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Previewing Vietnam’s Leadership Transition in 2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), scheduled to take place in January 2021, will introduce new leaders to lead the country until 2026.
- Seven members of the current Politburo who turn 65 before September 2020 will have to retire, and at least seven new members will be added. The top candidates for these positions will be non-Politburo members of the current CPV Secretariat.
- The CPV will likely revert to the so-called “four-pillar” power structure, under which the top four leadership positions are held by four different politicians. If so:
 - Mr Tran Quoc Vuong, currently Standing Member of CPV Secretariat, will be the strongest candidate to become the next CPV general secretary.
 - The top candidate for the state president position is Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh.
 - Deputy Prime Minister Vuong Dinh Hue is the favoured candidate to become the new government head.
 - The National Assembly chair position may be a race between Mrs Truong Thi Mai, Head of CPV Mass Mobilization Commission, and Mr Pham Minh Chinh, Head of CPV Personnel and Organization Commission.
- The next CPV leadership needs to address the under-representation of Southern politicians in the Party’s top echelons to avoid potential problems for the country in the long run.

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INTRODUCTION

The 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) is scheduled to take place in January 2021. A few months after that, a new government will be formed to lead the country until 2026. As usual, what personnel changes the congress will introduce have long become the centre of public attention and generated a lot of speculation. While this is largely expected given the secrecy shrouding the Party's high politics and the importance of the leadership changes for the country, it also provides Vietnam watchers with an opportunity to examine the country's political dynamics and offer their assessment of such changes and its implications.

This paper analyses the factors shaping the CPV's forthcoming leadership changes, the prospects of top candidates, and implications of the CPV's change of guards for Vietnam's politics. It starts by discussing the power configuration at the top level of the CPV before analysing likely changes in the CPV's Politburo, the country's top policy-making body. Finally, the paper highlights the potential candidates for the country's top four leadership positions and their prospects of election.

TOP POWER CONFIGURATION

Any meaningful prediction about Vietnam's forthcoming leadership change must take into account the top leadership configuration. This configuration will shape not only the eligibility and prospects of candidates for top positions, but also the political dynamics within the CPV's Politburo and Central Committee. Before October 2018, Vietnam's top leadership had been structured around the traditional so-called "four-pillar" model. Accordingly, the top four positions (namely CPV general secretary, state president, prime minister, and chair of the National Assembly) were held by four different politicians. However, after the sudden passing of President Tran Dai Quang in September 2018, CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong was elected by the National Assembly one month later to concurrently hold the state president position, effectively switching the top leadership structure into a "three-pillar" one. Therefore, an important question is whether the CPV will stick with that power structure or return to the traditional "four-pillar" configuration at its next congress.

When Mr Nguyen Phu Trong was elected to the state presidency, the issue of Vietnam's paramount leadership structure was highly controversial. Some analysts and retired senior officials publicly endorsed the 'three-pillar' model, arguing that it was the "right time" for Vietnam to switch to this model.¹ Others suspected that it was a temporary measure taken out of political convenience. Developments do suggest that Mr Trong is holding the state presidency only temporarily and it is highly likely that the CPV will return to the traditional "four-pillar" model at its next congress.

First, Mr Trong himself denied the "merging" of the two positions, claiming that he was just holding the two positions concurrently through an *ad hoc* arrangement forced upon the Party by unforeseen circumstances.² Second, there has been no changes in either the constitution or the CPV regulations to institutionalize the new arrangement. Third, technically, the State President's Office and the Central Office of the CPV have not been

merged and are still operating independently and there has been no discussion about merging the two.

Looking back, the decision to elect Mr Trong to the state presidency rather than embarking on a search for another candidate appeared to be one of political expediency for the CPV as well as its top leadership. Promoting another politician to the president position would have triggered a chain of high-ranking personnel changes, as the Party would have had to look for candidates to fill the vacancies left by not only the new president but also those who took over his or her old position. Such changes should normally be planned ahead and take a lot of time to complete. Looking forward, as Mr Trong is due to retire at the next party congress, front runners vying to replace him would not want the entry of a new politician into the top leadership. This is because the candidate for the general secretary position is normally selected from among the top politicians of the previous term. A new president will therefore make the race more competitive and hurt the chances of the current top leaders to win the position.

The return to the “four-pillar” model is also likely to be supported by the next Politburo and Central Committee for several reasons. First, there remain concerns about the potential long-term consequences of an over-concentration of power if one politician concurrently holds the general secretary and state president positions. Although the Vietnamese political system is dominated by the CPV, it is generally more “pluralistic” than China’s where both positions have long been held by a single politician. Moreover, in Vietnam’s political system, consensus is valued over strong leadership. The “four-pillar” configuration will better serve these purposes, and create a better “check and balance” mechanism among the top leaders. Second, more top positions available mean more room for the CPV to maintain a balanced regional and gender representation at the top. This is a traditional preference of the party. Finally, with more top positions open for competition, there will be more opportunities for prospective Politburo members to be promoted. As such, they have a personal incentive to support the return to the “four-pillar” model.

THE NEXT POLITBURO

In identifying the candidates for the top four positions, an overview of the possible line-up of the next Politburo is needed since only Politburo members are eligible for those positions. According to the Politburo’s Directive No. 35-CT/TW, September 2020 is the cut-off month for deciding the age eligibility of candidates for central-level positions, including Politburo members. As such, current Politburo members who turn 65 before September 2020 will have to retire, except for the one chosen to become the next CPV general secretary. Table 1 shows the 16 active members of the current Politburo and their age eligibility for the next election.³

Among the 16 members, eight are due to retire at the next Party congress. However, as the candidate for the general secretary position is likely to be picked from this group, one of them would then be exempted from the age limit. The remaining eight members who meet the age requirement will likely stay for the next term, except for Mr Hoang Trung Hai, who was disciplined in January for economic mismanagement during his tenure as deputy prime minister. Although he was not expelled from the current Politburo, the fact that he was

removed from the Hanoi Party Secretary position suggests that chances for him to be re-elected into the next Politburo will be low.

Table 1 - Active members of CPV Politburo and their age eligibility for re-election

	Name	DOB	Age by 09/2020	Current Position	Age eligibility
1	Nguyen Phu Trong	14/04/1944	76	General Secretary and State President	No
2	Nguyen Xuan Phuc	20/07/1954	66	Prime Minister	No
3	Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan	12/04/1954	66	Chair of National Assembly	No
4	Tran Quoc Vuong	05/02/1953	67	Standing Member of CPV Secretariat	No
5	Ngo Xuan Lich	20/04/1954	66	Minister of Defence	No
6	Nguyen Thien Nhan	12/06/1953	67	Party Secretary of Ho Chi Minh City	No
7	Tong Thi Phong	10/02/1954	66	Standing Deputy Chair of National Assembly	No
8	Truong Hoa Binh	13/04/1955	65	Standing Deputy Prime Minister	No
9	Pham Binh Minh	26/03/1959	61	Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs	Yes
10	To Lam	10/07/1957	63	Minister of Public Security	Yes
11	Vo Van Thuong	13/12/1970	49	Head of CPV Propaganda and Education Commission	Yes
12	Pham Minh Chinh	10/12/1958	61	Head of CPV Personnel and Organization Commission	Yes
13	Vuong Dinh Hue	15/03/1957	63	Party Secretary of Hanoi, Deputy Prime Minister	Yes
14	Truong Thi Mai	23/01/1958	62	Head of CPV Mass Mobilization Commission	Yes
15	Nguyen Van Binh	04/03/1961	59	Head of CPV Commission of Economic Affairs	Yes
16	Hoang Trung Hai	27/09/1959	61	Head of Document Committee of the 13 th CPV National Congress	Yes

The number of members in the next Politburo remains unknown. However, it should range between 15 and 19, judging from recent congresses, and dependent on the availability of qualified candidates and the CPV's strategic personnel planning. This means that in addition

to the eight Politburo members who are eligible for re-election, the Party will need to add at least seven new members to the new Politburo. The top candidates for these positions will be non-Politburo members of the current CPV Secretariat. They include:

Table 2- Non-Politburo members of CPV's current Secretariat

	Name	DOB	Age by 09/2020	Current Position
1	Luong Cuong	15/08/1957	63	Head of General Political Department, Vietnam People's Army
2	Nguyen Van Nen	14/07/1957	63	Head of CPV Central Office
3	Nguyen Hoa Binh	24/05/1958	62	Chief Justice, Supreme Court
4	Phan Dinh Trac	25/08/1958	62	Head of CPV Commission of Internal Affairs
5	Nguyen Xuan Thang	18/02/1957	63	General Director of Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics
6	Tran Thanh Man	12/08/1962	58	President of Vietnam Fatherland Front
7	Tran Cam Tu	25/08/1961	59	Head of CPV Commission of Inspection

In light of the CPV's emphasis on strategic personnel planning, the Party may want to elect up to 19 Politburo members in order to have a bigger reserve, and thus more choices, for its future leadership positions. As such, some other senior members of the CPV Central Committee may also be considered. They include certain senior government and party officials at both central and local levels, such as deputy prime ministers, ministers/deputy ministers of key ministries, and heads/deputy heads of CPV central commissions, especially those earmarked for promotion. However, it is still too early to name them as politicking and new developments in the next few months may shape their political prospects in different ways. Moreover, the selection of these candidates may depend on the allocation of important government and party seats as well as the availability of positions for which Politburo membership is deemed necessary or justifiable. As such arrangements do not seem to have been finalized, more time is needed for the party leadership to determine the final line-up of the next Politburo.

THE TOP FOUR POSITIONS

This section analyses the potential candidates for the top four positions, i.e. CPV general secretary, state president, prime minister, and chair of the National Assembly.

CPV general secretary

As noted, traditionally, the candidate for the general secretary position is picked from among the top four politicians of the previous term. However, the Standing Member of the CPV Secretariat can also be eligible. For example, before Mr Le Kha Phieu was elected CPV general secretary in December 1997, he was not among the top four but a Standing Member of the Politburo, a title equivalent to Standing Member of the CPV Secretariat.⁴ As

such, Mr Tran Quoc Vuong, the current Standing Member of the CPV Secretariat, will also be an eligible candidate for the general secretary position.

Due to the term limit as well as his advanced age and frail health, Mr Trong will step down from his positions at the next congress. The three candidates to replace him will therefore be Mr Nguyen Xuan Phuc, Mrs Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, and Mr Tran Quoc Vuong. Since all three will have exceeded the age limit of 65 by September 2020, the one picked will be exempted from the age limit to take up that position, while the other two will have to retire.

Among the three, Mrs Ngan appears the most disadvantaged. Historically, since the unification of the country in 1975, the general secretary position has always been held by northerners.⁵ Mrs Ngan hails from the southern province of Ben Tre. Moreover, Vietnam's high politics remains dominated by male politicians, and the chances for a female politician to lead the CPV remain low at this juncture.

Mr Phuc and Mr Vuong therefore appear to be the frontrunners. If the CPV sticks with the "three-pillar" structure, Mr Phuc may stand a better chance given his richer experience at both local and central levels, as well as the strong support he enjoys among local politicians and the business community, thanks to his long stewardship in the executive system. However, if the CPV reverts to the "four-pillar" model, Mr Vuong may have a bigger advantage. His lack of executive and local experience would then no longer be seen as a weakness, while his Northern origin and long track record as a party functionary would become his strengths.

More importantly, given the high-profile anti-corruption campaign under Mr Trong's leadership and the CPV's emphasis on fighting corruption, it is highly likely that Mr Trong would like his successor to carry on his legacy and continue the anti-corruption campaign. Mr Vuong, who used to be the Prosecutor General of the Supreme People's Procuracy and the Head of CPV's Inspection Commission, may be perceived as having better credentials to replace Mr Trong. With his unchallenged control over the party, especially personnel issues, Mr Trong will have a decisive say over the selection of his successor. As such, any candidate endorsed by him will stand a much higher chance.

Prime minister

Because this position requires relevant experiences, especially in economic management, it has since 1986 always been given to the deputy prime minister in charge of economic affairs. As Mr Hoang Trung Hai, who used to serve as deputy prime minister from 2007 to 2016, has been disciplined, he is unlikely to be considered for the job. Among the remaining six Politburo members, only Mr Vuong Dinh Hue and Mr Pham Binh Minh are deputy prime ministers. However, since Mr Minh has mainly been in charge of foreign affairs, Mr Hue, who deals with economic and financial affairs and used to serve as Minister of Finance from 2011 to 2016, stands out as the strongest candidate for the position. At the next session of the National Assembly, Mr Hue may be relieved of the deputy prime minister position so that he can focus on his other job as Hanoi Party Secretary. However, this will not affect his chance to become Vietnam's next prime minister.

State president and chair of the National Assembly

Who among the six remaining members of the Politburo will be promoted to these two positions remains unclear. The bar for them seems lower and in the past, politicians of very different backgrounds and career paths have managed to be elected.

For the state president position, the main contenders include Mr Pham Binh Minh, Mr To Lam, and Mr Pham Minh Chinh. However, Mr Pham Binh Minh, who is a veteran diplomat with good command of English, stands out. As the state president will have to engage extensively in foreign affairs, including bilateral visits and multilateral meetings, Mr Minh will have a considerable advantage over the two other candidates.

For the National Assembly chair position, except for Mr Vo Van Thuong whose relatively young age may be his disadvantage, the remaining Politburo members (Pham Binh Minh, To Lam, Pham Minh Chinh, Truong Thi Mai, Nguyen Van Binh) stand a more or less equal chance of being considered for the position. All of them are currently members of the National Assembly and have different merits to qualify for the position. However, different factors related to their career background, historical ties, and the availability of other positions that may fit them, also affect their chances. For example, while Mr Minh may be nominated for the state president position, Mr Binh's close relationship with former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and Mr Lam's perceived accountability for past corruption problems in the Ministry of Public Security can be liabilities for them both. Therefore, Mrs Mai and Mr Chinh seem to stand out as the most likely candidates for the position. If the CPV prefers a female politician to ensure some level of gender equality in the top four positions, Mrs Mai will be the favoured candidate. Otherwise, Mr Chinh will have a greater chance of being elected.

CONCLUSION

Unlike the 12th CPV National Congress when there was intense competition between two camps, respectively led by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, Vietnam's political environment in the run-up to the 13th CPV National Congress is relatively calm, with Mr Trong having a firm control over preparations for the congress. As such, personnel arrangements for the next term should be smoothly orchestrated. Be that as it may, competition between certain politicians and groups, or unexpected developments in the next few months, may interfere. The Party's return to the "four-pillar" model, while highly likely, also needs to be confirmed at the congress.

One problem that needs to be solved is the under-representation of Southern politicians in the top echelons of the Party. If Mr Vo Van Thuong is asked to wait for his turn in 2026, there will be no Southern politician in the top four positions for the next term. Similarly, if no major changes take place in the next few months, it is likely that there will only be three Southern politicians in the next Politburo. Having a balanced regional representation in national institutions is one of the CPV's goals, but it seems that the unavailability of qualified candidates from the South is making this goal unachievable. Therefore, identifying and training capable politicians from the South will be important for the next CPV leadership to restore some regional balance in its top echelons. Otherwise, the under-representation of the South in the country's top political institutions, together with certain

economic policies that are perceived to be unfair to Southern provinces, may generate unhealthy sentiments among Southerners and potential problems for the country in the future.

¹ A prominent proponent of the ‘three-pillar’ model was Mr Vu Mao, former Head of the Office of the National Assembly. See, for example, “Thời điểm chín muồi để thực hiện Tổng Bí thư làm Chủ tịch nước”, *Voice of Vietnam*, 3 October 2018, <https://magazine.vov.vn/20181003/vumao/index.html>.

² “Tổng bí thư làm Chủ tịch nước không phải là nhất thể hóa mà là tình huống”, *Thanh Nien*, 8 October 2018, <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/tong-bi-thu-lam-chu-tich-nuoc-khong-phai-la-nhat-the-hoa-ma-la-tinh-huong-1011236.html>

³ Three members not included in the table are Tran Dai Quang (deceased), Dinh The Huynh (seriously ill), and Dinh La Thang (dismissed).

⁴ After the 8th National Congress in 1996, the CPV replaced its Secretariat with a Politburo Standing Committee. After the 9th Congress in 2001, however, the CPV abolished the Politburo Standing Committee and reinstated its Secretariat.

⁵ Mr Nguyen Van Linh, then Party Secretary of Ho Chi Minh City, was elected CPV general secretary in 1986, but he was born and brought up in the North.

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