

Thayer Consultancy
ABN # 65 648 097 123



Background Brief:

Rumours Abound About General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong Stepping Down

May 5, 2022

Over the past week rumours have swept the overseas Vietnamese community who oppose the government in Hanoi that General Secretary of the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) Nguyen Phu Trong will step down before his term in office expires and that other leadership changes are going to take place at an important forthcoming party meeting.

Rumours about Trong's stepping down were published on 1st May by journalist Yossi Melman in *Haaretz*, a newspaper published in Israel. Melman wrote about a corruption case involving Israeli arms sales to Vietnam and the role of a prominent Vietnamese businesswoman, Nguyen Thi Thanh Nhan, as broker. Earlier this month, the Ministry of Public Security issued a warrant for her arrest on the grounds of fraud and breach of trust in a matter unrelated to the arms deal.

Melman, quoting a Vietnamese source familiar with the case, reported that the real reason behind Nhan's warrant was a power struggle at the highest levels of Vietnam's one-party state involving the party leader, state president, prime minister and the minister of public security. Melman wrote that "Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong, who is to step down." No further details were given.

The "important forthcoming party meeting" could refer to the fifth executive or plenary session of the VCP Central Committee that just convened or to a rare mid-term party conference rumoured to be scheduled for some time in 2023.

On the morning of 5 May, General Secretary Trong gave the opening address to the fifth plenum and spelled out a detailed six-point agenda. Item six bore the intriguing title, "Regarding the review of the leadership and direction of the Politburo and Secretariat in 2021 in connection with the implementation of the Conclusion of the fourth plenum, 13th Central Committee, on Building and Rectifying the Party and the Political System." There is speculation that the VCP will draft new regulations addressing the procedures if the party General Secretary becomes incapacitated or dies in office.

When the fifth plenum concludes, it can be expected that several relatively high-ranking members of the party will be disciplined for their involvement in corruption scandals or dereliction of duty. Rumours suggest Nguyen Thanh Long, Minister of Health; Chu Ngoc Anh, Chairman of the Hanoi People's Committee; and Tran Tuan Anh, head of the Central Economic Commission, will be reprimanded.

Secretary General Trong, who is serving an unprecedented third term in office, turned seventy-eight on 14 April. There has been no information in the public domain about any deterioration in his health since recovering from a stroke in 2019.

Leadership succession in Vietnam is generally a carefully managed process. The incumbent Secretary General has the responsibility to mentor his successor. Trong's attempt to advance Tran Quoc Vuong as his successor prior to the thirteenth national party congress unexpectedly failed. It is doubtful that Trong has had sufficient time over the past sixteen months to groom his replacement. Planning for the next national party congress normally would commence at the mid-way point between national congresses or some time in 2023.

The unexpected death of President and Politburo member Tran Dai Quang and the prolonged illness of Politburo member Dinh The Huynh, prior to the thirteenth national congress, should have served as a wake-up call for this kind of contingency in future.

If ill-health suddenly forced Trong to step down before his third term expired, Vietnam would face a difficult choice in finding a successor. There could be an intense struggle between the party wing and the government wing to determine who will fill Trong's shoes.

Party statutes require that a candidate for party leader must have served a full five-year term on the Politburo. At present there are only seven members out of eighteen who qualify. The two most likely candidates are Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Vuong Dinh Hue. If the "precedent" adopted after the death of Tran Dai Quang is followed President Phuc, could hold both posts concurrently. Or, Vuong Dinh Hue, the chair of the National Assembly, could give up his post and serve out the term as party leader. Hue turned 65 on 15 March and would have to receive an age exemption to serve a full five-year second term.

If Secretary General Trong serves out his third term and retires, seventeen members of the Politburo would meet the requirement for having served for one five-year term. But if the mandatory retirement age of 65 is taken into account, the pool of qualified candidates shrinks drastically, unless an age exemption for exceptional service is given.

Two of eight incumbent members of the Politburo already have been given age exemptions. They are expected to retire at the next national party congress. Nguyen Phu Trong will be 81 and Nguyen Xuan Phuc will be 67 in January 2026.

Of the six remaining incumbent members of the Politburo, five will be 66 years or older in 2026. Vuong Dinh Hue was born in Nghe An province, has the advantage of seniority as one of the "four pillars" of the leadership, and must be viewed as a starting favourite. He would need an age exemption. Vo Van Thuong, a member of the Secretariat, was born in 1970. He is the youngest member of the Politburo and would be the only member under 65. He was born in the southern province of Vinh Long, a potential disadvantage as an informal norm is to select the party Secretary General from a northern province.

Of the ten members of the Politburo inducted in 2021, five will be sixty-five years or older if the fourteenth national party congress is convened in January 2026. That

leaves five persons under 65 who would potentially qualify to be nominated as party leader: Phan Van Giang (Minister of National Defence), Tran Cam Tu (head of the Central Inspection Commission), Dinh Tien Dung (secretary Hanoi party committee), Tran Thanh Man (vice chair National Assembly) and Tran Tuan Anh (current head of the Central Economic Commission pending the outcome of the 5th plenum).

Three of the qualified potential candidates come from a northern province, Giang, Tu and Dung. Man and Anh were born in the provinces of Hau Giang and Quang Ngai, in southern and central Vietnam, respectively.

In summary, if Secretary General Trong unexpectedly leaves office before his term expires, there are two possibilities: first, one of the four pillars in the leadership could hold two positions concurrently or second, there is likely to be wrangling between party wings resulting in a reshuffle in posts once a consensus is reached on the new party leader.

if Secretary General Trong does not step down prior to the 14th national party congress in 2026, he will have three years and eight months to pick and groom a successor. The crucial time period will fall in the second half of 2025 when the Central Committee is likely to conduct several straw polls to determine who has majority support. However, a decision on Trong's successor could be made earlier if a mid-term party conference is convened in 2023.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Rumours Abound About General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong Stepping Down," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, May 7, 2022. All background briefs are posted on Scribd.com (search for Thayer). To remove yourself from the mailing list type, UNSUBSCRIBE in the Subject heading and hit the Reply key.

Thayer Consultancy provides political analysis of current regional security issues and other research support to selected clients. Thayer Consultancy was officially registered as a small business in Australia in 2002.