

The Beginning of a Political Doi Moi? Takeaways From the VCP's Seventh Plenum

The Vietnam Communist Party steps up efforts to reform its inner workings.

By Nicholas Chapman
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The Vietnamese Communist Party's (VCP) Seventh Plenum of the 12th Central Committee meeting took place last week. In the build-up to this event, it was widely anticipated that **we would see new faces** within the Politburo, the top decisionmaking body of the Central Committee. Two seats were in play: one to replace the disgraced Dinh La Thang and the other to replace Dinh The Huynh, who stepped down for medical reasons. It was also rumored that President Tran Dai Quang **would be replaced** on account of health. These rumors were fueled by his month-long absence in August.

However, no new Politburo members were named, while Quang quashed rumors of his ill-health by successfully carrying out his duties as chair for the closing session. What we saw, instead, was a reaffirming of Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong's enduring commitment to renovate the Party.

Trong has already sent clear signals that he is set on cleaning up the Party's image, reining in the crony capitalism heralded under former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, and, in his own words, addressing the "**shortcomings**" of the Party personnel. Indeed, in the lead up to the Seventh Plenum, **David Brown** fully noted the VCP's attempts to punish those engaging in corruption. Dinh La Thang's fall from grace has been widely reported on, with the Seventh Plenum officially expelling him from the Communist Party, and the now infamous Berlin kidnapping incident netted Trinh Xuan Thanh, another corruption suspect.

But high-profile incidents and this "clampdown" are merely stopgap measures to tackle corruption. They send a strong message to those within the Party but to those outside it, they merely confirm suspicions or raise questions as to why the Party let corruption go on for so long. Interestingly, the day after the Seventh Plenum Trong and National Assembly members **met with voters** in Hanoi. Many wondered why the Party had let such corruption scandals get out of hand and pressed the leadership for better mechanisms to prevent, rather than crack down, on corruption.

Nevertheless, the need for the VCP to reform itself was not lost on Trong. During his opening remarks, he made note that many officials in leading positions took advantage of loopholes for their own interests, causing losses and eroding public trust in the Party. He claimed that the force of the "**political system is big but not yet strong.**"

In order to tackle these issues, members of the Central Committee discussed plans to build a contingent of "strategic cadres," who will permeate all levels of government. As is often the case with VCP terminology, the question as to what constitutes a "strategic cadre" remains vague and raises more questions than answers. Nevertheless, **Vietnamese media** reported that a strategic cadre candidate is someone who excels in their position in terms of both management and ethics.

These elite members will serve as the foundation for future membership of the Party's 200-member Central Committee. Highlighting political ethics as a desired virtue certainly sends signals to new and upcoming members. While the high-profile corruption cases and the enforcement of discipline measures have served as a stick, in the



In this July 3, 2015 file photo, VCP General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong gestures during a meeting with the Western press in Hanoi, Vietnam.

Image Credit: AP Photo/Tran Van Minh

fight against corruption this new, strategic cadre unit will serve as the carrot. In other words, the message is clear – engage in wrongdoings and you won't make it to the top.

Trong noted the importance of such a project, declaring that the development of strategic personnel was of such importance, it can determine whether the “**revolution will succeed or fail.**” It echoes the words of former Secretary General Nguyen Van Linh around the time of *Doi Moi*, when he said that the “Party must reform or die.”

The Seventh Plenum also saw a **wage reform proposal**, an attempt to prevent catastrophic economic mismanagement at state-owned enterprises. Currently, leaders of boards are appointed, rather than hired and receive a set monthly wage that fluctuates, but is generally high. Under proposals discussed at the Seventh Plenum, leaders would only be able to receive wages when they meet business targets and protect the company's assets. Failure to do so would result in their termination, and in extreme circumstances being forced to compensate the company.

In addition, ideas on **public salary reform** were discussed. There was a widely held consensus that salary reform must go hand-in-hand with reforming the organizational structure of the political system to produce an effective and efficient civil service.

Last on the agenda was social insurance reform. Social insurance has been identified by the Party as one of the key areas for reform. Certainly, plans to raise the retirement age from 55 to 60 for women and 60 to 62 for men attracted public attention. However, at the Seventh Plenum the draft plan on reforming social insurance received widespread support from Party members. It has been **reported** that the draft plan will seek to increase compulsory social insurance to ensure coverage for everyone. Currently, only 13.9 million out of 53 million employees have joined social insurance.

While we did not see two new faces joining the Politburo at the Seventh Plenum, we certainly witnessed bold new proposals. It is clear that the VCP wishes to renovate itself by producing a more competent, professional bureaucracy – one that is more accountable and responsible, whilst at the same time restructuring its political system. It is trying to show that it can clean up its image whilst resisting democratization.

Until now, *Doi Moi* has largely referred to renovation in the economic sphere. **Commentators** have questioned whether the Party is able to renovate itself without meaningful political reform. Trong's actions are aimed at showing that renovation within the Party is both necessary and possible, but without having to cede ground politically.

Are we seeing the beginning of a political dimension to *Doi Moi*? Time will be the judge. But the Seventh Plenum, at least on the surface, demonstrates that the Party is putting concrete measures in place to renovate itself and gives it a new impetus for the reform agenda.

Nicholas Chapman is a Ph.D. candidate at the International University of Japan specializing in Vietnam's foreign policy, domestic politics, and civil society. He tweets at @nchapman222
