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The Fallout From Vietnam's Communist Party Congress

The outcome reflects a considerable degree of caution, and a desire to balance the party's internal factions.

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The Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) completed its 13th Party Congress, shortened at the last minute to deal with a recent COVID-19 outbreak. The nearly 1,600-strong Congress elected a 200-member Central Committee, which then elected the 18-member Politburo that will lead the country for the next five years.

Vietnamese politics is notoriously opaque. But there are a few known things: factions within the party exist, and engage in no-holds barred competition. But the Vietnamese political system prides itself on stability, and the leadership goes to great lengths to balance the factions out.

As such, there was a tremendous degree of continuity in both the composition of the new Politburo, the highest decision making body in the country, and the policies it is expected to pursue.

General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, 76, got both an age waiver and a waiver to allow him to serve an unprecedented third term as party chief. While this is shocking to some, who see a regular transition of leaders to prevent a Le Duan-style dictatorship that led Vietnam to the brink of economic catastrophe and diplomatic isolation, not to mention a rare cult of personality, it's also the outgrowth of the party's attempt to strike a political balance.

The underlying theme of Trong's tenure was anti-corruption. Corruption in Vietnam, still caught between the plan and the market, with no free press or ombudsmen, is endemic. And Trong is cognizant that it is a public irritant that threatens the Party's legitimacy.

And despite Trong's power, he could not marshal the votes to get his his protege, Tran Quoc Vuong, who spearheaded the anti-corruption campaign, to succeed him. Indeed, Vuong wasn't even re-elected to the Politburo. Yet in sacrificing Vuong, Trong held on to his position, despite legitimate concerns about his health. The selection of Trong, with his two requisite waivers, suggests compromise and a hint of insecurity, rather than strength. In addition to Trong, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, who will become the president, received an age waiver.

There's a high degree of continuity in the 13th Politburo: nine of the 18 members served on the 12th Politburo, while two served on the Central Committee's Secretariat, which is in charge of running the Party's day to day affairs. The average age of the Politburo is 63, making it older and more male than the 12th Politburo. It's composition says a lot about the party's orientation, priorities, and concerns.

The Vietnam People's Army (VPA) doubled its representation. In the 12th Politburo, only the Minister of Defense, who had been the head of the VPA's General Political Department – that is, the top political commissar who had no operational or command experience – served. Now the Politburo has two members of the VPA: The head of the General Political Department, Gen. Luong Cuong, and the VPA's Chief of General Staff, Gen. Phan Van Giang.

The Politburo also has a heavy police representation: To Lam, the Minister of Public Security, is serving again, but many others have police backgrounds: Pham Minh Chinh had been a Deputy Minister of Public Security, while Nguyen Hoa Binh had served in the MPS, as well as the Prosecutor General of the Supreme People's Procuracy.

The biggest difference between the 12th and 13th Politburos is in the dominance of the leaders of the Central Committee commissions. This Politburo is dominated by party interests. It includes seven members of the Central Committee's commissions (though two will assume new posts at the next National Assembly): the Head of the Central Committee's Organization Commission, Economic Commission, Mass Mobilization Commission, Ideology and Education Commission, Internal Affairs Commission, and Inspection Commission. It includes the party chiefs for Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, which is more normal. For the first time in the doi moi era, the Politburo includes the head of the party school, the National Ho Chi Minh Academy of Politics. The head of the mass organization, the Vietnam Fatherland Front, which oversees all unions, religions, and civil society, is also on the Politburo, as is the VPA's top political commissar.

Of the 18 members, 13 represent distinctly Party interests. The state sector is represented by the Minister of Public Security, the Minister of Trade and Industry (who also wears a second hat as the head of the Central Committee's Economic Commission), the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Finance, and the Head of the Supreme Court.

By way of contrast, in the 12th Politburo, only eight of the 19 (then minus Dinh La Thang, who was expelled and charged with corruption) members represented Party interests.

So who else are the losers? On the economic front, the Governor of the Central Bank, Nguyen Van Binh, is no longer represented on the Politburo. With a Politburo focused on economic growth, this is telling.

Another institution that lost some clout is the National Assembly, with its representation dropping from two to one. It was a loss not just for National Assembly representation, but also for gender: neither National Assembly Chairperson Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan now Deputy Chairperson Tong Thi Phong are on the 13th Politburo. Women went from three of the 19 members of the 12th Politburo to one of 18 in the 13th.

The outgoing Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc is slated to become the President, though this has not yet been officially confirmed. The final government appointments will not be made until the next National Assembly session this spring.

The composition of the 200-member Central Committee reflects the same degree of caution. The 13th Central Committee has 180 full members and 20 alternate members. 120 members (60 percent) were re-elected from the 12th Central Committee. Sixty-two (31 percent) are provincial or party secretaries, which is slightly lower than the norm in the past few three congresses. A paltry 19 (9.5 percent) are women, and 13 (7 percent) are ethnic minorities. Fifteen are ministers or heads of ministerial-level agencies.

It's important to place the 13th Congress in broader context. At the VCP's 12th Congress in 2016, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong outmaneuvered his rival Nguyen Tan Dung, received an age waiver, and served for a second term. Trong's protege Tran Quoc Vuong, the head of the Central Inspection Commission, worked to dismantle Nguyen Tan Dung's network of allies.

Conservatives roared back in 2016. After years of being shunted aside as the economy grew and decisions were being made more and more by technocrats, Trong wanted to remind everyone that the Party was in charge; the technocrats worked for the party, not vice versa.

Though Trong failed to secure his protege's position, the 13th Politburo still reflects Trong's imprimatur, including the Party's recent brutal crackdown on dissent. The dominance of senior party officials and the under-representation of state technocrats, including Deputy Prime Minister Vu Duc Dam, who led the country's stellar COVID-19 response, makes clear that regardless of the economic or technical complexity, decisions will be made by a centralized and indoctrinated party elite.

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