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Vietnamese Communist Party Removes Former FM From Politburo

Pham Binh Minh's removal came amid a crackdown on a wide-ranging corruption scandal involving COVID-19 repatriation flights.

By Sebastian Strangio

Late last week, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) removed Deputy Prime Minister Pham Binh Minh from the Politburo, its apex decision-making body, amid an unfurling corruption scandal involving his former ministry.

Vietnamese state media reported that the VCP Central Committee voted to remove Minh, along with a fellow committee member, Deputy Prime Minister Vu Duc Dam. As a result, Minh, who served as Vietnam's foreign minister from 2011 until April 2021 and is the deputy prime minister in charge of foreign affairs and diplomacy, will also lose his position on the 18-member Politburo, which is elected from among the 200 members of the Central Committee.

According to the state media reports, the pair will stay on as deputy prime ministers.

While the body did not provide a public reason for the rare removals (and state media reports certainly did not hazard any guesses), they came amid a concerted government crackdown on a number of COVID-19-related corruption scandals that have indicted dozens of mid- and high-ranking government and party officials.

Last month, the VCP's Central Inspection Committee recommended that the Politburo and the Central Committee's Secretariat discipline the entire Ministry of Foreign Affairs, up to and including the current minister, Bui Thanh Son, over a wide-ranging corruption scandal involving government-organized COVID-19 repatriation flights.

The scandal involved officials charging Vietnamese citizens extort fees for seats on around 400 repatriation flights arranged for those stranded abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic. The funds thus garnered, which are estimated to have exceeded \$200 million, were then appropriated by corrupt officials.

So far, more than 35 people from the foreign ministry and other ministries have been arrested over the scheme, including high-ranking officials like former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs To Anh Dung and former ambassador to Japan, Vu Hong Nam.

This came months after the VCP expelled several officials for involvement in a scandal involving the procurement of overpriced COVID-19 test kits, which netted an estimated \$172 million for those involved.

It is highly unusual for a member of the Politburo to be removed outside the five-yearly VCP National Party Congress, the next of which is not scheduled to take place until 2026. While it remains unclear whether Minh was directly involved in either of the above scandals, the fact that his unusual removal from the Central Committee followed so closely on the heels of the Central Inspection Committee's recommendation, suggests that the two events are connected.

According to a report by the state-run Voice of Vietnam, the purge of officials might well extend further, with the outlet claiming that the country's National Assembly is scheduled to hold an extraordinary session in Hanoi on Thursday. It stated that the meeting will address "several urgent issues, including personnel."

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