

Vietnam's leader wants a successor tough on corruption

General secretary's decision at January congress in focus as candidates jockey

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HANOI -- With a month to go before the convening of Vietnam's all-important National Congress, speculation is growing over the fate of the country's top leader.

State media reported on Wednesday that the Communist Party of Vietnam meeting, held every five years, is slated for the week beginning Jan. 25, during which new leadership and economic goals for the next five years, will be unveiled.

The future of Nguyen Phu Trong, the 76-year-old general secretary of the CPV and who also serves as the country's president, is being closely watched. Trong is widely expected to step down because of his age and ill-health. Foreign media reported in 2019 that he had suffered a stroke.

Party rules also stipulate that the position of general secretary can only be held by the same person for a maximum of two terms and Trong is currently serving his second.

Speculation over Trong's fate accelerated after a central party committee meeting that closed on Dec. 18. It was said that Trong was not named as a candidate for the next Politburo -- the party's executive committee -- during the gathering. Any party leader must first have a seat at the Politburo.

Two men are said to be favored to replace Trong as general-secretary -- 67-year-old Tran Quoc Vuong, a standing member of the party secretariat, and 66-year-old Nguyen Xuan Phuc, the incumbent prime minister.

"There is a high possibility that Vuong will be the general secretary, sooner or later," Duong Quoc Chinh, a Hanoi-based political analyst told Nikkei Asia on Thursday. Trong could continue to serve as general secretary for a while after the congress and transfer the post to Vuong, Chinh said.

Le Hong Hiep, a fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, also thinks Vuong is widely believed to be Trong's successor. "He is perceived to have a cleaner profile due to his more limited patronage network," Hiep said in a report issued in September. "Vuong is therefore seen to be in a good position to carry on Trong's most important legacy: the fight against corruption."

"Vuong is able to continue Trong's so-called 'dot lo' -- or 'burning to ashes' -- or anti-corruption campaign, in other words" Chinh said.

Hailing from Thai Binh in northern Vietnam, Vuong is a veteran party official and has experience as the top prosecutor. "Vuong has mainly worked at party agencies," Chinh said. "He has experience in positions at the Central Inspection Committee and served as the chief of the Office of the Party Central Committee."

Vuong's long engagement in party affairs could prove to be a weakness as he does not have much experience in foreign affairs. But that has not hindered his climb up the party's ladder as far as he has stuck close to Trong, who is seen as an absolute loyalist to the communist regime, Chinh said. "To many party members, the one who serves as the general secretary must be someone who is inclined to communist theory and firmly follow communist ideas."

Trong has the greatest power in choosing his successor, a long party tradition. Thus, his recommendation carries the most value, Chinh stressed. "Moreover, the anti-corruption campaign he led will create many enemies to Trong. Therefore, installing a successor who is loyal to him is vital to Trong even after he steps down as general secretary."

The fact that the general-secretary position has always been secured by those from the north of the country -- home of Vietnam's political elite -- also puts Vuong in a better place than Phuc, according to Hiep. The prime minister comes from Quang Nam province in central Vietnam.

The possible Vuong-centered leadership is not expected to significantly change policy in the areas of the economy, trade and foreign investment, Chinh said. Vuong does not have economic experience, but the prime minister is supposed to lead economic and trade policies while foreign affairs usually fall into the president's jurisdiction, according to Chinh.

"The possibility of Vuong concurrently holding the position of general secretary and president as Trong does is very low," Chinh says. "Vuong is yet to prove his capacity to become general secretary." Meanwhile, there are rumors that Pham Binh Minh, the incumbent minister of foreign affairs, will become president.

But with a month left to go until the 13th congress kicks off, the situation remains unpredictable. Although speculation about Trong's future is rife, he could end up overriding party rules at the last minute to stay on beyond the congress as general secretary, at least for a while, to groom a new leader to take over his position.

"In a nutshell, even if Vuong rises to be the next general secretary, he will not acquire as much power as Trong," Chinh said, though Vuong's influence could remain steadfast as long as he manages to keep his anti-corruption campaign rolling.