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Background Brief:

A Female President in Vietnam in the Next 5 to 10 Years?

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On the occasion of International Women's Day we request your assessment of the following issues:

Q1. Is it possible for Vietnam to have a female head of state or government?

ANSWER: Yes, it is possible providing the leadership of the Vietnam Communist Party sets itself that objective and takes determined measures to achieve this goal.

As of 2020, the ratio of females to males in Vietnam was roughly equivalent; 48.74 per cent of the population is female and 48.6 per cent is male. Women, however, make up only 19 per cent of the current Central Committee, including nine who are currently provincial party secretaries.

In 2016, the twelfth national party congress elected three women to the Politburo (Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, Tong Thi Phong and Truong Thi Mai). After the twelfth congress, the National Assembly elected Dang Thi Ngoc Thinh, a member of the Central Committee, as vice president. In 2018, when President Tran Dai Quang died in office, Thinh served as Acting President for a brief time. The Central Committee took the decision to elect party Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong to serve concurrently as state president.

Two women retired from the Politburo at the thirteenth national party congress: Tran Thi Kim Ngan and Tong Thi Phong. Truong Thi Mai, head of the Central Commission for Mass Mobilisation, was re-elected. Mai is the only woman on the current Politburo.

It would have been possible for Vietnam to have selected a woman candidate as state president at this time by granting an age exemption for exceptional service. Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, the Chair of the National Assembly, would have fit the bill. She consistently scores at the top of votes of confidence.

In Southeast Asia, four countries have had women as head of state (president) but none as head of government (prime minister): Indonesia (Megawati Sukarnoputri), the Philippines (Corazon Aquino and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo), Myanmar (Aung San Suu Kyi, State Counsellor) and Singapore (Halimah Yacob, currently serving).

See Box below of a list of countries where women have served as head of government (prime minister).

States Where Women Have Served as Head of State (President)

Africa: Ethiopia, Liberia, Malawi

Caribbean: Trinidad-Tobago

Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan

East Asia: Republic of Korea, Republic of China (Taiwan)

Europe: Croatia, Germany, Georgia, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Moldova, Slovakia

Latin and South America: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Guyana, Nicaragua, Panama

Oceania: Australia

South Asia: India, Mauritius, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka (Ceylon)

South Pacific: Marshall Islands

Q2. Can a woman become president of Vietnam in the next 5 or 10 years?

ANSWER: It is theoretically possible for a woman to be elected president in five years, and a distinct possibility in a decade. Under current regulations, a candidate for one of the four top leadership positions (“four pillars) – party Secretary General, state President, Prime Minister, Chair of the National Assembly – must have served for at least one full 5-year term. By the next party congress in 2026, Truong Thi Mai will have served two full terms on the Politburo; but at 68 years of age she would have to be given a special exemption to assume the presidency.

It is unclear what role Mai will play in the next five years, she is currently a member of the National Assembly’s Standing Committee and Chair of the Social Affairs Committee. Mai would have to be given special responsibilities in the government over the next five years to have a suitable background for state president. Mai’s name does not appear on a list prospective deputy prime ministers and ministers in the next Cabinet that is currently circulating in Vietnam.

In order to elect a woman as state president in ten years, two conditions should be met. First, the Central Committee would have to approve a rule change to make the Vice President a member of the Politburo (either as an alternate or a full member). This would enable the Vice President to become state president in the event of death or incapacitation of the incumbent.

Second, if the Politburo, with the concurrence of the Central Committee, set the objective of electing a woman as state president in ten years, they would have to groom current female members of the present Central Committee for that role over the next five years. In addition, the prospective candidate would have to serve on the next Politburo for a full five-year term.

For example, Pham Thi Thanh Tra, a current member of the party Central Committee and Deputy Minister of Home Affairs, is tipped to become Minister of Home Affairs after national elections in May. She was born in January 1964 and would be 62 at the time of the fourteenth national party congress in 2026. At that time, she could be

elected to the Politburo and serve either as Vice President or Deputy Prime Minister. In 2031, she could be given an age exemption to permit her to serve as state President.

The goal of electing a female as state president should be part of a larger campaign to increase the number of women members of the Vietnam Communist Party and the Central Committee in particular.

Q3. How likely is it that Vietnam could have a woman as party Secretary General or Prime Minister?

ANSWER: It appears highly unlikely that a woman could be elected party Secretary General in the next ten years, and unlikely that a woman could serve as Prime Minister over the same period. At present there is an institutional bias in favour of males as party leader and prime minister. For example, all the prospective candidates for deputy prime minister in the next Cabinet are male.

However, the list of female prime ministers who have served as head of government is even longer than the list of females who have served as head of state (president). And there have been and are some notable if not formidable women prime ministers (see Table 1 in Appendix below).

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Table 1	
Selected List of Female Prime Ministers and Terms in Office	
Country	Name and Dates in Office
Australia	Julia Gillard, 2010-13
Bangladesh	Sheikh Hasna, 2009-present
Finland	Tarja Halonen, 2000-12
India	Indira Gandhi, 1966-77 and 1980-84
Ireland	Mary Robinson, 1990-97
Israel	Golda Meir, 1969-74
Korea, South	Park Geun-hye, 2013-17
New Zealand	Jenny Shipley, 1997-99; Helen Clark, 1999-2008; Jacinda Ardern, 2017-present
Norway	Gro Harlem Brundtland, 1981; 1986-89; 1990-96; Erna Solberg, 2013-present
Pakistan	Benazir Bhutto, 1988-90, 1993-96
Sri Lanka	Sirimavo Bandaranaike, 1960-65, 1970-77, 1994-2000
Thailand	Yingluck Shinawatra, 2011-14
United Kingdom	Margaret Thatcher, 1979-90; Theresa May, 2017-19