

DIPLOMAT
27-9-19

Is Vietnam's Trong Still Going Strong?

The state of the president and communist party chief's health could have major implications for Vietnamese politics.

By David Hutt

About eleven months ago, it was announced that, astonishingly, Vietnamese Communist Party chief Nguyen Phu Trong would become the new state president, following the death of the incumbent. Not since the 1960s had an official held both positions concurrently, and it came as a sign that Vietnamese politics could be changing rapidly and unexpectedly.

Just a few months later, in April 2019, Trong (aged 75) was rushed to hospital, suspected of having suffered a stroke. There are claims that he is now slightly paralyzed down one arm. The Communist Party was naturally tight-lipped about this, and would only say he was in poor health, though more along the lines of stress than a terminal illness. (It was much the same story as the previous president, Tran Dai Quang, who was first diagnosed with a serious illness in June 2017, but this was hushed up, despite his repeated absences, including medical visits to Japan, until his death in September the following year.)

“Trong” became one of the most searched words on Google in Vietnam on April 14. Characteristically, Vietnamese social media was alive with gossip: he was bumped off by a former rival, whose stronghold was Kien Giang province, or it was a palace coup launched by his protégée, Tran Quoc Vuong, the Central Committee's Secretariat.

Since his return to the public eye in May, the Vietnamese state-run newspapers have made much of Trong reportedly chairing Politburo meetings, as well as addressing the Central Committee's tenth plenum that month. In early August, he hosted the Lao president Bounnhang Volachith, but that was said to have been a very brief meeting. **And when Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad paid him a courtesy call during a three-day visit to Vietnam later that month, it reportedly lasted only 25 minutes. He hasn't yet travelled abroad since May.**

As fate would have it, Trong's period of ill-health happened to witness a rare occasion of polemical publishing about him. In July, the Su That National Political Publishing House, the Communist Party's printing arm, released two books: *Determined To Prevent And Repel Corruption*, a collection of his speeches and interviews, and the less snappy but more instructively titled *General Secretary and State President Nguyen Phu Trong, With Affection From The Country's People And International Friends*, compilation of dozens of newspaper articles and speeches, and even social media postings, which fawn over Trong.

Then, in August, came along a self-published book by the independent journalist Pham Thanh, *Nguyen Phu Trong: Celestial Practice or Treason and Heresy*, that criticizes the party boss, and stunningly so for Vietnam. The Communist Party rarely venerates speeches or lectures of its senior officials. Neither does it try to aggrandize their image through such means. And seldom in the constricted public sphere are diatribes against senior politicians common or, indeed, permissible.

Yet these polemics arrive at a time when Trong's health is looking increasingly fragile and uncertain. **If rumors are to be believed, he might not even make it to the next National Congress in 2021.** When Trong made international headlines by taking on the presidency last year (for decades, the Communist Party has divided power between the four most senior positions, the so-called "four pillar" system) some claimed that he was adopting dictatorial powers and becoming Vietnam's Xi Jinping.

At the time, I argued that it was instead motivated by expediency. Put simply, there was no desire to alter the Party's leadership so long before the 2021 National Congress. Indeed, if someone had been promoted to president last year, they probably would have had to remain in the job post-2021. And this would have disrupted the normal order of political jockeying inside the Party that goes on for at least eighteen months before a National Congress. And as state president, not just party chief, he could be more active in international diplomacy.

But all this depended on his playing a more active role in politics, not sidelined by ill-health and less active. **The problem now is that after taking on more responsibility, he leaves Vietnam more divided at home and weaker abroad.** Firstly, because the Communist Party is now gearing up for its next National Congress, we would naturally expect political jostling taking over domestic politics for the next fifteen months. But if Trong is playing a less active role, it means others have to fill in for him, providing them the means to grasp at more power and connections.

The earlier mentioned Vuong, the Central Committee's Secretariat and the anti-corruption czar as head of the Central Inspection Committee, has popped up more often in public since April. And now that the "four pillar" of Vietnamese politics has been reduced to "three pillars", Trong's absence would naturally increase the competition between Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc and the chairwoman of the National Assembly, Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, who has been making more state visits than normal in recent months, including one to Beijing in July.

Without any natural heir, any weakness on Trong's part could lead to even more bitter infighting amongst the senior Party officials. Even more so with the 11th Central Committee plenum planned for later this year, at which serious debate over personnel and policy decisions is expected to begin. There are now typically between 13 and 14 plenums between Congresses, the last held just weeks before the event. So there isn't too much time left for major decisions to be made.

More serious are foreign affairs. Tensions with China over the South China Sea are arguably at their worst since 2014, and Beijing's attitude is becoming increasingly aggressive and belligerent. There are also concerns about Vietnam's relations with the United States: lately, for instance, Trump has been demanding Hanoi does more to reduce its trade surplus.

It is widely thought that both the United States and Vietnam want Trong to visit Washington next month, in what could be a major bilateral meeting that sees their relationship upgraded to a "strategic partnership." Washington doesn't like having meetings with Communist Party chiefs. Indeed, when Trong became the first-ever sitting party chief to visit the United State in 2015, it put U.S. authorities in a bind.

With Trong now also state president, it simplifies matters. But all this could be scuttled by his reported ill-health. It is rumoured that both parties are being tight-lipped about the state visit because of uncertainty over whether Trong can travel. Prime Minister Phuc could step in to fly to Washington instead. He has met Trump on numerous occasions and is thought to be a much

more competent and natural diplomat than the offish Trong. But Trong is head of both state and Communist Party, rather than just head of the civilian government, so a visit by Trong rather than by Phuc would send a clearer signal to Beijing that U.S.-Vietnam relations are serious. Not travelling, however, would also send a clear signal to the Vietnamese people that Trong is seriously unwell.

The decision, in October 2018, to name Trong as president was most probably a stopgap designed to provide some stability within the Party. But if the worst was to happen to him now, it would trigger a power struggle the likes of which the Vietnamese Communist Party hasn't seen for decades.