the outgoing CC and the new Politburo, respectively. The incoming CC retains the right to nominate other candidates. If there are more than two candidates running for the post of secretary general, a preliminary vote will then be carried out in the new CC in order to choose the two most popular candidates. This is the first time that the election procedure for the secretary general has been explicitly stated in a party regulation.

While Decision 244 institutionalizes the voting procedure, Regulation 90 QD/TW issued in 2017 formalizes the criteria for candidature. To be eligible for the post, a candidate must hold at least one term of Politburo membership (ideally two terms) and have an “excellent” record in governance (either as a provincial party chief or head of one of the party’s central commissions). In particular, the candidate must have the ability to “steer and administrate the Central Committee, the Politburo, and the Executive Secretariat”, which has led to suggestions that the candidate must have served as one of the “top four” offices (secretary general, prime minister, chair of the National Assembly or state president) that are allowed to moderate a CC plenum.¹⁰ Health is also considered a critical precondition, which places candidates with bad health records at a disadvantage for the top post.

In addition to written regulations, succession politics in Vietnam is heavily influenced by quasi-institutionalized norms, which are not clearly stated in official documents but are consensually accepted among the ruling elites.

The most widely discussed norm is the regional allocation among the leadership. Since the 6th VCP Congress, the “troika” within the Politburo (secretary

general, president and prime minister) has generally been divided equally among three regions. The secretary general has always been a northerner (in this case, hailing from north of the 17th Parallel, the old border between North and South Vietnam). There is however more flexibility for the posts of prime minister and president (see Table 1). There is no clear reason for this norm, but a common explanation among party members revolves around the idea that northern communists are more ideologically committed and thus less likely to endanger the regime's socialist orientation.

Another norm is the age limit. There is no fixed threshold for election or re-election to the Politburo in written documents, although the CC usually discusses this issue before each congress. In the 9th Congress, for example, the CC set the appointment age at sixty-five, meaning that anyone exceeding the limit could not be re-elected to the Politburo.¹¹ This principle was reasserted at the 10th Congress¹² and has been considered a norm ever since. However, if one were to look closely at the ages of secretaries general when they first took the post, this norm has not been strictly adhered to. In fact the only party chief who qualified for the criterion of being under sixty-five was Nong Duc Manh at the 9th Congress (he was sixty-one). The norm seems to apply more strictly to other posts. Since the 10th Congress, all elected prime ministers and presidents have been within the age limit. In the recent 11th Plenum, the Politburo issued Conclusion 60-KL/TW on the age requirement of re-elected officials. However, the conclusion does not regulate CC members.¹³

A third norm revolves around the expectation that a secretary general should ideally have solid experience in governance, or as stated in Regulation 90, "a deep and wide knowledge on politics, economics, culture, society, defence, security, and foreign policy". A candidate should have experience governing a province as either the party chief or the people's committee chairman/chairwoman. It is however not a must, since Regulation 90 states that a candidate could also have served as the head of a central commission. However, not having governing experience is seen as a severe weakness. The only candidate promoted to the top post without such experience was Le Kha Phieu in 1997. Nevertheless, Phieu was by then already among the five members of the short-lived Standing Committee of the Politburo and held a key position in the military. Despite this, his selection was fiercely protested by many CC members.¹⁴ In addition, although Phieu did get elected, his lack of governing experience and political connections isolated him, eventually leading to his failure to secure a second term.¹⁵

In sum, for the past three decades, succession politics in Vietnam has been characterized by a combination of increasingly institutionalized rules on the one

TABLE 1
Regional Allocation and Age of Top 3 Positions in Vietnamese Politics since the 6th Congress

<i>VCP Congress</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Age when elected</i>	<i>Origin</i>
6th (1986)	Secretary General Prime Minister President	Nguyen Van Linh	72	Hung Yen (North)
		Pham Hung ^a	75	Vinh Long (South)
		Vo Chi Cong	75	Quang Nam (Central - South)
7th (1991)	Secretary General Prime Minister President	Do Muoi	74	Hanoi (North)
		Vo Van Kiet	69	Vinh Long (South)
		Le Duc Anh	71	Hue (Central - South)
8th (1996)	Secretary General Prime Minister President	Le Kha Phieu	67	Thanh Hoa (Central - North)
		Phan Van Khai	64	HCMC (South)
		Tran Duc Luong	60	Quang Ngai (Central - South)
9th (2001)	Secretary General Prime Minister President	Nong Duc Manh	61	Bac Kan (North)
		Phan Van Khai	68	HCMC (South)
		Tran Duc Luong	65	Quang Ngai (Central - South)
10th (2006)	Secretary General Prime Minister President	Nong Duc Manh	66	Bac Kan (North)
		Nguyen Tan Dung	57	Ca Mau (South)
		Nguyen Minh Triet	64	HCMC (South)
11th (2011)	Secretary General Prime Minister President	Nguyen Phu Trong	67	Hanoi (North)
		Nguyen Tan Dung	62	Ca Mau (South)
		Truong Tan Sang	62	Long An (South)
12th (2016)	Secretary General Prime Minister President	Nguyen Phu Trong	72	Hanoi (North)
		Nguyen Xuan Phuc	62	Quang Nam (Central - South)
		Tran Dai Quang ^b	60	Ninh Binh (North)

Notes: a. Pham Hung (1912–88) was initially the prime minister (known then as the president of the Council of Ministers). Hung was from Vinh Long (the South). After he died in office in 1988, Vo Van Kiet was chosen to be the acting PM. However, in the subsequent vote, Kiet lost to Do Muoi.

b. Tran Dai Quang (1956–2018) died in office. Nguyen Phu Trong replaced him as president in 2018.

Source: Compilation by the author.

hand and informal, implicit norms on the other. To an extent, the system has a degree of democratic elements, particularly in the election process and the criteria for nomination. However, for an authoritarian regime, democratic practice means a lack of predictable outcome for leadership transition and the risk of political infighting, especially when there is no clear favourite for the top post. The next section discusses such risks for the 13th Congress.

Candidature Uncertainties in 2021

Vietnam differs from China in lacking a position designating the heir apparent, thus making it extremely difficult to determine the identity of the next leader. If institutionalized rules are considered, theoretically all the currently active Politburo members are eligible to be candidates for the top post.¹⁶ However, informal norms rule out certain people. Female Politburo members such as NA chairwoman Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, vice NA chairwoman Tong Thi Phong and head of the Central Mass Mobilization Commission Truong Thi Mai will prove to be unlikely choices in the male-dominated politics of Vietnam. Minister of Public Security To Lam and Minister of Defence Nguyen Xuan Lich are not favoured due to fears about the over-centralization of power in the security sector. The party constitution dictates that a secretary general cannot hold the position for more than two terms.¹⁷ Given that the CC is not recommending any changes to the party constitution in the coming congress in 2021,¹⁸ it is very unlikely that Trong will stay at the top post beyond the 13th Congress. Not to mention that his deteriorating health and old age would also prove to be huge disadvantages if he wished to remain.

Trong, however, holds the power to introduce his preferred choice in his capacity as the incumbent secretary general and the head of the Personnel Subcommittee for the 13th Congress, which is responsible for preparing nominations for membership to the CC and Politburo. It was rumoured that Dinh The Huynh was initially his first choice, before Huynh withdrew from politics, citing health reasons. His replacement as the executive secretary of the party's Secretariat, Tran Quoc Vuong, is seen as even closer to Trong. Vuong had championed the Vietnamese anti-corruption campaign as head of the Central Inspection Commission (CIC). However, Vuong is not a "perfect" candidate if norms are taken into account. He has never governed a province, either as a provincial party chief or chairman of the People's Committee. Like Phieu, Vuong has spent most of his career in the Central Party Office and the Supreme People's Procuratorate of Vietnam before leading the CIC. These experiences have familiarized him with party politics

but will also likely have created more enemies than friends for him. Another disadvantage is his age: Vuong will exceed the party's age limit for Politburo membership by 2021. This means that if he fails to secure the top post and thus becomes the "special candidate" to stay on, Vuong will have to retire.

As an experienced technocrat and two-term Politburo member, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc is a clear frontrunner. For the last two years, Phuc has shown his ambition by touring the country tirelessly to promote himself as a reformist. He has also tried to be more involved in ideological and theoretical issues such as party building, the ideology of Ho Chi Minh, and "building successful socialism" in Vietnam,¹⁹ something that had been less evident during the tenures of his predecessors, who concentrated mostly on governance. As the regime depends on economic performance for its legitimacy, his key advantage is the much-improved economic situation witnessed during his premiership since 2016. However, he will reach the age of sixty-six by 2021, and, more importantly, he is originally from the South. As noted above, no one from the former South Vietnam has ever become the VCP's supreme leader. Sustained rumours about his alleged corruption since the last congress might also damage his potential candidacy. In addition, his selection might destabilize the system in the sense that he is too powerful in comparison to his peers.²⁰ This was seen as the reason why his predecessor, Nguyen Tan Dung, was not supported by the CC during the 12th Congress.²¹

Pham Minh Chinh, who heads the Central Organization Commission (COC), is a younger candidate. Chinh has a solid record in governance as the former party chief of Quang Ninh, one of Vietnam's wealthiest provinces. During his time in that post he was known for promoting various economic and administrative reforms, including the much-discussed "unification" of party and government positions at the same administrative level. His current position, however, might weigh against him: there has never been a secretary general who was previously the head of the COC. A former COC head, Ho Duc Viet, was a favourite choice for the top post in the 11th Congress, but he eventually lost the race to Trong.²² Looking further back in history, Le Duc Tho was also prevented from taking the top post in 1986 because of fears over manipulation from other CC members. Tho, a Politburo member of thirty-one years, led the COC for more than twenty years and successfully controlled the whole cadre management system to the point that both Ho Chi Minh and Le Duan complained about his accumulated power.²³ Furthermore, the failure to put forward the Law on Special Economic Zones (SEZs), which sparked violent protests in Vietnam last year, has dented Chinh's credibility. Chinh was seen as the main promoter for the draft law, which involves building an SEZ in his stronghold of Quang Ninh.

There are other potential candidates, although the likelihood of them succeeding is minimal. Standing deputy PM Truong Hoa Binh is a southerner who exceeds the age limit and lacks local governing experience, since he only ascended through the ranks of the police force. In addition, it would be unlikely that he could leapfrog Phuc in the pecking order. Another deputy PM, Vuong Dinh Hue, had been clearly groomed for the premiership. Deputy PM and foreign minister Pham Binh Minh is a career diplomat, which would traditionally rule him out from the race. Hoang Trung Hai and Nguyen Thien Nhan, the party chiefs of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, respectively, are veterans of the system, but they have both suffered damage to their reputations. The former is said to have close connections with China, and has had his name implicated in some anti-corruption cases; the latter has been criticized for lacking the capability to govern effectively. Nhan will also exceed the age limit by 2021. The head of the Central Propaganda Commission, Vo Van Thuong, and the head of the Central Economic Commission, Nguyen Van Binh, are relatively young, and they may have to wait for their turn during the 14th Congress in 2026.

As such, the VCP seems to lack the “perfect” candidate for the post of secretary general in the upcoming congress. Most of the prominent choices have weaknesses, and selecting from among them would necessitate some bending of the formal and informal rules of succession. Breaking rules is not necessarily a bad thing, however, provided that the new ones are more institutionalized and guarantee fair competition for the top post. Unless Trong uses his power to push forward his preferred choice without adhering to the existing institutional framework, the likely outcome of this uncertainty will be a more competitive intra-party election mechanism in the VCP. In this sense, the Vietnamese regime seems to have more of an institutionalized power-sharing scheme than its communist neighbour China.

Vietnam’s Succession Politics: A Comparative Analysis with China

For survival, authoritarian regimes must solve the “twin problems” of power control and power sharing.²⁴ The former refers to how rulers control their population, while the latter refers to how ruling elites manage the relationships among themselves. Succession politics lies at the centre of power sharing and is among the most significant factors that determine authoritarian resilience. Political crises often arise in autocracies as a result of succession quarrels. On the other hand, the longevity of party-based authoritarian regimes is often attributed to the

existence of a norm-bound process of succession politics.²⁵ Both Vietnam and China, as the two longest-ruling communist regimes to survive, have each built a solid institutional arrangement for leadership transition since the late 1980s. Yet, a closer look reveals marked differences between the two regimes.

Succession politics in China tends to emphasize stability: the heir apparent is known well ahead of the National Party Congress at which the individual is supposed to be elected. For instance, Hu Jintao held the positions of successor-apparent (vice chairman of the Chinese Communist Party's [CCP] Central Military Commission and vice president) prior to replacing Jiang Zemin as the supreme leader in 2002.²⁶ There was a similar pattern for Xi Jinping in the run-up to the CCP's 18th Congress.

There are two symbiotic steps for leadership transition: the first deals with how the incumbent steps down, and the second with how the new leader is selected.²⁷ In China, the first step of leadership transition is institutionalized, but not the second. Since the third generation took power in 1992, exits from power in China have been smooth and orderly, thanks to term and age limits, as well as the balance of power among the ruling elites.²⁸ However, the selection of leaders is more unpredictable. The first two supreme leaders after the Tiananmen Square incident, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, were handpicked by Deng Xiaoping. The promotion of Xi Jinping in 2007 was a largely unknown process. Some observers have credited his ascension to the support he enjoys among party elders,²⁹ his alleged popular image,³⁰ his princeling origin,³¹ or even to luck.³² No matter the reason, it is unlikely this process will be repeated in the next congress, given the fact that the term limit for the presidency was abolished in 2018, which paves the way for Xi Jinping to retain his hold on power. Xi Jinping has also abandoned the practice of appointing the heir apparent, which was seen in the case of Hu Jintao and himself. The institutionalization of succession politics in China is therefore fragile and more vulnerable to personal manipulation.

On the other hand, leadership transition in Vietnam is more rule-bound and increasingly more impervious to personal intervention. The death of Le Duan at the threshold of the VCP's 6th National Congress, and the subsequent retirement of revolutionaries such as Nguyen Van Linh and Pham Van Dong, had the effect of freeing Vietnamese politics from the influence of party elders. There is no leader like Deng Xiaoping in Vietnam who enjoys such paramount influence to determine the next generation of leadership. The selection of leaders in Vietnamese politics is usually the outcome of hard-won bargains and competition among the ruling elites rather than an imposition from the top. It is much more unpredictable in the sense that no one would be able to claim to know the results until the very

last minute. Indeed, if we were to look at the various VCP congresses after Doi Moi, succession politics in Vietnam has been no less remarkable than those in a vibrant electoral democracy. Zachary Abuza has detailed the political struggle before the 8th Party Congress, where all the frontrunners were dismissed due to a lack of consensus over an acceptable candidate.³³ The VCP had to wait for another year after the 8th Congress to choose the new leader. The one chosen—Le Kha Phieu—eventually failed to even secure a post in the CC during the 9th Congress in 2001, as he lost support from all sides.³⁴ The compromise among ruling elites also led to the selection of Nong Duc Manh in the next two congresses (in 2001 and 2006). Malesky, Schuler and Tran have illustrated the race in the 11th Congress between the then NA chairman Nguyen Phu Trong and the head of the VCP's Central Economics Commission Truong Tan Sang,³⁵ while Vuving has described how a strong candidate like Ho Duc Viet can fall out of favour.³⁶ The most recent congress witnessed one of the most intense competitions in history, between the outgoing PM Nguyen Tan Dung and the incumbent party chief Nguyen Phu Trong.³⁷

Furthermore, exits from power in Vietnam have been smooth. Outgoing secretaries general respect the norms of term limits and generally abstain from meddling in party affairs after their retirement. This has been particularly true since 2001, when the powerful advisory commission to the CC—which had consisted of retired leaders with widespread influence—was abolished. The situation is different in China—for instance, Jiang Zemin continued to hold on to the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission two years after his retirement.

Since 1989, Vietnam has had five different party secretaries general, and only two among them have managed to be re-elected (Nong Duc Manh and Nguyen Phu Trong). Over the same period in China, however, there have only been three secretaries general, who have each ruled for ten years.

When discussing leadership change in one-party regimes, it is also important to examine not only the supreme leader but also the ruling elites, or what De Mesquita et al. call “the winning coalition”,³⁸ who collectively share power. In Vietnam the “winning coalition” refers to the Politburo, while in China it is the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC).³⁹ In the last six party congresses in the respective countries, the rate of holdover in Vietnam's ruling coalition has remained relatively stable, while for China it has fluctuated periodically according to the ten-year cycle that dictates when most of the PSC members would step down for a new generation of leadership. This pattern had clearly deteriorated by the 18th CCP Congress, when only two out of the seven PSC members retained their seats (President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang).

Thus it can be argued that while Vietnam maintains a stable ruling coalition and shuffles its leaders, China stabilizes the top posts and alternates the coalition. These characteristics have a huge impact on how power is shared among the ruling elites in Vietnam and China: the VCP seems to uphold the principle of collective leadership, while the CCP, particularly under Xi Jinping, tends to move towards more personalization.

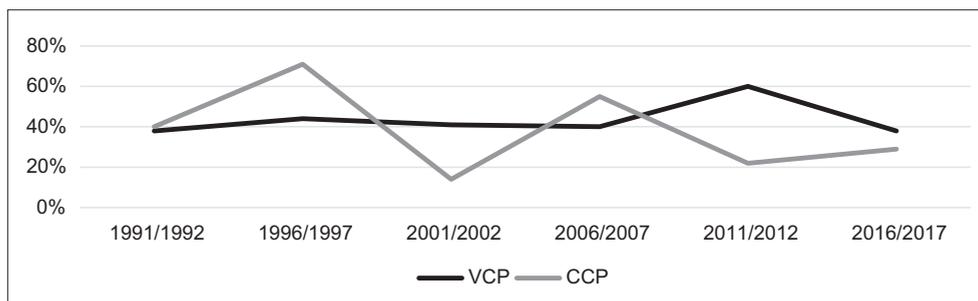
What Is To Be Done?

Trong's tenure has been one of the most exciting periods in Vietnamese politics for decades. His rule is illustrated by two contradictory tendencies: while power is being increasingly consolidated in his hands, Trong has been laying the foundation for a more norm-bound process of succession politics. He was the mastermind behind Decision 244, which institutionalizes party elections at all levels, as well as Regulation 90, which determines the criteria for candidates aspiring for the top leadership position. Although there have been some concerns that Decision 244 has a negative effect on the VCP's intra-party democracy, particularly in emphasizing majoritarian views and enhancing the power of the outgoing steering committee in nominating candidates, it has the benefit of making the election to the top party post more procedural and competitive.

Trong's legacy, however, will depend on the person who succeeds him. The new leader might continue Trong's agenda for further intra-party democracy, but he could also imitate his quest of centralizing power. The latter scenario would destabilize Vietnam's relative balance of power among the elites and put the regime at risk of intense infighting. Trong is a committed party loyalist and a relatively clean politician, or at least he is widely perceived to be by his comrades. He has exercised power not for personal gain but to purify a party decaying from corruption and abuses of power. However, a younger successor with a longer time horizon might not be as committed to such ideals. Instead, he might take advantage of his position to enrich his family and cronies, as most autocratic rulers are wont to do.

Trong is aware of this risk. During his tenure the VCP has tried to uphold the principle of collective leadership by introducing different mechanisms for checks and balances, such as confidence voting for the top leadership⁴⁰ and increasing the supervisory power of the Central Inspection Commission. However, as previous congresses have shown, the ultimate tool to hold a leader accountable is the fear of being voted out. As a result, the key to maintain the regime's stability is to implement and adhere to a highly institutionalized election procedure that

FIGURE 1
Holdover Rates in Ruling Coalitions in Vietnam and China, 1991–2017



Note: Ruling coalitions are the Politburo in Vietnam and the Politburo Standing Committee in China.

Source: Compilation by the author.

provides the “selectorate” with the necessary tools to elevate good leaders and eliminate bad ones. The VCP has been deliberating on a potential rule that would allow congress delegates to vote directly for the secretary general,⁴¹ instead of the current delegate mechanism. Such a move has been trialled in several provinces since 2010,⁴² but it has yet to be applied at the central level. If Trong can push through this practice at the 13th Congress or, even better, institutionalize it in the party constitution or through a CC regulation, it might prove to be his biggest legacy, along with his popular anti-corruption campaign.

Notes

1. The author would like to thank Xavier Marquez, Xiaoming Huang, Roberto Rabel and Malcolm McKinnon from Victoria University of Wellington for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. All remaining errors are my own.
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3. Zachary Abuza, “Leadership Transition in Vietnam since the Eighth Party Congress: The Unfinished Congress”, *Asian Survey* 38, no. 12 (1998): 1105–21.
4. Duc Minh, “Ông Đinh La Thăng chịu mức án chung 30 năm tù” [Dinh La Thang is sentenced 30 years in prison], *Phap luat*, 27 June 2018, <https://plo.vn/phap-luat/ong-dinh-la-thang-chiu-muc-an-chung-30-nam-tu-778546.html>.
5. Le Dan, “Vụ Trịnh Xuân Thanh: kỷ luật bí thư, nguyên bí thư tỉnh ủy Hậu Giang” [Trinh Xuan Thanh case: Discipline the party chief and former party chief of Hau Giang], *Tuoi tre*, 2018, <https://tuoitre.vn/vu-trinh-xuan-thanh-ky-luat-bi-thu-nguyen-bi-thu-tinh-uy-hau-giang-1243477.htm>.

6. Article 10, VCP Constitution at 4th Congress (1976). This article was kept until the 7th Party Congress (1991), when it was rewritten in mostly the same way, but the word *dan chu* (democratic) was removed. There is no clear explanation for this change, but the Central Committee's Report on party building and the amendment of the party institution of the VCP 6th Congress suggests that there were concerns of "overly-democratic" tendencies that might lead to chaos. This implies a more cautious approach of the 7th Congress on political reforms after five years of Doi Moi. Indeed, in the 6th VCP institution *dan chu* appeared fifteen times, but it only appeared five times in the 7th VCP institution.
7. Article 17, VCP Constitution at the 11th Congress (2011).
8. Nguyen Duc Ha, "Một số điểm mới của Quy chế bầu cử trong Đảng" [Some new amendments on the party's election regulation], Vietnam Communist Party, 18 July 2014, <http://www.cpv.org.vn/tieu-diem/mot-so-diem-moi-cua-quy-che-bau-cu-trong-dang-257568.html>.
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