DIPLOMAT
7 January 2020

Vietnam's 13th Congress: Institutional Resilience or Institutional Decay?

This month's Communist Party conclave is set to determine more than just who occupies the top positions.

By Nguyen Khac Giang

Other than the date – which is set for January 25 – little is clear about the all-important 13th National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), which is due to select the country's new generation of leadership for the next five years. Vietnam observers have been weighing different possibilities about who is going to succeed Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong – the most powerful Vietnamese leader since the death of Le Duan in 1986. Tran Quoc Vuong, Trong's right-hand man and the standing member of the VCP Secretariat is seen by many as the leading candidate, but his potential competitor, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, is also a solid challenger thanks to his strong performance in economic management and the fight against COVID-19.

Yet betting on a candidate in Vietnamese politics is tricky, not least because of its high degree of uncertainty and internal competition in comparison to other communist states like China or Laos. Most credible analysts got it wrong in the last Congress in 2016, when Nguyen Phu Trong successfully maintained his seat over the then powerful Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung. It is understandable why Vietnam watchers are keen on the leadership transition aspect of the quinquennial congresses; however, the events offer more insights than just gripping competitions for top positions.

The 13th Congress is in fact not an isolated, one-off event: the week-long gathering in Hanoi later this month is the result of a year-long cascade of party elections at all four levels of government – commune, district, provincial, and central – which elected more than 1,500 elite Party members to the National Congress. The VCP often treats those elections as experimental platforms for institutional reforms, which will be eventually applied to the highest level (i.e. the election of the post of General Secretary) if they are considered successful. In this sense, there are two significant developments that are worth noting.

First, direct voting was piloted nationwide in 11 percent of commune and district level elections. The standard election procedure in a communist system is based on the principle of "democratic centralism," which depends on a system of delegation: congresses at lower levels of government vote for Party committees, which then vote to select the Party secretary for the respective level. The same process applies to the National Congress's selection of the Central Committee, the Politburo, and the General Secretary. This conventional method guarantees stability but is prone to manipulation, because only a small number of Party members have a voice in the selection process. With the new method, the "selectorate" is expanded, bringing with it the exciting uncertainty of electoral competition, which is otherwise rarely available in a one-party system like Vietnam's.

Direct elections at congresses have been promoted by Party theorists for some time, with the first pilot at the provincial level taking place in Danang 10 years ago. However, the idea was never

realized on such a large scale until last year. The usual cautious approach of the VCP to political reform suggests that we might have to wait for at least one more congress (from 2026 onward) to see whether the new voting principle is applied at the national level. Yet the prospect of 1,500 delegates voting to choose the Party leader from (nominally) two candidates would be huge leap forward for Vietnamese politics, and well worth the wait.

Second, 43 percent of the new provincial party chiefs – which occupy the largest section in the Central Committee – are under 50 years old. They represent a generation that has grown up in an era of market reforms, tends to be less ideologically rigid, and is more open to universal values than war-seasoned conservatives. They will definitely play a crucial part in the policy making process in the new term, and those excelling at their position will emerge as the contenders for the leadership transition in 2026.

These new developments proceed in line with the institutionalization process initiated by the VCP since the 8th Congress in 1996, when first-generation revolutionaries retreated to make room for the younger leadership and to ensure that intra-party democracy remained intact. At that time, the Central Committee set a rule requiring all Politburo members over the age of 65 to retire in order to guarantee a smooth transition of power. The rule leaves only one "special exemption," usually reserved for the most important posts, though in practice applied unevenly. In 2001, for instance, then General Secretary Le Kha Phieu was dethroned nominally because he exceeded the age limit, while the exemption allowed Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, then 68, to remain in the Politburo. In 2016, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung was unable to stand for selection due to his age, while Nguyen Phu Trong was granted a special exemption.

Nevertheless, this rule is now in peril. This year's competition is so intense that there is a proposal that two – or even three – special exemptions should be granted. Those prominent candidates are Tran Quoc Vuong (68 years old), Nguyen Xuan Phuc (67), National Assembly Chairwoman Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan (67), and Nguyen Phu Trong (77). As the current Party chief and the head of the Congress' Personnel Commission, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong has the power to dictate the rules of the game, including setting the number of exemptions. Having more exemptions will allow him to plant his favorite candidate Tran Quoc Vuong, or himself, in the General Secretary post without too much protest. However, this move could potential undermine or undo the Party's institutionalization efforts, dismantle its unity, and set a dangerous precedent: Party strongmen in the next Congress will have legitimate reasons to cling onto power.

More importantly, a smaller number of senior retirements means less seats to be filled. The career cascade – which runs from the central to the grassroots level – will thus come to a grinding halt. For the younger generation of leadership – including the aforementioned new provincial Party chiefs – this prospect is certainly undesirable. First, the game of musical chairs will be much more intense, which could lead to further factionalization inside the VCP. Second, younger cadres may have less motivation to perform, knowing that their efforts will be less likely to be rewarded with promotion. For a regime that champions performance-based legitimacy, this could be a disastrous side-effect. The VCP might risk going down the path of institutional decay that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union experienced under Leonid Brezhnev in the 1970s, when the average age of its Politburo members was over 70. The stagnant leadership made the superpower unable to adapt and reform quickly enough, presaging its eventual collapse in 1991.

As a result, the main focus of this month's Congress is not only about who would be the next leaders, but also about how the VCP – and General Secretary Trong himself – solves two pressing contradictions of its institutional arrangements.