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Background Brief:

Vietnam's Party Secretary General

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We have received reports that Nguyen Phu Trong seems likely to stay in office for a third term. Many reports suggest this will make him the most powerful figures in decades. Do you agree with this assessment? And what can we expect from his third term?

ANSWER: If Nguyen Phu Trong is elected to a third term in office this would be unprecedented in the era of *đổi mới* (renovation). Since the landmark Sixth National Party Congress in December 1986 there have been five party secretary generals, only two of whom have served two full 5-year terms in office, Nong Duc Manh (2001-2011) and Nguyen Phu Trong (2011-2021).

Secretary General Trong was given an exemption from the mandatory retirement age of 65 in 2016 at the 12th national party congress. He has been given a second exemption this year. This too is unprecedented.

Secretary General Trong has proven adept at revising the rules and creating new ones that are applicable to holding membership on the Central Committee, Secretariat, Politburo and the four top leadership posts – party Secretary General, state President, Prime Minister and Chair of the National Assembly.

Trong used these amended rules in 2016 to prevent Nguyen Tan Dung, the then prime minister, from contesting the leadership of the party. Dung had completed two terms as prime minister and was not eligible to stay in office. Dung's attempt to stand for party leader was unprecedented as prevailing norms dictated that he retire. Trong, in the words of David Brown, a Vietnamese speaking retired American diplomat, forged an "anything but Dung" coalition and prevailed.

In his second term in office, Trong launched a determined anti-corruption campaign (known colloquially as the "blazing furnace/incinerate to ashes") that netted high-level party officials, including two members of the Politburo (both were expelled from the party and one is now in prison), a deputy minister of national defence, and high-level officials in the Ministry of Public Security. By some accounts, the anti-corruption campaign netted more than 100 party officials that came under the authority of the central party apparatus (as distinct from provincial level).

Secretary General Trong has also played a key role focusing on "party-building" and the selection of "strategic cadres" as future leaders. "Party-building" is a term that

embraces recruitment, education and training, ideological moulding, ethical standards, regular review and evaluation, and career development.

Secretary General Trong suffered a stroke in 2019 and may have been ill in 2020. He is also 76 years of age. These are seen by some as liabilities.

Trong's duties include grooming his successor. He attempted to advance his protégé, Tran Quoc Vuong, the second in command of the anti-corruption campaign and the head of the Central Committee's Organisation Committee. At the 14th plenum a majority of the Central Committee pushed back and Vuong's name was withdrawn as a candidate for party leader. This was viewed by some as a sign that Trong's power was waning.

However, Trong engineered a come-back by mustering support for a second exemption from the retirement age and his retention for a third term as party leader. He has effectively neutered possible rivals. Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, who has just completed his first term in office and would need an exemption from the retirement age to serve a second term, has been "kicked upstairs" into the office of state president. His vacancy is not being filled by Vuong Dinh Hue, Deputy Prime Minister in charge of economic affairs, as has been the norm, but by Pham Minh China, an official whose career is rooted in the party apparatus and public security ministry. Deputy Prime Minister Hue has been shunted aside as Chair of the National Assembly.

Delegates to the 13th National Congress have been given a three-day period ending 31 January to review and vote on nominations to the next Central Committee. The results will be announced on Sunday, 31 January. The new Central Committee will hold its first plenary session on 2 February and elect a 19-member Politburo and party Secretary General. It will then become clear if Trong has managed once again to assemble a coalition to support his leadership.

We can expect Trong to continue to push his "blazing furnace" and party-building campaigns in his third term. In addition, we can expect a continuing crackdown on dissenting voices in the online social media.

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