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Not until June, after a week of holidays and a year behind most of east Asia, did Covid-19 break loose in Vietnam. Until then, aggressive contact tracing had held the pandemic at bay and allowed the economy to keep growing. Perhaps those successes had prompted a false sense of security. In the event, the party-state had almost no vaccine in inventory, which gave it no choice but to enforce a draconian lockdown in Ho Chi Minh City and surrounding provinces while it negotiated urgently for vaccine.

By September, however, doses were plentiful and the regime, spooked by signs that some manufacturing orders were being re-routed away from Vietnam, declared that the nation would "live with Covid." Hanoi's gamble seems to have paid off. After contracting sharply in 2021's 3rd quarter, the Vietnamese economy revived in the 4th. For the whole year; the nation posted GDP growth of 2.6% and now seems poised to return in 2022 to its accustomed 6% plus annual growth rate.

2021 had begun with the Communist Party's 13th Congress, the ceremonial end to months of intra-Party politicking aimed at renewing the leadership and reconfirming party doctrine. In the months before the congress it became apparent that General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's favorite had no chance of winning the CPV Central Committee's approval. Rather than yield party leadership to Nguyen Xuan Phuc, who was then the prime minister, Trong manipulated internal rules to effect his own re-election for a third five-year term and install another 'party faction' figure, Pham Minh Chinh, as prime minister. Phuc and another 'government faction' standout, Vuong Dinh Hue, were relegated to the relatively powerless posts of State President and National Assembly leader.

Trong is now 78 years old, and intent on cementing his legacy. Since 2016, he's made history as a relentless foe of corruption. Notable in 2021 were the sacking of the Hanoi party chief for forgery and money laundering, further prosecutions of individuals linked to the former HCM City party boss, and a wholesale purge of senior coast guard officers.

Trong has sought also to rid the CPV of the heresy of 'self-evolution' (the idea that the Party might lead Vietnam step-by-step to more inclusive decision-making and broader participation in government by non-Party-affiliated groups). However, he's running short on time; poor health may force the General Secretary to step down before his term is up in 2026. Close observers of CPV politics say that just in case, Chinh, Hue and Phuc are again canvassing votes.

The regime continued to cleanse Vietnam's public space of citizens it perceives as rabble-rousers. Troubadour-journalist Pham Doan Trang, sentenced in December to nine years' imprisonment, was only one of many convicted in 2021 of "conducting propaganda against the state." In parallel, harsh sentences meted out to farmers accused of mounting an insurrection put land rights activists on notice that resistance to expropriations is futile.

Also in December, after exposes that made headlines abroad, Facebook vowed to cease enabling regime efforts to suppress on-line criticism by Vietnamese bloggers. This development bears watching; Hanoi has in the past brought foreign social media to heel simply by squeezing their local advertising revenues.

Now that the leaders of the once robust 'democracy movement' are in jail or in exile (and most of the remnants are seemingly obsessed by Donald Trump), it's hard to see why the regime doesn't ease up. Prime Minister Chinh in particular seems to have been stung by criticism of the regime's record

on political liberties. Several times toward the end of the year, he told reporters that human rights in Vietnam are not as imagined in the West. The party-state's job, he said, is ensuring that the nation's 100 million citizens are comfortable and happy, secure in the knowledge that the nation's politics are under good management and that in times of crisis, none are left behind.

During 2021, Vietnam's decades-old "no foreign alliances" policy was further stressed by the contentious relationship between China, on one hand, and the United States and its Asian allies on the other. When the US secretary of defense and then the vice president visited Hanoi in August, they urged that Vietnam consider a broadly-based "strategic partnership" with the United States. As the year ended, credible accounts were circulating that Vietnam's top leadership has reached consensus in principle on upgrading ties with the US but, worried how China will react, they remain hesitant to formalize an agreement.

Two scandals rang out 2021 in Vietnam. One was merely obscene: cell phone photos showed General To Lam, the Minister of Public Security, being fed bites of a gold foil-wrapped beefsteak at a posh London restaurant.

The second scandal centered on Viet A, a hitherto obscure supplier of medical equipment. The company was revealed to have charged disease control centers in several provinces jaw-droppingly high prices for Covid-19 test kits -- something impossible without under-the-table payments and collusion throughout the supply chain. It was the sort of thing that periodically sows doubt in the integrity of Vietnam's "socialist market economy." As 2022 began, the CPV's powerful Anti-Corruption Steering Committee and police units were probing the involvement -- evidently lucrative -- of high officials in the Ministries of Health and Science and Technology.