

PERSPECTIVE

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Personnel Issues at the CPV's Seventh Plenum

*Le Hong Hiep**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The seventh plenum of the twelfth Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), which took place from 7 to 12 May 2018, deliberated on a blueprint for the Party's strategic personnel planning and management and elected two new members to the Party's Secretariat.
- The blueprint reveals some interesting data about the Party's personnel system and introduces bold measures to revamp its personnel planning and management. The move has demonstrated the Party's strong political will in strengthening the quality and integrity of its cadres as well as the resilience of its political system.
- The election of Mr Tran Cam Tu, Standing Deputy Head of the Central Committee's Inspectorate Commission, and Mr Tran Thanh Man, Chairman of the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), into the Party's Secretariat indicates that the Party leadership has earmarked them for further promotion in the future.
- If the Party's Central Committee decides to add new members to its Politburo, Mr Tu and Mr Man, together with the five remaining non-Politburo members of the Secretariat, will be among the most likely candidates.

* *Le Hong Hiep is a Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.*

INTRODUCTION

The seventh plenum of the twelfth Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), which took place from 7 to 12 May 2018, discussed and made decisions on three key issues, namely the CPV's strategic personnel planning and management, salary reforms, and social insurance reforms. The Committee also elected two new members into its Secretariat. Out of the three issues, personnel policy decisions and changes at the plenum attract the most attention from the public given their important implications for the country's political prospects.

This essay examines the personnel issues discussed at the plenum against the broader context of the CPV's current efforts to fight corruption and clean up its system, as well as the Party's initial preparations for its thirteenth national congress, which is to be held in 2021. It will accordingly analyse the context, significance and implications of two major personnel issues of the plenum: the adoption of a resolution on the Party's strategic personnel planning and the election of two additional members into its Secretariat.

PERSONNEL PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

Guided by the late President Ho Chi Minh's dictum that "Cadres are the foundation of all works", the CPV has consistently put a strong emphasis on its personnel management. In the context of economic reforms under the *Doi Moi* (renovation) policy, the Party has considered personnel works as an essential element in its formula for industrializing and modernizing the country. The Party has therefore formulated and implemented various plans and policies to improve the quality of its cadres, especially at the "strategic levels". The third plenum of the eighth Central Committee in June 1997, for example, issued Resolution 03-NQ/TW on the Party's personnel strategy with the aim of "building up a pool of cadres and officials from grassroots to central levels, especially leaders, of integrity and capabilities [...] in order to successfully implement the cause of industrialization and modernization, safeguarding independence and autonomy, and advancing the country towards socialism".¹

However, such plans and policies have not translated into expected outcomes. As the Party itself has acknowledged, weaknesses remain in the Party's personnel works, including the lack of effective mechanisms for appraising cadres and recruiting talents, as well as the prevalence of corrupt personnel practices, such as political patronage, nepotism, or bribing for power and positions.² The CPV's inability to implement its personnel strategies effectively has prevented the Party from reducing corruption among its ranks and rolling out its socio-economic policies effectively. The CPV's ongoing anti-corruption campaign, which has seen the prosecution of various high-ranking officials at both central and local governments, including a former Politburo member, has further highlighted the importance of personnel works to the Party's resilience and reputation.

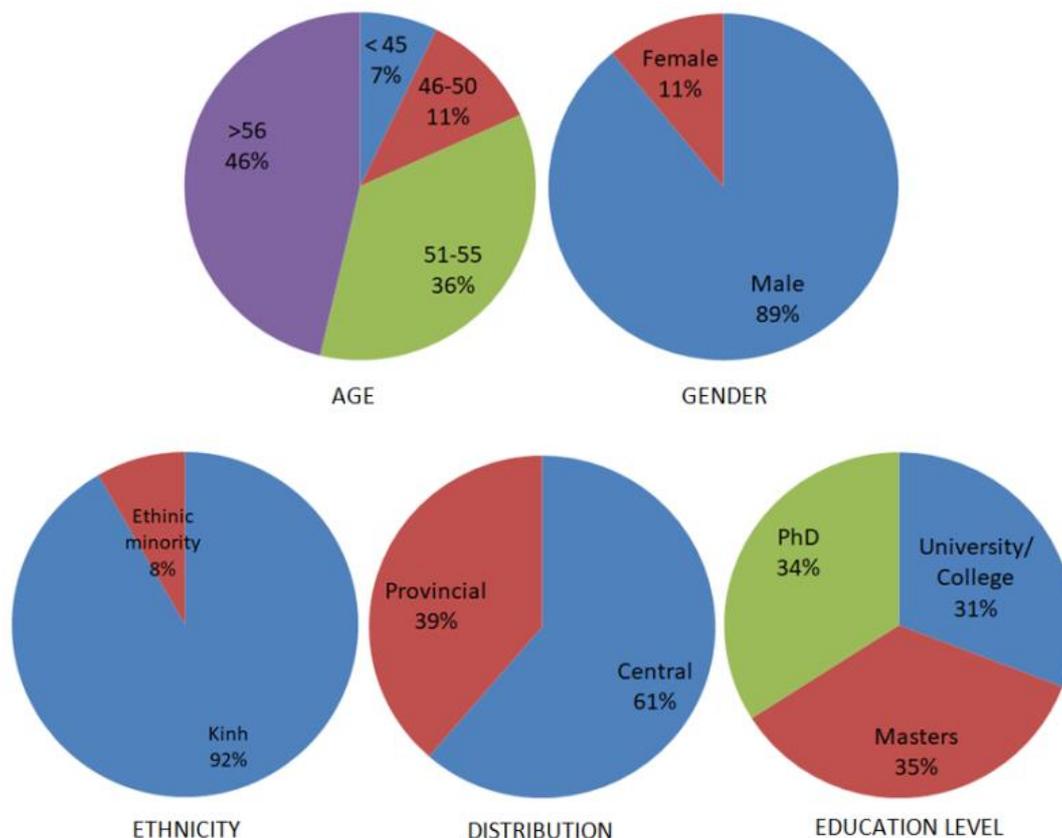
Against this backdrop, a draft blueprint on the Party's personnel strategy up to 2030 and beyond was presented to the Central Committee's seventh plenum for its deliberation.³ The 73-page-long blueprint is a well-restructured and well-researched document with rich supporting data, mostly provided in its 197 footnotes. It can be seen as an indication of the Party's seriousness about its personnel reforms. The blueprint also seems to bear the imprint of Mr Pham Minh Chinh, Head of the CPV's Department of Personnel and Organization, who oversaw the drafting of the blueprint. Despite his public security background, Mr Chinh is known as a well-read intellectual credited for advocating various reforms within the Party.⁴ The document may therefore reflect his vision for the sorts of personnel reforms that he wishes to promote within the Party.

The blueprint is divided into five sections. The first presents the theoretical and practical basis of the blueprint. The second reviews the current status of the Party's personnel works. The third proposes guidelines, objectives and solutions to improve the Party's personnel works. The last two sections assess the blueprint's impact once implemented and propose measures for its implementation. Notwithstanding the abundance of clichés typical of CPV's political documents, the blueprint reveals some interesting data and clues as to how the Party is going to revamp its personnel planning and management.

According to the blueprint, by March 2017, the total number of cadres, officials and state employees was 2,726,915, accounting for approximately 4.9% of Vietnam's total workforce.⁵ Meanwhile, the total number of people on the government's payroll was 3,958,400,⁶ including 1,231,483 irregular cadres at grassroots levels. Such a large state system has been blamed for causing the government's recurrent expenditure to expand rapidly in recent years. This is one of the reasons why the CPV and its government are undertaking personnel reforms not only within the Party but also across government agencies at all levels to improve the efficiency of the political system and to consolidate the country's fiscal position.

The document defines "strategic-level cadres" as leaders of central Party and state organs; key leaders of ministries, central agencies, and provincial/municipal governments and party branches. These cadres are accountable to and directly managed by the CPV Central Committee, Politburo and Secretariat. According to the blueprint, the total number of these elite cadres as of 2018 is 585. The following charts show the composition of this group in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, distribution, and education level.

Figure 1 - Composition of Vietnam's 'strategic-level cadres'



Source: Author's own compilation based on the blueprint's data

After reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of different categories of cadres and officials within the system as well as the Party's past personnel management, the blueprint set the criteria for each category of cadres as well as the objectives for the Party's future personnel works. More importantly, the blueprint proposes five overarching "breakthrough measures" for achieving such objectives:

1. Reforming the procedures and methods for appraising cadres;
2. Strictly controlling cadres' power, putting an end to the practice of bribing for power and positions;
3. Introducing the rule that the party secretary of a given province or district must not be a native of the same province/district;
4. Reforming salary policies to incentivize cadres' performance and to attract talents into public institutions; and
5. Improving mechanisms to strengthen ties between cadres and the people, thereby encouraging the people to contribute to the development of the cadre system.

It also proposes some notable specific measures towards these objectives, such as preparing a national strategy to attract talents regardless of whether they are Party or non-Party members, Vietnamese or foreigners; giving leaders more authority and responsibility in training and nominating their successors; designing mechanisms to identify, train and fast-

track young capable cadres for leadership positions; establishing regulations on the practice of resignation; strictly sanctioning officials who make illegitimate personnel decisions, even after they have retired; expanding the practice of recruiting leaders at the departmental level through examinations; implementing direct election of chairpersons of commune people's committees; and gradually phasing out "lifetime employment" within the public sector.

The blueprint envisions that once implemented, it will strengthen the quality of Vietnam's bureaucracy and improve the efficiency of the whole political system. It also expects to help mitigate the government's budgetary deficit by reducing the number of officials and cadres by 10% between 2018 and 2020, and the number of state employees by 10% by 2021, and another 10% for every five years thereafter until 2030.

The blueprint served as the basis for the CPV Central Committee to adopt a resolution on the Party's personnel works at the end of the plenum. While it remains to be seen whether the CPV can successfully implement the measures proposed by the blueprint, the move has demonstrated the Party's will to strengthen the quality and integrity of its cadres as well as the resilience of its political system. The adoption of the resolution should also be seen in the light of the CPV's recent efforts to crack down on corruption and to further institutional and economic reforms, both of which will hardly be successful without a cleaner and more capable cadre system, especially at the leadership level.

ELECTION OF ADDITIONAL SECRETARIAT MEMBERS

Given the CPV's past practice of making changes to its leadership line-up at its Central Committee's mid-term plenums,⁷ the Party was widely expected to elect additional members into its Politburo at the seventh plenum. The additional members were supposed to replace Mr Dinh La Thang, who was removed from the Politburo in May 2017 on corruption and economic mismanagement allegations, and Mr Dinh The Huynh, who is seriously ill. At the same time, reports about the poor health of President Tran Dai Quang also gave rise to speculation that he would be replaced as well.

However, the plenum decided instead to elect two new members into its Secretariat: Mr Tran Cam Tu, Standing Deputy Head of the Central Committee's Inspectorate Commission, and Mr Tran Thanh Man, Chairman of the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF). Mr Tu was also elected Head of the Inspectorate Commission after Mr Tran Quoc Vuong stepped down from the position to focus on his other post as Standing Member (i.e. Executive Secretary) of the Secretariat.

Since December 1993, the Party's Inspectorate Commission has always been headed by a Politburo member. As such, the Party's assignment of the position to Mr Tu rather than an existing Politburo member suggests that Mr Tu will likely be elected into the Politburo in the near future. This is to give him the necessary authority to oversee the Party's anti-corruption campaign, which remains a priority for the Party under the leadership of General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong.

Similarly, Mr Man will also stand a good chance of being elected into the Politburo as the VFF in recent decades has normally been headed by a Politburo member. Mr Man's rather young age (56) and Southern origin may also play to his advantage given that the Politburo is currently dominated by Northerners while the Party normally seeks a relative balance in the regional representation of its top decision-making body.

That said, it remains to be seen if the CPV's Central Committee will elect new members into the Politburo in its forthcoming plenums at all. Given that no election took place at the seventh plenum, it is not impossible that the Politburo line-up will remain unchanged until the thirteenth Party congress in 2021. However, it is more likely that the Party's intention was just to delay the election, not to cancel it altogether. A few observations support this argument.

First, the delay of the election may be explained by the fact that as the Party leadership has earmarked Mr Tu and Mr Man for Politburo membership, they need to have the two officials first elected into the Secretariat, whose members are seen as being more senior than normal members of the Central Committee, so that they can stand a better chance of being elected into the Politburo. This is to avoid the scenario where candidates favoured by the Party leadership are not elected as planned.

Second, the Party leadership may need more time to make necessary arrangements regarding the election, such as the number of new members to be added, the candidates to be nominated, as well as the shift in official positions resulting from the election. As such, the delay of the election is necessary.

Third, as part of the preparation for personnel changes at the thirteenth Party congress that is to be held in 2021, the Party will need to elect additional members of the Politburo to better groom future leaders and to ensure continuity in its top policy-making body, given that apart from Mr Thang and Mr Huynh who have been unable to serve out their term, at least five other Politburo members will have to retire by 2021 due to age limits.

Therefore, if the election of additional Politburo members does take place, it will likely be done at the eighth plenum that is to be held later this year, as doing it at the ninth plenum next year or thereafter will be rather late given that the thirteenth congress will be fast approaching. Apart from Mr Tu and Mr Man, the most prominent candidates will be the five remaining non-Politburo members of the Secretariat.⁸ They are Senior Lieutenant General Luong Cuong (Head of the Political Department of the Vietnam People's Army), Mr Nguyen Van Nen (Head of the CPV's Central Office), Mr Nguyen Hoa Binh (Chief Justice of the Supreme Court), Mr Phan Dinh Trac (Head of the CPV's Internal Affairs Commission), and Mr Nguyen Xuan Thang (Director of Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy). Who will be elected will depend on the number of additional members needed, as well as whether and by whom President Tran Dai Quang will be replaced.

CONCLUSION

The agenda of the seventh plenum of the CPV's Central Committee shows that personnel planning and management constitutes a major area of concern for the Party. Whether the Party can grow a strong team of cadres, especially at the strategic levels, will have major implications for its governance capacity as well as its political legitimacy. It also determines whether or not Vietnam will be able to navigate the various socio-economic and foreign policy challenges under the Party's rule.

The blueprint on personnel works deliberated at the plenum underlines the Party's seriousness in dealing with weaknesses in its personnel planning and management as well as improving the quality and integrity of its cadres. However, the Party will need to overcome major challenges in order to successfully implement the blueprint. The fact that the Party's Resolution 03-NQ/TW on personnel works in 1997, which stated rather similar objectives, failed to bring about positive changes to the Party's personnel works, is a stark reminder of how difficult it is to change deep-rooted norms and overcome vested interests. This is particularly the case in Vietnam where the CPV allows little public scrutiny into its internal affairs and the handling of personnel issues remains a lucrative business for some senior officials.

Meanwhile, the election of two additional members into the Party's Secretariat shows that the Party leadership may be taking well-calculated steps to shape the new line-up of its top governing and policy-making bodies, especially the Politburo. Mr Tu and Mr Man, now members of the Secretariat, will be among the likely candidates for Politburo membership should the Party decide to add new members to its Politburo at its forthcoming plenum. But as shown by the Party's decision to delay the widely expected election at the seventh plenum, whether the election will be held and which candidates will be given the positions remains anyone's guess, at least until November 2018 when the Party's Central Committee meets again.

¹ The Resolution is available at < <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Bo-may-hanh-chinh/Nghi-quyet-03-NQ-TW-nam-1997chien-luoc-can-bo-thoi-ky-day-manh-cong-nghiep-hoa-147538.aspx>>

² The CPV's report on "some theoretical and practical issues after 30 years of Doi Moi (1986-2016)".

³ The blueprint is titled *Tập trung xây dựng đội ngũ cán bộ các cấp, nhất là cấp chiến lược đủ phẩm chất, năng lực và uy tín, ngang tầm nhiệm vụ* ("Focusing on building up a team of cadres at all levels, especially the strategic one, with sufficient integrity, capabilities and reputation required for their tasks").

⁴ During his tenure as Party Secretary of Quang Ninh province (2011-2015), for example, Mr Chinh oversaw various administrative and institutional reforms, including the pilot programme of merging the positions of party secretary and chairperson of people's committee at local levels.

⁵ According to the World Bank, Vietnam’s total workforce in 2017 was 57,495,020 people. See < <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.IN?locations=VN>>

⁶ This is exclusive of the armed forces and retirees.

⁷ For example, in May 2013, the seventh plenum of the eleventh Central Committee elected Mr Nguyen Thien Nhan and Mrs Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan as additional members of the Politburo.

⁸ This is based on the author’s observation that from 1991 to 2016, 16 out of the 20 non-Politburo members of the CPV Secretariat were eventually elected into the Politburo.

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