

Vietnam picks new PM and president for next 5 years

New prime minister Chinh vows to 'inherit and promote achievements'

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HANOI -- Vietnam's parliament on Monday elected Pham Minh Chinh, head of the Communist Party's Central Organization Committee, as prime minister, replacing Nguyen Xuan Phuc who will take on the largely ceremonial post of president.

The new leadership will try to keep the economy of the communist nation growing solidly -- a rarity during the pandemic -- and is expected to remain in power for the next five years.

"The Prime Minister clearly recognizes his responsibility in inheriting and promoting the achievements [of the previous government]," Chinh, 62, said in his first speech after he was elected prime minister at 3:50 p.m. local time. He also vowed to resolutely and firmly defend the country's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Tensions between Vietnam and China have been growing in the South China Sea.

Phuc was also elected as the president earlier Monday. Chinh is set to form a new cabinet after assuming his post.

On April 7 and 8, the National Assembly will dissolve the current government and approve the appointment of some members of the new government, according to local news platform Vnexpress. The current government has 26 members, including four deputy prime ministers and 21 ministers and heads of branches.

During the 13th National Party Congress held in Hanoi from Jan. 25 to Feb. 1, the party reelected Nguyen Phu Trong, 76, as general secretary, the nation's top job, for an unprecedented third term.

Chinh, a native of the northern province of Thanh Hoa, has mainly served public security positions and was elected to the 18-member Politburo -- the country's highest-ranking party -- in the 12th National Party Congress held in 2016.

Chinh's promotion is in line with Hanoi's recent moves to muzzle the press and closely monitor social media in response to heightened tensions in Asia, including Hong Kong, Thailand, and Myanmar, local analysts said. Meanwhile, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Trong Nghia, who oversaw the 10,000-member army cyber unit that monitors political comment on social media, has been appointed as head of the Commission for Propaganda and Education of the Central Committee.

In his speech, Chinh vowed to maintain Hanoi's anti-corruption push, a key Trong initiative during his past two terms. The government will "proactively prevent, resolutely and persistently step up the fight against corruption, waste, bureaucracy and negativity with stronger, stricter and more effective mechanisms and solutions," the new prime minister said.

"Vietnam wants to keep social and political stability to maintain an annual economic growth rate of about 6% for the near future," said Ngo Vinh Long, professor of Asian History at the University of Maine.

Chinh is relatively inexperienced at high-level government dealings and it remains to be seen if his diverse background will enable him to be an effective prime minister, Carl Thayer, professor at the University of New South Wales said.

Chinh spent his first twelve years in low-level posts starting in 1984 as a researcher in the Ministry of Home Affairs and diplomat in Romania. "He then served in the Ministry of Public Security beginning in 1996 in various capacities before becoming deputy minister in 2010. He then served at the provincial level, spending four years in Quang Ninh and rising to party secretary. His career took a turn in 2015 when he was posted to Hanoi as deputy and chairman of the party's Organization Commission as well as a member of the Secretariat," according to Thayer.

Vietnam's political leadership has four pillars: Communist Party chief, president, prime minister and chair of the National Assembly, the country's parliament.

As the new president, Phuc -- who has been credited for keeping the nation's economy on a steady upward trajectory despite the pandemic -- will be the country's top diplomat.

Trong, de facto leader of the single-party state, has concurrently been serving as president since the previous leader, Tran Dai Quang, died in office in 2018.

At the end of March, the National Assembly appointed Hanoi Party chief Vuong Dinh Hue, 64, as its new chairman.

The priority for Hanoi's new leadership will be focused on the economy as Vietnam seeks to emerge from the pandemic. The four pillars need to maintain high growth rates to build trust with the general public, Duong Quoc Chinh, a Hanoi-based political analyst told Nikkei Asia.

"What is clear is that Chinh has the support of a large number of members of the Central Committee," Thayer said. "Chinh's immediate priorities have already been determined: defeating the coronavirus pandemic and kick-starting Vietnam's economic recovery."

Trade is the largest component of the Vietnamese economy. "In the longer term, Vietnam will have to focus on meeting its obligations by implementing the multilateral and bilateral free trade agreements it has negotiated," Thayer said.

"Priority needs to be given to the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, Europe-Vietnam FTA, Vietnam-Eurasian Economic Union FTA and the Vietnam-U.K. and Northern Ireland FTA," he added.

"To maintain growth, the new government will still pay most attention to attracting foreign direct investment through multilateral relations, taking advantage of every bilateral and multilateral agreement Vietnam has signed," said Duong Quoc Chinh.

Vietnam's trade surplus with the U.S. during the first 10 months of 2020 was almost \$51 billion, prompting Washington to accuse Hanoi of manipulating its currency. "This is not a huge problem for both countries, as the two sides have agreed to keep open doors on the issue and keep talking," said Ngo Vinh.

Much more intractable for both the U.S. and Vietnam is China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea, Long said. "The United States, on the other hand, needs cooperation with Vietnam and other coastal Southeast Asian countries for legitimacy if it wants to help contain China's incessant intrusion into the South China Sea," he said.

