

NEW YORK TIMES
1-2-21

Term Limits? Not for Vietnam's Hard-Line Communist Leader

Nguyen Phu Trong, 76, was named to a third term in office as party leaders were unable to reach consensus on a successor. The reappointment may have put off a transition to more pragmatic leadership.

By Richard C. Paddock

BANGKOK — Under the rules of Vietnam's Communist Party, its chief is to step aside at age 65 or after two terms. The country's dogmatic leader, Nguyen Phu Trong, would not qualify for reappointment on either count.

But that didn't prevent the party from cementing his rule as it concluded its once-every-five-years congress on Monday, giving him a third term in an effort to project unity and hold off more pragmatic challengers.

Mr. Trong, 76, in frail health after 10 years at the party's helm, was reappointed as general secretary in one of the world's few remaining communist dictatorships. Known for his conservative ideological stance, Mr. Trong has made fighting high-level corruption a priority, and he has presided at a time of sustained economic growth and national success in containing the coronavirus.

Under his leadership, Vietnam is expected to maintain a foreign policy of balancing Chinese and American interests, while keeping the party's grip at home by continuing to suppress dissent through the imposition of long prison sentences.

"The key message is the party will cling to power at all costs," said Alexander Vuving, a professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Honolulu. "I don't expect any big change in the direction of Vietnam foreign policy or economic policy in the next five years."

Vietnam's Communist Party governs the nation of nearly 100 million people and has ruled for more than 45 years since reunification. Leadership of the one-party state is split among three positions: the party chief, a president who serves as head of state and a prime minister who runs the government. Since 2018, Mr. Trong has served as both party leader and president.

The party promotes a version of state capitalism that propelled Vietnam to economic growth of 2.91 percent last year despite the severe headwinds of the coronavirus pandemic. That was down from more than 7 percent the previous two years but among the highest growth rates in the world.

Vietnam has been among the most successful nations in containing the coronavirus, with strict border controls, mask-wearing, contact tracing and isolation of infected people. Before a recent outbreak, it had gone nearly two months without detecting a case of local transmission, and it has reported only 1,817 cases and 35 deaths.

A new study by the independent Lowy Institute in Australia ranked Vietnam second in the world behind New Zealand in handling the pandemic's first nine months.

On China, Vietnam maintains strong but occasionally testy relations with its giant communist neighbor to the north, which is seeking to expand its influence in the South China Sea. Analysts predict that Vietnam's relations with China will remain robust but that Vietnam will continue seeking improved ties with the United States to counter China's growing influence in the region.

Granting Mr. Trong a third five-year term to handle these issues as general secretary meant going against the party's own rules limiting him to two terms in office and waiving the age limit for him for the third time.

"The party wants to project an image of unity, solidarity and strength so that it could prevent internal fighting among various factions," said Tuong Vu, an expert on modern Vietnamese history and politics at the University of Oregon.

Mr. Trong represents a conservative Marxist-Leninist faction within the party, which has come under increasing pressure from more pragmatic Communist leaders of various factions.

He had chosen a favored subordinate as his designated successor, but the party rejected his nominee. Mr. Trong chose to stay on as general secretary rather than let the leader of a rival faction accede to the top post.

"Basically, it signifies to me the failure of the party chief," Mr. Vuving said. "He needed to pass the baton to another conservative candidate, but his choice was not popular among the Central Committee members."

Mr. Vuving predicted that the next leader of Vietnam would be less doctrinaire than Mr. Trong, as the leaders of more pragmatic factions in senior posts continue vying to succeed him.

"He is the last conservative to become general secretary. It will loosen up after he is gone," Mr. Vuving said, calling Mr. Trong "a transitional leader."

The weeklong party congress in Hanoi, a much-anticipated ritual, ended Monday, a day early, as many members left to deal with a new coronavirus outbreak in the northeastern part of the country.

The rash of new cases, which could include patients with the more contagious variants found in Britain and South Africa, is the most serious yet for Vietnam. In the last four days, it has reported 266 new infections.

But Vietnam has reaped the economic benefits of its overall success against the pandemic. It is benefiting from a shift in manufacturing from China to other countries as large international companies seek to diversify their operations and avoid American tariffs. Foxconn, for example, is building a \$270 million plant to assemble Apple phones and laptops in Vietnam.

“Even though they are a Communist Party, and very conservative in Marxism-Leninism, in economic policy they are an eager globalizer,” Mr. Vuving said.

The government maintains power in part by imposing draconian prison terms on journalists and critics who speak out against it. In the months leading up to the party congress, it carried out a harsh crackdown.

In January, three journalists — including Pham Chi Dung, the founder of the Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam — were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 11 to 15 years. Another prominent journalist, Pham Doan Trong, was arrested in October on charges of making and disseminating propaganda. She faces up to 20 years in prison.

Phil Robertson, the deputy Asia director for Human Rights Watch, said he foresaw no end to the suppression of free speech with Mr. Trong remaining in power.

“The re-election of hard-liner Nguyen Phu Trong means the ruling Communist Party is doubling down on its repression of proponents of greater democracy and human rights in Vietnam,” he said. “This congress shows just how little political reform is possible in today’s Vietnam, which continues to be one of the most authoritarian governments in Southeast Asia.”

In addition to serving as party chief, Mr. Trong assumed the presidency in 2018 with the death of the incumbent, Tran Dai Quang. Mr. Trong is expected to relinquish the presidency later this year when the rubber-stamp National Assembly ratifies the new top government leaders chosen by the party.

Under that scenario, the current prime minister, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, 66, who lost his bid to become party general secretary, will become president, a post that is higher in prestige but has less power than the prime minister.

Mr. Phuc, who is considered more pragmatic than Mr. Trong, compiled a largely successful record but could not muster enough support in part because he is from southern Vietnam. Northerners have long dominated top leadership positions.

Mr. Trong, who appears to walk with some difficulty and is said to have suffered a stroke, nevertheless delivered a 75-minute address on the opening day of the congress in which he praised the country’s economic development and control of the coronavirus.

There is no formal process for filling his post should he leave office before his five-year term ends, but the Central Committee would be expected to pick a new general secretary from among the senior leaders.

“That might create a crisis because of all the uncertainties surrounding that situation,” Mr. Vu said.