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A New Era of Turbulence and Uncertainty in Vietnamese Politics

The removal of a sitting Politburo member hints at more profound changes at the top echelons of the party-state.

By **Hai Hong Nguyen**

During the closing days of 2022, Hanoi faced the cold of winter. At the same time, the 180 official members and 20 alternate members of the Central Committee of the ruling Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) faced something like the opposite: a withering heat from the Ba Dinh compound, the seat of political power in Vietnam, on whose sentiments political careers rise and fall.

On December 30, the VCP Central Committee held a half-day extraordinary meeting, the second of its kind since the body began its five-year term in 2021. At the meeting, it made the decision to remove from its membership two deputy prime ministers, Pham Binh Minh and Vu Duc Dam. For Minh, his membership in the VCP Politburo was consequently terminated. A state-controlled media release made immediately after the meeting did not mention a reason for the removal, which surprised many in the Vietnamese public, prompting rumors about infighting within the party following a comment by Vo Van Thuong, a Politburo member, and the standing member of the Secretariat, at a conference in Hanoi. According to Thuong, the body needs to create pressures within the party, to force officials allegedly responsible for wrongdoings to step down.

Although the state-controlled media release did not reveal the reason for the removals, the “left-wing” media – that is, the social media uncontrolled by the state – linked the departure of Minh and Dam to recent corruption scandals involving the COVID-19 testing kits manufactured and supplied by the firm Viet A Technologies and the repatriation flights for Vietnamese citizens stranded overseas during the pandemic. Indeed, when several high-ranking officials were arrested in relation to these two “grand corruption and bribery cases,” fingers were pointed at Dam and Minh for their respective responsibility and accountability. Thus far, 102 individuals involved in the Viet A case have been arrested, including former Health Minister Nguyen Thanh Long, the former Chairman of Hanoi Municipal People’s Committee Chu Ngoc Anh, and the former secretary of the Hai Duong Provincial Party Committee, Pham Xuan Thang. Before their arrest, all three men were members of the VCP Central Committee and have since been expelled from the party. In November, Dam’s personal assistant was arrested and expelled from the party after being charged with “abusing the public office and power when executing the duty” to benefit Viet A Technologies.

In the repatriation flight case, 38 individuals across eight ministries, sectors, and enterprises, have been arrested and prosecuted. Of these, 10 individuals were from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), including an incumbent deputy minister, a former Vietnamese ambassador to Japan, and other high-ranking officials. On December 27, the VCP Politburo and Secretariat, chaired by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, who has spearheaded the so-called [“furnace firing”](#) (*dot lo*) anti-graft campaign since 2013, offered stern criticism to the incumbent foreign

minister, [Bui Thanh Son](#). It also offered an official warning, the second severest form of discipline for a party body as per the rules of the VCP, to the MOFA Party Caucus of the 2016-2021 term in relation to the COVID-19 repatriation flights. Son is also a member of the VCP Central Committee. Notably, Minh was the minister and the head of the MOFA Party Caucus during the 2016-2021 term. On September 27, his personal assistant was arrested and prosecuted for taking bribes in organizing the flights. According to the Ministry of Public Security, nearly 2,000 repatriation flights were organized and each of the flights earned 2 billion Vietnamese dong, or approximately \$85,000.

Apparently the departure of Minh and Dam leaves their positions vacant. However, it is not just about the vacancy of the positions, it is about who will replace them and do the job better. According to the statement released after the Central Committee's extraordinary meeting, the meeting gathered opinions on two candidates whom the Politburo will recommend for the National Assembly to appoint as deputy prime ministers. Ten days before the meeting, the Standing Committee of the National Assembly had already planned to hold a five-day extraordinary session, commencing on January 5, to make decision on important issues including personnel work that requires the National Assembly's approval. This implies that the removal of Minh and Dam, as well as the selection of those who will take over their jobs, had already been planned for at least several months.

The public will now be curious to know who these two potential replacement candidates are. Given that Minh was the standing deputy prime minister and a Politburo member, the candidate who will replace him must also be a Politburo member. Technically, there are five candidates who are suitable for this job with relevant experience in the government. These include the Minister of Public Security To Lam, the chief justice of the Supreme People's Court, Nguyen Hoa Binh, the chairperson of the Central Commission for Economic Affairs, Tran Tuan Anh, the chairperson of the Central Commission for Internal Affairs, and the Secretary of the Ho Chi Minh City Municipal Party Committee, Nguyen Van Nen.

However, one area of expertise that these candidates do not have fully to fill the gap caused by Minh's departure is experience in foreign affairs. In this space, the one candidate that emerges as being able to cover the gap is Le Hoai Trung, currently the chairperson of the Central Commission for External Affairs. Trung is also a former deputy foreign minister, a career diplomat, and a close aide to Minh. The one issue is that Trung is not a Politburo member. So, if Trung is promoted to the rank of deputy prime-minister, there are two possibilities. The first possibility is that he will be elevated to the Politburo or the Secretariat. The second possibility is that for the first time since Doi Moi in 1986 a deputy prime minister in charge of external economics and affairs will not also be a member of the Politburo or of the Secretariat.

Whomever among the above candidates is elevated to replace Minh and Dam next week, it is certain that there will be a re-division of the duties and responsibilities among the four deputy prime ministers. But even after their installment, their political careers will be uncertain unless they gain one of the key positions known as the "four pillars": that of VCP general secretary, state president, prime minister, or the chairperson of the National Assembly. Vietnamese politics is like a chess board, on which each member of the Central Committee is a chess piece – and on which it is always very risky to play.

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