

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

**Singapore** | 22 February 2019

---

## **Leadership Reshuffle and the Future of Vietnam’s Collective Leadership**

*Paul Schuler and Mai Truong\**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- On 23 October 2018, Vietnam’s National Assembly confirmed General Secretary of Vietnam’s Communist Party, Nguyen Phu Trong, as president, following the sudden death of the President Tran Dai Quang.
- Trong is the first person to hold both titles since 1986. Some argue that the merger is either temporary or will not bring about substantive changes to the country’s politics. Others suggest that by merging the posts of the president and the party secretary, Vietnam is following the one-man rule model found in China under President Xi Jinping.
- The implications are more likely to be somewhere in between. The surprising leadership reshuffle was not merely a matter of temporary convenience. Documents and ideological views expressed within the party presaged this change. At the same time, the merger will not automatically produce a strongman for Vietnam due to the continued institutional power of the prime minister position.
- The change will have the most impact if Nguyen Xuan Phuc becomes the next General Secretary, as he will be able to combine his influence within the state sector with control over the party machinery.
- The blurring of the division between party and government will decrease the power of Vietnam’s National Assembly, which is one of the most active in the Communist world past or present. This will be accelerated if Phuc becomes the general secretary in 2021.

*\* Guest writers, Paul Schuler is Assistant Professor at the School of Government and Public Policy, University of Arizona, and Mai Truong is a PhD student at the same university.*

## INTRODUCTION

On 28 January 2016, when asked about democracy in Vietnam, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Nguyen Phu Trong, told AFP that the superiority of Vietnamese politics lies in “collective leadership, and individual responsibility.”<sup>1</sup> The Secretary even raised a rhetorical question: “How can we consider a country democratic if one leader holds so much concentrated power?” His pride in Vietnamese democratic values likely lay in the “four pillars” [tứ trụ] design in which political power was dispersed across four individual leaders: the party general secretary, the prime minister, the president and the chair of the Vietnam National Assembly (VNA). However, two and a half years later, on 23 October 2018, Trong appeared to contradict his words. Following the death of President Tran Dai Quang, Trong was confirmed by the VNA as the new President, signaling a potential erosion of the aforementioned hallowed principle. He received votes from 99.8% of lawmakers, making him the first to hold both titles since Truong Chinh briefly occupied both positions in 1986.<sup>2</sup>

Trong’s confirmation as both the general secretary and president raises the question: What implications does such a move have for politics in Vietnam? Commentators provide two diverging answers. The first view downplays the importance, arguing either that the change is temporary, or that it does not constitute a substantive change. Carl Thayer, for example, told BBC Vietnam immediately following the change that this arrangement was simply a provisional response of the party to the sudden death of the former president.<sup>3</sup> Ha Hoang Hop, a visiting fellow at Singapore’s ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, also suggested that Vietnam might have two separate positions in the 2021 Party Congress after Trong’s retirement.<sup>4</sup> From a similar perspective, some argue that given the power structure of the country’s political system, even if the merger is institutionalized, it does not bring substantive political changes to Vietnam. This is because among the “four pillars,” the presidency is the least powerful position. The office of state president is largely symbolic, and without any substantive power<sup>5</sup>.

By contrast, commentators such as Nguyen Khac Giang, the lead political researcher at the Vietnam Institute for Economic and Policy Research (VEPR) in Hanoi, assert that this unprecedented power concentration foreshadows Vietnam’s path toward the one-man rule model found in China under Xi Jinping.<sup>6</sup> This argument implies that Trong as well as his successor will wield powers commensurate to those of President and General Secretary Xi Jinping in China.

In this piece, it is argued that both perspectives carry some truth, but that the likely impact lies somewhere in between. First, unlike those skeptical of the importance of the change, there is evidence that the change fulfills the ideological ambitions of some within the party expressed even before Quang’s death. At the same time, the change is unlikely to result in a position as strong as the General Secretary’s position in China. Given the relative independence of the government from the party, the greatest threat to collective leadership will be if a sitting prime minister takes over the newly empowered general-secretary position. Any concentration of power will also decrease the power of the VNA, which is historically one of the most active in the communist world.

## **WHY THIS POLITICAL RESHUFFLE MAY BE PERMANENT**

Starting with the question whether the change is temporary, a close look at the party's strategies suggests that some have deliberately prepared for this political arrangement. First, Vietnam has experimented with "unifying" party and government posts at the local level for many years.<sup>7</sup> The pilot programme was implemented at the commune level in Quang Ninh province in 2002. At the district level in Quang Ninh, Co To district began this dual model in 1994. The success of the pilot programme led to Resolution 18 on October 2017, providing legal basis for streamlining the state apparatus. The capital city, Hanoi, is also preparing a pilot programme to merge the two positions at all administrative levels.<sup>8</sup>

More importantly, one of the key backers of these experiments, Pham Minh Chinh, is a Politburo member and head of the Central Organization Committee and some consider him a possible future general secretary.<sup>9</sup> Outside of Chinh, the idea of merging the two highest positions in Vietnamese politics has been occasionally discussed within the Central Committee.<sup>10</sup> For example, former General Secretary Le Kha Phieu suggested merging the general secretary and president positions in 1999, and then restated his view in 2002. In addition, the party has rearranged a few central organizations to centralize power. For example, the party has combined different corruption units within the Ministry of Public Security.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps more importantly, Nguyen Phu Trong was given a position on the Central Police Commission, a post that previous party secretaries did not hold.

Second, both preceding and following the change, the party mobilized arguments in defense of increased centralization. Ahead of the change, the party emphasized some shortcomings of the "collective leadership" model. This model makes it challenging for the party to control the government. In an effort to rein in the government, Trong has exposed corruption cases involving some high-ranking officials in the Ministry of Public Security, especially Phan Van Anh Vu, Tran Viet Tan and Bui Van Thanh.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, others have argued that Vietnam's dualistic governance system saddles the bureaucracy with an overly large, inefficient bureaucracy.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, following the change, *Nhan Dan*, the party mouthpiece, sent a clear message that this leadership reshuffle was not an ad hoc response. The article emphasized three reasons why the merger increases the party's strength and improves the political system.<sup>14</sup> First, this political move is simply a natural development, and in most other countries in the Communist bloc, the head of the party also serves as the head of state. The article also reminds readers that Ho Chi Minh held dual positions as the general secretary and the president. Second, the article suggests that such a move was not possible during the Doi Moi era because the party focused its priority on developing the economy to lift the country out of hardship, seeming to imply that the divide between the party and state was wider than is the case now. Finally, the article argues that this move simply institutionalizes Article 4 of the Constitution. By marshaling these arguments in such an official venue, the party suggests that such a move is more than temporary.

## **TRONG IS NOT THE XI JINPING OF VIETNAM**

The previous section suggests that the merger is not an ad hoc change. Does this mean that Trong will become a strongman? On the surface, what Trong has done since he entered his

second term as general secretary suggests that it is possible. During the 12<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2016, he defeated his rival, Nguyen Tan Dung, and was re-elected as General Secretary. At the age of 71, he was ineligible for serving a second term as General Secretary, but the party granted him a special exemption.<sup>15</sup>

Immediately upon commencing his second term, the General Secretary made an unprecedented move by participating in the Party Committee of the Ministry of Public Security. Prior to 2016, only the prime minister and the president had been present in the Party Committee of this ministry.<sup>16</sup> What is most suggestive of his consolidation of power during his second-term as the General Secretary is his large-scale anti-corruption campaign that targeted many high-profile party members. The two most prominent targets were Dinh La Thang, the Vietnamese Communist Party Secretary of Ho Chi Minh City and Politburo member, and Trinh Xuan Thanh, the former General Director of Petro Vietnam's Construction Corporation. This is the first time in the history of Vietnamese politics that a Politburo member has faced trial and a long-term prison sentence.<sup>17</sup> In this vein, Trong resembles Xi Jinping in China.

However, the broader context suggests that he is not likely to be the primary beneficiary of this move. Given that he is already 74 years old, it is not likely that he will break the two-term norm. In fact, upon hearing his confirmation, he reportedly expressed his discomfort and anxiety about this change.<sup>18</sup> This, combined with the party's ideological efforts to support the change, suggests that granting Trong both positions is more rooted in a party-wide effort to change the system than to empower Trong personally.

### **WILL THE NEXT GENERAL SECRETARY BE A STRONGMAN LIKE XI JINPING?**

While Trong will not be the next Xi, the more relevant question is whether the next secretary will take advantage of the consolidated role. To answer this question, it is worth reviewing the structure of the political system of Vietnam compared to China. Two important differences stand out.

First, the division between party and government in the Vietnamese system is stronger than in China. The CPV delegates greater authority and independence to the prime minister.<sup>19</sup> The Constitution grants the prime minister the power to ensure "the overall management of the economy." Also, the prime minister has the ability to appoint ministers through the Office of the Government. By contrast, China has Party Leading Small Groups, which play the leading role in policy formation and policy oversight. In Vietnam's case, therefore, without direct oversight from the party, the prime minister has more resources to build an independent power base. For example, former Prime Minister Dung was able to mobilize economic power, especially in the state sector. This distinct feature of the Vietnamese system implies that the power of the general secretary vis-à-vis the prime minister is weaker than that in China.

Second, Vietnam's Central Committee is more powerful than in the Chinese case. In Vietnam, the Central Committee is arguably the most powerful party institution, and operates on a more level playing field with the Politburo.<sup>20</sup> Since 1990, the Central Committee has included an increasing proportion of provincial leaders.<sup>21</sup> Because of its

power, the Central Committee occasionally checks the Politburo's decisions, which is rarely seen in China. For example, in 2002, the Central Committee voted against the Politburo's wish to retain Le Kha Phieu as the General Secretary. In 2012, the Central Committee dramatically rebuffed Trong and the Politburo's attempt to oust Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung.<sup>22</sup> Although the Central Committee has advocated for Trong to hold two positions, potentially increasing the power of the general secretary, the power of the Central Committee should be able to rein in any excessive centralization of power on the part of the General Secretary.

Given these differences, the next general secretary, even if that person is simultaneously the president, will not necessarily centralize power to the degree that the general secretary does in China. This is due to the persistent power of the prime minister's position. However, potentially for also this reason, one possible path by which collective leadership could be undermined would be if Nguyen Xuan Phuc takes the helm as General Secretary. This is because Phuc would be able to marry his connections within the government, built over a term as prime minister, with control over the party institutions. Indeed, this same logic partially explains why Dung's potential ascension to the general secretary position in 2016 held such important implications. Although Phuc may not seem like a strongman ruler, many said the same of Xi ahead of his promotion to general secretary.

## **THE VNA COULD BE WEAKER**

One additional implication of the shift, if it becomes permanent, will be its impact on the VNA. Among single-party communist regimes in the world, the VNA is one of the most active. Several features stand out that make the VNA more active than other communist legislatures. First, the party allows the legislature to conduct televised query sessions of government officials during its legislative sessions. Second, in 2012, the VNA institutionalized regular votes of confidence for the government officials. The votes of confidence, which are made public, are applied to all the ministers including the prime minister and the VNA leadership. Finally, the legislature simply meets more regularly. Compared to the one-week annual plenary session that is typical in China, the VNA meets twice for more than two months per year.

Why the increased strength? It is because the party uses the VNA to indirectly challenge the government.<sup>23</sup> During 1980s, after delegating greater authority to the government, the party empowered the legislature to shift the blame for poor performance to the government without criticizing the party.<sup>24</sup> For this reason, a greater consolidation of power within the party leadership should diminish the need for an active legislature. While we do not expect to see the party do away with query sessions and votes of confidence, we do expect that if the centralization of power within the party continues, the VNA should see its role decline. Query sessions will become less active and confidence vote more formalistic.

## **CONCLUSION**

Vietnam has long relied on a remarkably collective leadership structure compared to other single-party regimes. While Vietnam's recent leadership reshuffle does not end that structure, it is not a mere cosmetic or temporary change. Rather, it is congruent with the

strategy of some in the party frustrated with the collective leadership structure, to streamline the state apparatus. This move helps the party improve central control and increases efficiency in decision making.

However, given that General Secretary Trong is unlikely to break the two-term norm, he will not become a strongman of Vietnam. While his successor will be in a stronger position than previous general secretaries, whether this will end collective leadership in Vietnam depends on whether a sitting prime minister takes over the position of party secretary.

If Phuc does this, the move would likely minimize the division between the party and the government. In such a situation, it is highly likely that Vietnam will hew closer to the one-man rule model found in China under President Xi Jinping. Consequently, the legislature, a channel for the party to indirectly control government officials, would also lose its power dramatically.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.baodanang.vn/channel/5399/201601/tong-bi-thu-nguyen-phu-trong-dai-hoi-bieu-thi-ro-tinh-than-dan-chu-doan-ket-2467061/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://laodong.vn/thoi-su/tong-bi-thu-nguyen-phu-trong-trung-cu-chu-tich-nuoc-voi-9979-phieu-bau-637613.lido>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam-45781281>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in\\_depth/combination-of-party-s-chief-and-president-positions-maybe-a-temp-solution-10042018124458.html](https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in_depth/combination-of-party-s-chief-and-president-positions-maybe-a-temp-solution-10042018124458.html)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/vietnam-president-describes-as-low-key-man/4584447.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/is-vietnam-going-the-way-of-china/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://dantri.com.vn/chinh-tri/nhat-the-hoa-bi-thu-chu-tich-ubnd-dan-keu-la-phai-toi-lap-tuc-giam-sat-ngay-20180816104043334.htm>

<sup>8</sup> <https://dantri.com.vn/xa-hoi/ha-noi-se-thi-diem-bi-thu-kiem-chu-tich-ubnd-quan-phuong-20180115182238691.htm>

<sup>9</sup> See Ha Hoang Hop and Lye Liang Fook. 2019. "Communist Party of Vietnam Laying the Groundwork for New Leadership." *ISEAS*. January 25, 2019.

<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/commentaries/item/8964-communist-party-of-vietnam-laying-the-groundwork-for-new-leadership-by-ha-hoang-hop-and-lye-liang-fook>

<sup>10</sup> <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Vietnam-edges-toward-China-s-model-of-centralized-rule>

<sup>11</sup> <https://dantri.com.vn/chinh-tri/thay-doi-the-nao-trong-to-chuc-cac-co-quan-chong-tham-nhung-20181113112225209.htm>

<sup>12</sup> <http://danlambaovn.blogspot.com/2018/08/nguyen-phu-trong-don-uong-e-bung-tran.html>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.qdnd.vn/thuc-hien-hieu-qua-nghi-quyet-trung-uong-iv-khoa-xii-cua-dang/nhat-the-hoa-de-tinh-gian-bo-may-503453>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.nhandan.com.vn/chinhtri/item/37822002-tong-bi-thu-dong-thoi-la-chu-tich-nuoc-bao-dam-tang-cuong-suc-manh-va-hoan-thien-he-thong-chinh-tri.html>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/28/world/asia/vietnam-communist-party-nguyen-phu-trong.html>

<sup>16</sup>

[https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam/2016/09/160925\\_nguyenphutrong\\_police\\_party\\_board](https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam/2016/09/160925_nguyenphutrong_police_party_board)

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.voatiengviet.com/a/dinh-la-thang-hoang-trung-hai-nguyen-phu-trong/4170550.html>

<sup>18</sup> <https://vietnamnet.vn/vn/thoi-su/media/tong-bi-thu-nguyen-phu-trong-lam-chu-tich-nuoc-dau-an-nhan-su-2018-492333.html>

<sup>19</sup> Abrami, Regina, Edmund Malesky, and Yu Zheng. "Vietnam through Chinese Eyes: Divergent Accountability in Single Party Regimes." In *Why Communism Did Not Collapse*, edited by Martin Dimitrov. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Abuza, Zachary. "The Lessons of Le Kha Phieu: Changing Rules in Vietnamese politics." *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, April 2002: 121-145.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Vuving, Alexander. "Vietnam in 2012: A Rent-Seeking State on the Verge of a Crisis." *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2013: 323-347.

<sup>23</sup> See Schuler, Paul. 2018. "Position Taking or Position Ducking? A Theory of Public Debate in Single-Party Legislatures." *Comparative Political Studies*.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<p><i>ISEAS Perspective</i> is published electronically by:</p> <p><b>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</b></p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: Malcolm Cook, Lee Poh Onn, Benjamin Loh and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
--	---	--