

10 February 2021

## Vietnam Picks Control Over Reform at 13th National Party Congress

*Conservative decisions and an aging leadership don't bode well.*

By **Huong Le Thu**

As autocracies age, they hit turning points where they must choose between reform and repression. This isn't a single decision but a series of cruxes. One such for Vietnam was the 6th National Party Congress in 1986, when the formerly hard-line communist country adopted the Doi Moi ("renovation") reforms that would allow it to adapt to the post-Soviet world, transforming the centrally planned economy into a "market economy with socialist orientation." This helped many Vietnamese escape poverty, integrated the nation into the global economy, and increased its national standing. Arguably, the current state of affairs offered another turning point just ahead of its 13th National Party Congress at the end of January. But the initial results of the congress indicate that consolidating party power has been given higher priority than reform.

The elaborately planned, weeklong gathering, held every five years, assembles the highest-level representatives of the party to set policy plans and key leadership roles. The congress concluded a day earlier than planned on Feb. 1 because of the sudden emergence of new COVID-19 cases after months of zero community transmission—and, according to official reports, thanks to a "high-level of consensus and solidarity."

Meetings like this in a one-party state rarely surprise its citizens—instead, they're confirmations of what's already been agreed upon through political wrangling in the lead-up to the plenum. But the circumstances for this one were unprecedented. To begin with, with half of the Politburo—the most senior policymaking body—more than 65 years old and due to retire, there was a rare opportunity to revitalize the body with young blood. But instead, the newly elected Politburo, now with 18 members, has a median age of 63—a new crop of gerontocrats most of whom will, under party rules, have to retire themselves rather than seek reelection. That's particularly glaring given how young Vietnam's population is, even though the seniority and experience needed for the top posts make it unlikely that the generational change in the country will ever be reflected in its leadership. Two exceptions to the age limit were granted, allowing Secretary-General Nguyen Phu Trong (76) and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc (66) to remain in office. Trong extended his hold over the top party position for a third term, apparently without a secure successor despite his previous health issues. This makes him the longest-serving secretary-general since Le Duan died in 1986.

The pandemic has given Vietnam a chance to lead in economic recovery, but that requires a leadership that can harness the potential of a young and innovative population. But another part of this critical moment is the conditions created by the global pandemic. Vietnam has been among the most effective in responding to the pandemic due to early recognition of the grave danger it posed. Phuc, among others, also recognized the impact the pandemic might have on the global balance of power and economic competitiveness.

Vietnam's determined pandemic strategy was aimed at securing an early economic recovery. In a time of global supply chain shifts and the United States and China decoupling, Vietnam—with its geographic position, economic level, conducive trade and investment policies, skilled workforce, and political stability—can take advantage. Phuc and other technocrats have pushed for modernizing the Vietnamese economy, committing to the fourth Industrial Revolution and catching up with the global digitalization trend. Phuc and Deputy Prime Minister Vu Duc Dam were seen as the front-line leaders on the COVID-19 response and have become hugely popular as a result.

But to the disappointment of many, Dam was not elected to the Politburo while Phuc, if confirmed as state president, will move from an executive position to a ceremonial role in a de facto demotion. Both Dam and Phuc have immediately stepped back into their COVID-19 emergency response responsibilities to contain the outbreak ahead of the country's largest holiday: Tet, the Lunar New Year. Meanwhile, the only female leader in one of the top four positions, Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan—who served as chairperson of the National Assembly, is said to be replaced by Vuong Dinh Hue. Pham Minh Chinh, head of the Central Organizing Commission, is expected to take over Phuc's former position—breaking with convention as he hasn't previously served as a deputy prime minister.

The upcoming appointments also indicate a larger trend of blurring party with state functions. In Vietnamese leadership, although all officials must be Communist Party members, there are two distinctive power centers: the party apparatus itself and the state's executive power. One slogan says: “The party leads, the state implements, and the people inspect.” But all indications are that the party is taking on a strong role in implementing policy. Trong has vowed that the anti-corruption campaign—which he started after he secured a second term and used to oust his former rival, former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, in the last National Party Congress in 2016—will continue to burn fiercely and serve as a powerful factional struggle.

In Vietnam, the perception of lagging behind other Asian economies has been among the country's top insecurities and, in fact, has driven its development policies. This has come from decades of wars that deprived the country from development and exhausted it economically. The post-Doi Moi era was about catching up to some level of parity with its Southeast Asian neighbors. The pandemic has given Vietnam a chance to lead in economic recovery, but that requires a leadership that can harness the potential of a young and innovative population. A stagnant government will find it difficult to seize this moment—or face the challenges of a hard-line China and a more demanding United States.