

Diplomat
8 February 2021

Nguyen Phu Trong: The Best Choice to Lead Vietnam's Communist Party

His reappointment for a third term will help Vietnam hold fast to its current political and economic trajectory.

By Phuong Pham

At the start of this month, the 13th National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) announced its appointments to the country's main leadership positions for the next five years. Most notably, Nguyen Phu Trong was re-elected as the VCP's General Secretary, despite having already served two consecutive terms. This may raise questions about whether Trong can serve out his new term, given his deteriorating health. However, in Vietnam's current political and economic landscape, Trong's staying may be more pro than con for Vietnam.

At first glance, the re-election of Trong will stabilize Vietnam's political landscape over the next five years. This year marks 35 years since its doi moi economic reforms were introduced in 1986, a period that has seen the country make significant economic and social achievements. From the Party's perspective, it is imperative that the country maintain this progress running up to the important 40th anniversary of doi moi in 2026. This entails maintaining the country's political and economic stability, something that requires consistent policies and orientations over the next five years. To this extent, Trong's re-election may help. During his previous two terms, Vietnam's economy performed relatively well. The country has witnessed a relatively high GDP growth rate since 2011, when Trong was first elected as party chief, an average of approximately 6.4 percent per year. Remarkably, in 2020, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks to the VCP's efforts Vietnam has enjoyed a positive growth of 1.6 percent and overtaken the Philippines in terms of GDP per capita. Trong's continuation as VCP head could help Vietnam maintain this economic momentum.

In addition, Trong's continuation in power could be beneficial for the VCP's political legitimacy. This may be counter-intuitive, given that some analysts have criticized the VCP for Vietnam's abysmal records on human rights, corruption, and transparency, all of which could undermine its popular legitimacy. Nevertheless, Vietnam has witnessed improvement in all of these realms during Trong's two terms. For example, the "blazing furnace" anti-corruption campaign launched by Trong in 2016 has prosecuted and disciplined many senior Party members. Most recently, the general secretary asserted that he would further step up the crackdown on graft inside the Party if granted a third term. During the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks to its relative transparency, Vietnam has managed to contain the virus effectively compared to other countries in the region. Regarding human rights, despite its severe shortcomings, Vietnam has been working to promote and protect human rights, and has made numerous achievements so far. All of

these grant the VCP, and more specifically Trong, a degree of legitimacy to lead the country.

Before the 13th Congress, there were rumors that Trong would step down from his position, and that Tran Quoc Vuong, a standing member of the VCP Secretariat, would take his place. Nonetheless, Vuong is far less highly regarded than Trong due to his insufficient experience, and whether he would command the same degree of legitimacy, or perform to the same level, is questionable. In this light, Trong's re-election may ensure, at least partially, that the VCP is still able to implement its previous policies effectively, which is necessary to maintain and strengthen its political legitimacy.

Trong's third term as party chief may also help Vietnam on the foreign policy front. Granted, although the VCP, under Trong's tenure, has been criticized for being repressive, it has in fact leveraged Vietnam's international prestige quite effectively. For instance, Vietnam, during its chairmanship of ASEAN in 2020, was praised for leading the bloc effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating its responsibility as a member of the international community. As a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Vietnam has also performed well, undertaking initiatives and activities that help maintain and promote a stable global environment.

Since 2011, Vietnam has deepened its bilateral relations with many countries, including major powers such as the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, as well as successfully negotiated and signed new free trade agreements, most notably the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement. Given these achievements, the re-election of Trong is likely to see Vietnam proceed on its current foreign policy trajectory, perhaps paving the way for the country to become an active middle power.

To be sure, there are some doubts surrounding Trong's ability to see out his full five-year term. To begin with, the general secretary's health is fragile and may be a hindrance. But there are signs that this may be getting better. First of all, Trong has participated in and made speeches at several important events since the beginning of 2020, showing that his condition has improved. More importantly, as the highest leader of the Party, Trong has access to the best healthcare services, ensuring that his health remains good enough for him to lead the Party, and if necessary, to find and train a successor should he decide to step down before 2026.

Before the 13th National Congress, some analysts expressed concern that another term for Trong might create a precedent of which Vietnam's future leaders could take advantage. The VCP's Charter states that no person can hold the position of general secretary more than twice. Hence, the re-election of Trong would seem to require an amendment to the charter. However, this was not the case. At the end of the Congress, the Central Committee agreed not to amend the charter, and allowed Trong's re-election on the basis of a clause allowing the term limit to be suspended in "special cases." In the foreseeable future, there is unlikely to be any amendments of the two-term limit, as the

VCP – and even Trong himself – may be well aware of the consequences. Specifically, if the VCP amends this provision, it will face with a higher level of criticism, both domestic and international, which could substantially tarnish the VCP’s image. For this reason, it is too soon to conclude that the re-election of Trong will be harmful for the future of the VCP, and by extension, the future of Vietnam.

Another potential argument is that the re-election of Trong would lead to the tightening of domestic political space and the increasing repression of dissidents. This argument is problematic, in several aspects. Trong has been roundly criticized for tightening political space, arresting and imprisoning dissidents and journalists during his tenure, so it may be inferred that he will step up these tasks in his third term. Nevertheless, this is questionable, as it could be a double-edge sword for Trong’s legitimacy in his upcoming term. Accordingly, if he increases the level of repression, he would likely face even more dissent, which is detrimental to his prestige and makes it more difficult for the VCP to implement its policies. Furthermore, the increasing repression could be harmful for Vietnam’s economic development, which is a crucial task for Trong and his Party to retain political legitimacy. Indeed, with the signing of new FTAs that require more comprehensive domestic political reforms, the ruling party may compromise or re-negotiate in order to fully reap the economic benefits from these FTAs, laying a more solid foundation for the VCP’s power.

The next five years will be critical for Vietnam’s achievement of its socio-economic and political goals. Due to the current situation of the Party and the country, an additional term for Trong as the Party’s leader, contentious though it may be, is necessary to ensure Vietnam’s conducive domestic environment and its continued economic and social development.

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