

Diplomat

16-1-20

## Another Vietnam Politburo Purge?

*A closer look at one of the storylines developing within Vietnamese politics ahead of next year's National Congress.*

By David Hutt

Is Hoang Trung Hai getting the boot from Vietnam's Politburo amid the countdown to the most consequential political event in the country's politics in 2021? With only 12 months to go until the next National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party, gossip and intrigue are about to reach their peak this year as glimpses of infighting and factional squabbling seep into the public sphere.

On January 10, the Party's Central Inspection Committee took the decision to reprimand Hai, a member of the elite Politburo. This was related to his actions as a former deputy prime minister (2007-2016) in overseeing Thai Nguyen Iron and Steel, a state-run firm at the center of a corruption and mismanagement scandal. At the moment, it is very much only a slap on the wrist. But it could go further if state inspectors decide to follow through with the case. The most extreme outcome could be Hai's dismissal from the Politburo; more probable would be for him to step down as the Party chief of Hanoi.

The Hai controversy has precedent. Back in 2017, the Party chief of Ho Chi Minh City, Dinh La Thang, became the first person in decades to be dismissed from the Politburo over his previous connection to the PetroVietnam scandal, a corruption case that would eventually lead to Thang being sentenced to a lengthy prison term. Just like Thang, Hai is not only stained by corruption allegations from years ago; he is also guilty by his close association with former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung. At the last National Congress in 2016, incumbent Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong saw off a power-play by Dung, who controlled many of the Party's corrupt patronage networks.

Since then, Trong has orchestrated a considerable anti-corruption campaign that has prosecuted dozens of senior Party officials and also gone after known Dung associates, like Thang and, seemingly, now Hai. According to analyst Alexander Vuving, Hai is one of two "close associates" of Dung, and members of the "rent-seeking" wing of the Party, who continue to sit on the Politburo – the other being Nguyen Van Binh.

As with much of Vietnamese politics, Hai's possible removal from either the Politburo or his Hanoi Party chief post (or both) is a Janus-faced move. On the one hand, Trong could remove an ideological opponent who might have been able to marshal his own allies to compete with Trong's preferred candidates ahead the next National Congress. On the other, it could allow Trong to promote his own ally in Hai's place. Indeed, if rumors speak truth, Hai could be replaced as the Hanoi Party chief by Vuong Dinh Hue, a deputy prime minister and architect of many of Vietnam's economic policies.

Hue was the source of one of Trong's most embarrassing moments during his first term as Party general secretary when, in 2013, he endorsed Hue – who at the time headed the Party's

Commission of Economic Affairs – as an additional Politburo member. But the Central Committee, which would ordinarily follow the advice of the Party’s top leader, elected another official instead. (Interestingly enough, getting the nod ahead of Hue was Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, today the National Assembly chairwoman and a top-three candidate to take the Party chief post next year.) This came only a few months after the Central Committee surprisingly overturned the Politburo’s decision, orchestrated by Trong, to discipline Dung.

Clearly, Hue has been a favorite of Trong’s for years. But he is hardly cut from the same cloth. Most of Trong’s allies come either from Ministry of Public Security, the Party’s theoretical institutes, or the provincial Party apparatus. Their focus is on maintaining the Party’s supremacy in politics and tackling corruption. Hue, however, is considered one of the most technocratic of Vietnam’s senior politicians and the brains behind the country’s economic policies. He is not too interested in reasserting Marxist ideology in the Party, a subject he rarely speaks about, nor is he a known anti-corruption crusader.

Hai may well survive the latest scandal. The so-called rent-seekers – the nonideological wing of the Party, who are most concerned about their own fortunes and patronage networks – won’t want to see one of their own thrown under the anti-corruption bus so close to a National Congress. And they will work hard to make sure Hai’s reprimand doesn’t lead to his downfall. We may be able to gauge the strength of the anti-Trong wing of the Party from this episode, in fact. Will there be a broad coalition that forms against Trong ahead of the 2021 National Congress, just as there was an “anything but Dung” coalition in 2016?

Moreover, whether this represents a late surge by Hue to take one of the top four positions – Party general secretary, state president, prime minister and National Assembly chair – at next year’s National Congress waits to be seen. He is certainly a promising candidate. Aged 63, he is one of the youngest members of the current Politburo – and one of the few who will be below the expected retirement age come next year. He is also a northerner, from Nghe An province, which bodes well for Vietnam’s geographical factions. Yet he also has experience in the south, too; since 2016 he has headed the Steering Committee for the Southwest Region. But he doesn’t have experience of local politics that is necessary for a top-four politician – so becoming Party chief of Hanoi this year would fulfill that obligation.

It is entirely feasible to imagine a situation where the current prime minister, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, moves up to the Party chief position at next year’s National Congress (he is probably the front-runner at the moment) and Hue replaces him as prime minister. Both men are almost identical in background and outlook, though Phuc is hardly a close ally of Trong. Then, this would provide Trong will an ally in the next leadership team.

Trong’s preferred candidate of successor as Hanoi Party chief appears, for the time being, to be the anti-corruption czar Tran Quoc Vuong, who is busy raising his profile domestically and internationally. But Vuong is going up against the more experienced Phuc and Ngan, and has made some powerful enemies during his years fighting internal corruption. And if the posts of Party general secretary and state president are permanently merged next year – following Trong’s controversial and almost unprecedented assumption of the presidency at the same time as serving as Party chief in 2018 – Party apparatchiks will want to make sure a trusted and unifying candidate, like Phuc, takes the expanded post, and not a sectarian and one-minded candidate like Vuong.

As such, if the chances of Phuc taking the general-secretary post are now mounting, it might make sense for Trong to push for an ally, like Hue, to become the next prime minister. This would allow Trong to maintain some informal authority after he steps down from front-line politics. But, as is the case in any year leading up to a National Congress, events are far from certain and constantly changing in this blurred, political steeplechase.

*David Hutt is Southeast Asia columnist at The Diplomat based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where he has been based for more than two years*