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The Sixth Plenum in Vietnam: Thunder Without Rain

By David Koh

INTRODUCTION

The Communist Party of Vietnam holds a monopoly on power in that country, but that has never prevented competition for the highest offices among its elite members. The competition usually takes place when it is time for the Party National Congress, which is held once every five years.

It has only been two years since the 11th Party Congress was held – in January 2011, and political competition among elite members should therefore be quite out of season. But that is not the case. There is infighting going on at the Party's highest level. The Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung has been openly challenged.

This demonstrates the impatience of some of those involved. The outcome, however, has not gone their way.

The immediate effect of the confrontation is political instability; it has also acted as a great distraction from the central project of reforming the economy. But there is a upside to this: it brings about a rebalancing of power which has over the years been more and more concentrated in the hands of a few.

This essay examines the intricacies of this latest political contest.

LEADERSHIP COMPETITION

The top prizes in the Communist Party of Vietnam are about getting voted into the Central Committee (200 seats); into the Political Bureau (15-17 seats) and Central Committee

Secretariat (ten seats); and the top four positions of office, which are head of Party (General Secretary), head of Government (Prime Minister), head of State (State President), and Chairman of National Assembly. These four positions have always been occupied by members of the Political Bureau.

The mechanism that mediates the contests for positions at the central and national level are the Party elections held at the Party National Congress. Provincial Party chapters have their congresses as well, and elections are held then to fill roughly the same types of posts at their levels.¹

The reason for the off-season challenge is partly because the results of the election held at 11th Party National Congress in January 2011 did not satisfy most people. There was a race to replace the retiring General Secretary, Nong Duc Manh, and at least two candidates were considered the strongest contenders: Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, and Party Standing Secretary Truong Tan Sang. Both had been serving in the Political Bureau since the mid-1990s, and by 2011 both were among the most senior members of the Bureau, a precondition for becoming General Secretary. The Prime Minister led by a nose by virtue of experience. In the end, neither succeeded, and in the event, the PM also survived an assault on his position to stay on for another term. Truong Tan Sang, assumed by many to have been largely behind the attack on the PM, took up the largely ceremonial post of State President. A third person, Party theoretician Nguyen Phu Trong received the blessings of the Party to become the new Secretary General.

While competition was always allowed, that of the 11th Party National Congress was particularly intense and tenacious. In particular then Party Standing Secretary Truong Tan Sang, responsible for overseeing the daily management of the Party and national affairs from 2006-2011, was suspected of leaking news of huge losses exceeding several billions of USD incurred by the state conglomerate Vinashin. News also spread that several more conglomerates were in serious trouble.

State conglomerates were under the purview of the PM.

The failed assault on the PM was followed by a temporary truce. Trouble began to brew almost immediately when Truong Tan Sang after becoming the State President in May 2011, showed greater pro-activeness than his predecessors and visited places at home and overseas, demonstrating a resolve to change the office rather than have the office change him. By the middle of 2011, the Party had decided to restructure the loss-making conglomerates, thus hitting at interest groups linked to the PM. The rumour mill churned gossip about specific state conglomerates about to go bust, and which banks the government was going to force to close to safeguard the banking sector, which was suffering a huge non-performing loan debt of about 10 per cent.

¹ An elaborate process of congresses of lower level Party bodies lasting more than two years precedes the National Congress. Lower level congresses elect their own office holders as well as delegates to attend the congress at the next higher level, and so on and so forth, leading all the way up to the national level.

News about the losses of the conglomerates continued breaking until the end of 2011. At the same time, the General Secretary was contemplating a rectification of the Party in light of the perceived larger degree of corruption, seen to be the main cause of losses suffered by state enterprises. When the rectification campaign was announced at the 4th Plenum (December 2011) of the Central Committee, a widely believed interpretation was that the political struggle at the 11th Party Congress had not abated; the 4th Plenum resolution had the PM and his friends as the target. Although it remains to be verified whether the PM was indeed such a target, it should be noted that in political competition in Vietnam, oblique and indirect attacks are quite the norm.

Political observers also noted an apparent partnership between the General Secretary and the State President, with the two making speeches that emphasized the need to eliminate corrupt leaders from the Party. A source that this author spoke to at the beginning of the campaign, however, dismissed the idea of such a conspiracy: the desire to clean up the Party was that of the General Secretary, while the State President saw this as an opportunity to hit out at the PM and to continue the effort to remove him.

Throughout 2011, there were numerous news commentaries and conferences dedicated to establishing the revisions to be made to the State Constitution in the coming few years. While many articles in the Constitution needed urgent revision, those pertaining to increasing the power of the State President beyond ceremonial roles and formal powers of appointment of top officials received the most attention. These had the potential to initiate a rebalancing of power in the country.

The Party rectification that the 4th Plenum mandated, however, was inspiring to many because it was a “shower to cleanse the Party that begins from the top.” Thus the process started with criticisms and self-criticisms of the Political Bureau, the Party Secretariat, and the Central Committee. The General Secretary mandated the collection of criticisms of top leaders from leading and retired members of the Central Committee, and this information led to the writing of a report criticizing the three major bodies of the Party. This led to very lively speculation at the top level; at the same time, a clearly out-of-bounds blog page called Quan Lam Bao appeared in May 2012 to provide very detailed information and to launch a one-sided attack on the PM and top national officials supposedly close to him, linking them to important policy changes such as economic and financial sector structuring, and interpreting those changes as favouring cronies. This blog was distinguished by its avoidance of criticisms of the State President and the General Secretary, leading to speculations that it was the work of the former to attack the PM.

It was in this tinderbox that the 6th Plenum met from 1st to 15th October 2012, amidst great expectations that the PM would at the end of it lose a confidence vote in the Central Committee. The Political Bureau tabled a report on the criticisms and self-criticisms of its top leaders. At this point, an unexpected turn of events added further intrigue to what was already a highly secretive process. The Political Bureau recommended fully (“100%”) to the Central Committee that the Political Bureau be disciplined for serious mistakes in the management of the country, in particular “a comrade of the Political Bureau” (widely

understood to be PM Nguyen Tan Dung). However, the Central Committee decided not to accept the recommendation. Instead, it asked the Political Bureau to reflect and focus on correcting its mistakes, and did not comment further publicly on the fate of the PM. But the fact that he was not removed from the Political Bureau shows that the PM has survived a bruising battle.

This result reversed the top-down decision-making process, in particular, the relationship between the Central Committee and Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Vietnam. In common practice, the Political Bureau “recommends” and the Central Committee accepts. The Central Committee instead went its own way, suggesting that a separate process unseen by the public took place within the Central Committee and this ended in favour of the PM. This process was most probably a call to vote, and it would be right to assume that the PM had a majority of votes supporting him in the Central Committee. This was despite the fact that he was out-voted in the Political Bureau, 13-1.

What accounts for the support from the Central Committee for the PM? Explanations by observers have centered on two political dynamics surrounding the Committee itself.

First, who was to decide on disciplinary matters pertaining to Nguyen Tan Dung? Given that Nguyen Tan Dung was voted into the Political Bureau by the Central Committee, disciplinary matters pertaining to him had to be decided by the latter. Such matters are usually decided by votes—a simple majority would suffice. There are 175 voting members in the Central Committee. The blog Quan Lam Bao hinted that the PM had 95 votes in his favour, more than the majority of 88/175² required. Another source said it was more than 120 who favoured the PM.

The second explanation says there was no candidate suitable at the moment to replace Nguyen Tan Dung as PM. This person would have also to be a Political Bureau member and must have had experience in running the economy. Speculations were strong about former DPM Nguyen Sinh Hung, but at the Central Committee (according to Quan Lam Bao) meeting, he spoke in a reconciliatory tone about the need to give any individual a second chance to correct his mistakes. Among his peers, however, PM Nguyen Tan Dung is usually accorded respect for his decisiveness and vision, which no others supposedly could match.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Yet, observers have largely neglected other important considerations that could have posed as rational and strong arguments to persuade Central Committee members that while Nguyen Tan Dung has been at fault for poor management, the entire Party also has to shoulder a substantial part of the responsibility as well. Thus, it was wiser – and fair – for Nguyen Tan Dung to be retained and to be made to correct his management mistakes. These considerations are as follows.

² Only Full Members of the Central Committee (175) are allowed to vote. The other 25 are Alternate Members.

1. Broad policy directions, such as the maintenance of the state's direct role in the economy through the use of state enterprises, was not an initiative of the PM, but a collective decision of the Party. The policy document that set down the decision to establish state conglomerates such as Vinashin, which went bankrupt in 2010, was discussed widely and agreed to by the Party National Congress in 2006. No doubt the current PM took responsibility in drafting the document, but it had to be approved by top leaders at that time. The PM was, however, definitely at fault for moving too fast in setting up the conglomerates and pumping funds into them without due consideration for profitability.

2. At the 11th Party National Congress in January 2011, 21 months ago, the Congress approved the Political Report as well as the Socio-Economic Report (the latter basically a report on the Government's work). The latter basically is an acknowledgement of the achievements of the Government, which the PM heads. While all reports mentioned shortcomings of the office holders and organizations, adoption of the report means a passing mark for the Government. On that basis, the PM stood for reelection into the Central Committee and the Political Bureau, and was appointed to be the PM for a second term. There was a nagging thought that 21 months were insufficient to assess the performance of the PM. His rivals were of the opposite opinion, understandably.

3. The decision to retain the PM despite his alleged serious mistakes granted him a chance to correct them and make amends, is, it should be said as well, as Vietnamese as the bowl of *pho* on the dining table. Forgiveness and *repeated forgiveness* is common in how the Vietnamese deal with each other on a daily basis, and it is a way to maintain relationships. The question is, to what extents will the Vietnamese people be able to repeatedly forgive incompetence in governance and to what extents are demands for accountability suppressed.

4. A fear exists that disunity within the Party will lead to its breakdown, its split, and the end of the regime. The General Secretary said as much when he mentioned in his closing speech at the 6th Plenum that the Party must be careful in not allowing "enemy forces" from exploiting the current problems to threaten the regime. In fact, one blogger even pointed out that the mistakes of the PM are small in comparison with the mistakes of the Communist Party between 1954-1956, when land reforms the Party undertook went awry and resulted in the death of many innocents. At that time, the General Secretary of the Party Truong Chinh resigned to take responsibility, but remained in the Political Bureau for thirty more years until his death.

EFFECTS OF THE POLITICAL STRUGGLE

Increased apathy on one side, and increased determination on the other to reform the country and the communist system are likely to be the first effects of this political struggle. Vietnamese society is increasingly vocal because of the social media, and it has shown its power in the political contest just passed. Blogs emerged as alternate sources of information and interpretation and they vocalize demands on the political leadership more than ever before. At the same time, however, repeated leadership contests that fail to put in capable and strong leaders who can bring fundamental and speedy change in governance have also led to much despair and apathy among intellectuals, and even the wealthy. Many of them have found other outlets for their aspirations, including migration.

Thus while the communist system may survive because it controls the key levers of power, the regime is likely to suffer even more severe challenges of legitimacy than before. Leadership competition without resolution is likely to encourage all contestants and their supporters to use ever more radical and desperate measures to eradicate the competition. While unity against outside forces has been a moderating force, and this was formed by memories of the war against foreign aggressors, such memories are fading away, generation by generation.

AN ASSESSMENT: VIETNAM'S LEADERSHIP CRISES

Following 1986, when Doi Moi reforms first began, members of the Communist Party elite have always been unable to achieve strong consensus over who should occupy the top seats of the Party. The table below is a summary of the major events of leadership succession since 1988.

Year	Reason for contest	Outcome and context
1988	Incumbent PM died suddenly. Country in the throes of reform	Customarily there was only one candidate for election recommended by the Party, but the National Assembly agreed to have two instead, which led to a competitive election within the Assembly. The Party's candidate, seen as conservative and less dynamic, won by 60% against 40%.
1996	Eighth Party National Congress; further reforms desired	Aged leaders continued for another term due to lack of consensus regarding succession.
1998	Mid-Term Party National Congress; Asian Financial Crisis meant new leaders desired	Succession issues left over from two years before were resolved. Leaders agreed to become Advisors, in favour of a new set of leaders in all three top positions. But great dissatisfaction arose from the choice of a general as the Party chief, and the establishment of a new powerful body – the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau – leading to concentration of power in a few hands

2001	9 th Party National Congress	Consensus achieved on succeeding leaders only at the eleventh hour. General Le Kha Phieu was forced to retire because he tried to concentrate power in his own hands. Nong Duc Manh became General Secretary as the consensus, rather than as the best, candidate.
2006	10 th Party National Congress	Failed attempt by some Party members to prevent the General Secretary Nong Duc Manh from entering a second term. Manh was seen as incompetent but there was no consensus on successor or challenger to him. New State President Nguyen Minh Triet and new PM Nguyen Tan Dung elected.
2011	11 th Party National Congress	Nguyen Phu Trong was the consensus and successful candidate to be next General Secretary. He was seen as conservative and his ascendance did not bring optimism to the country. Truong Tan Sang became State President in May 2011 signaling more future challenges for PM Nguyen Tan Dung
2011 and 2012	4 th Plenum and 6 th Plenum of the Central Committee	The 4 th Plenum of the Central Committee in December 2011 issued a resolution on the rectification of Party members; 6 th Plenum in October 2012 discussed criticism and self-criticism of top Party leaders, with an obvious focus on the PM. Attempt to unseat PM Nguyen Tan Dung failed.

The lack of competent and universally acclaimed leaders in successive generations has been an important reason, given that many dynamics other than merit and performance are at work in the promotion of officials. The lack of consensus shows that since 1986, power to decide on the choice of top leaders has not been concentrated in the hands of a few, unlike during the Vietnam War. The 6th Plenum saw an occasion for the Central Committee to exercise a prerogative over the wishes of the Political Bureau, and the dynamics of political succession in Vietnam will now become even more complicated. The Central Committee has become a very important body where any candidate wishing to become a top leader must have strong caucuses of support. This was evident in the case of Nguyen Tan Dung at the 6th Plenum. In terms of numbers and authority in the Party, the Central Committee has made an important mark in exercising its authority, a precedent to be referred to in the future.

If the ballot box within the Central Committee becomes an important tool of decision on top leaders, then we can also expect individual leaders to cater to the interests of the caucuses and even make decisions to win votes rather than in the national interest.

The current leadership conflict can be seen in the context of a contest over the authoritarian allocation of political values. Indeed, who and what the government is, the obligations of one-party governments towards the people, and the rising inequalities and income gaps in this socialist country are vexing questions for the current regime. The answers to all of them are so far mainly negative. If the PM and his government had pursued quick growth but taken better care of social policies to prevent inequalities from becoming glaring, allowed some companies to take advantage of government monopolies but also emphasized

their corporate social obligations, as well as put in strong safeguards in government and state business to prevent abuses, then the PM could have well received the endorsement of his critics now. If he had succeeded to do these things in the first term 2006-2011, then undoubtedly he would have become the undisputed and acclaimed candidate to become General Secretary in 2011. An opportunity for greatness is lost.

Instead, in the next few years, we are likely to see curbs put on his power, since constitutional amendments to be approved by 2016 (when the next Party National Congress will be held) will move some powers of government to the State President (including some powers over foreign affairs matters and senior appointments). His critics will also continue to scrutinize his every decision carefully now due to the less than ideal track record, and his rival will continue to attack him via any means possible.

What is at stake for the PM is whether he can become General Secretary in the next term. But much more is at stake for the country in 2016. The question is, will Vietnam get a top Party leader who has a legitimacy achieved mainly through a high degree of morality (seen through his decisions and the activities of family members and friends), that will underpin an authority to bring positive changes to the country?

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