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Background Brief:

Parsing Vietnam's Leadership Transition¹

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In January 2016, delegates to the 12th National Congress of the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) elected a new Central Committee comprised of 180 full and 20 alternate members for a five-year term. The new Central Committee, at its first plenary session, elected a 19-member Political Bureau and from this body re-elected Nguyễn Phú Trọng as party Secretary General for a five-year term (see below).



¹ This *Background Brief* was drafted on May 16, 2020 and revised on May 22, 2020. It updates two earlier *Background Briefs*: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam: Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong Resumes Duties," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, May 16, 2019. See:

<https://www.scribd.com/document/414316775/Thayer-Vietnam-Secretary-General-Nguyen-Phu-Trong-Resumes-Duties> and Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam's Next Party Secretary-General?" *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, January 9, 2020. See: <https://www.scribd.com/document/442355183/Thayer-Vietnam-s-Next-Party-Secretary-General>.

In eight months the VCP will hold its 13th National Congress in January 2021. This month the VCP Central Committee held its 12th plenum (11-14 May). This plenum focused mainly on editing and revising policy documents that spell out the criteria for leadership selection at the 13th congress. These documents will be reviewed by the Politburo and considered at the 13th plenum to be held later this year.

This Background Brief speculates on who will occupy the ‘four pillars’ of national leadership in 2021 – party Secretary General, Prime Minister, state President, and Chair of the National Assembly.²

Status of Current Politburo Members

Over the last five years the 19-member Politburo has lost two members – President Trần Đại Quang who passed away and Đinh La Thăng who was dismissed.

Name	Year of Birth and Age September 2020	Position
Nguyễn Phú Trọng	April 1944 (76)	VCP Secretary and President
Nguyễn Thiện Nhân	June 1953 (67)	Secretary Hồ Chí Minh City Party Committee
Đinh Thế Huynh	April 1953 (67)	On medical leave since August 2017
Trần Quốc Vượng	February 1953 (67)	Standing Member VCP Secretariat
Nguyễn Xuân Phúc	July 1954 (66)	Prime Minister
Ngô Xuân Lịch	April 1954 (66)	Minister of National Defence
Nguyễn Thị Kim Ngân	April 1954 (66)	Chair National Assembly
Tòng Thị Phóng	February 1954 (66)	Standing Deputy Chair of the National Assembly
Trương Hòa Bình	April 1955 (65)	Standing Deputy Prime Minister

² See also: Hai Hong Nguyen, “Who will be Vietnam’s next party boss?” *East Asia Forum*, November 18, 2019; <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/11/18/who-will-be-vietnams-next-party-boss/> and Le Hong Hiep, “Previewing Vietnam’s Leadership Transition in 2021,” *Perspective* (Singapore: Yusof Ishak Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), no. 41, May 8, 2020; https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_41.pdf.

Also, it is very likely that Hoàng Trung Hải will retire. On January 10, 2020, the VCP's Central Inspection Committee took the decision to reprimand Hải for his failure as Deputy Prime Minister (1997-2016) to oversee properly Thai Nguyen Iron and Steel, a state-run firm at the centre of a corruption and mismanagement scandal. Hải's inaction 'seriously damaged the financial position and properties of the state,' the Central Inspection Committee said in its disciplinary warning.

Hải's disciplinary warning should be put in the context of remarks made by Secretary General Trọng at the opening of the 12th plenum. Trọng stated, 'Candidates must have good ethics and lifestyle, be example for others and have high public prestige. They must not be involved in corruption nor be opportunistic, and have no ambition for power.'

Name (Rank on Politburo)	Year of Birth (Age)	Present Position
Tô Lâm (5)	1957 (63)	Minister of Public Security
Vương Đình Huệ (11)	1957 (63)	Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of the Hà Nội Party Committee
Phạm Minh Chính (9)	1958 (61)	Head of the Central Personnel and Organisation Commission
Trương Thị Mai (14)	1958 (62)	Head of the Central Mass Mobilisation Commission
Phạm Bình Minh (13)	1959 (61)	Deputy Foreign Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs
Nguyễn Văn Bình (16)	1961 (59)	Head of the Central Economic Affairs Commission
Võ Văn Thưởng (17) ³	1970 (49)	Head Central Propaganda and Education Commission

According to Chỉ thị Số 35-CT/TW⁴ issued by the Politburo, a decision on age eligibility for candidates for the top four leadership positions will be made in September this

³ Since his appointment to the Politburo in 2016, there have been sporadic unconfirmed reports that Thưởng is very ill and underwent medical treatment in Japan. A review of the Vietnamese press reveals that Thưởng has been quite active in his role as Head of the Central Propaganda and Education Commission.

⁴ Chỉ thị 35-CT/TW năm 2019 về đại hội đảng bộ các cấp tiến tới Đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ XIII của Đảng do Ban Chấp hành Trung ương ban hành. See: <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/bo-may->

year. In other words, nine current Politburo members who will be over 65 in September will be required to retire (see Table 1 above). In addition, those members who have completed two full terms in office are not eligible for re-election to that office. If they are under 65, they may serve two or more terms on the Politburo but in another office; for example, this would include the current Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Exemptions to Mandatory Retirement

Current party rules include a provision for an exemption from retirement at 65 years of age for ‘exceptional’ individuals. In the past this exemption invariably has been granted to the person nominated as the next VCP Secretary General. According to VCP Regulation 214 (February 2020) only the Central Committee has the right to grant exceptions. This means that at least one Politburo member who is over 65 could be granted an exemption. However, the circumstances in 2020 are somewhat unique as no vacancies on the Politburo have been filled. This means that there are only seven persons who qualify for election to the top four party and state posts.

An argument could be made, however, that either or both the Prime Minister and Chair of the National Assembly deserve an exemption as they have performed ‘exceptionally’ in their respective offices and each has served only a one five-year term. In a vote of confidence conducted by National Assembly deputies in October 2018, Ngân received 90.1% of high confidence votes and 7.01% of confidence votes. Phúc received 81.3% of high confidence votes and 14.2% of confidence votes. Both Phúc and Ngân will be 66 at the time of the 13th national congress.

Three Pillars or Four?

Traditionally the top leadership of Vietnam comprised four posts known colloquially as the ‘four pillars.’ In September 2018, when the state President Trần Đại Quang died in office, the Central Committee took the decision to allow Secretary General Nguyễn Phú Trọng to hold the office of state president concurrently until the end of the term.

It appears likely that Vietnam will revert to the ‘four pillar’ leadership structure. It is highly unlikely that Trọng, who has completed a partial term as president, will be re-elected president for a full five-year term because of his advanced age and health.

Party Secretary General

According to VCP Regulation 214 (February 2020), the Secretary General must ‘have the capability to direct the preparation and development of a team of strategic officials, especially a successor, and key officials.’ And, the Secretary General ‘must have experienced and fulfilled their duties well as provincial or municipal Party secretary or head of a central committee, department or sector and must have been a member of the Politburo for at least one full term.’⁵

hanh-chinh/Chi-thi-35-CT-TW-2019-dai-hoi-dang-bo-cac-cap-tien-toi-Dai-hoi-dai-bieu-toan-quoc-lan-thu-XIII-417004.aspx.

⁵ This Regulation updates Quy định Số 90-QĐ/TW August 4, 2017, Bộ Chính trị quy định tiêu chuẩn chức danh, tiêu chí đánh giá cán bộ thuộc diện Ban Chấp hành Trung ương, Bộ Chính trị, Ban Bí thư quản lý. See: <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/bo-may-hanh-chinh/Quy-dinh-90-QD-TW-2017-danh-gia-can-bo-Ban-Chap-hanh-Trung-uong-Bo-Chinh-tri-Ban-Bi-thu-quan-ly-359250.aspx>. Le Hong Hiep (footnote 2 above) brought the September 2020 deadline to my attention.

Of all the likely candidates, Trần Quốc Vương stands out as the most qualified.⁶ He has extensive experience in the Supreme People's Procuracy and the central party apparatus as Chief of the VCP Central Committee Office (Chánh văn phòng Trung ương Đảng, 2011), member of the VCP Secretariat (May 2013), and head of the Central Inspection Commission (2016). Vương ranks twelfth on the current Politburo. His appointment as Standing Member of the Central Committee Secretariat in March 2018 elevated his seniority in the party's pecking order. Vương will be 67 at the 13th national congress. He is a native of Thái Bình province which is a plus.

Wương, a Deputy Prosecutor General of the Supreme People's Procuracy for six years before becoming Prosecutor (2007-11), is Trọng's right hand man in the conduct of the anti-corruption campaign.

It is an open question whether Vương will serve one or two terms in office. If he performs well and his health is good the precedent set by Trọng could be used to give him a second exemption. Vương will be 72 when the 14th national congress is held.

Some analysts have speculated that Nguyễn Xuân Phúc and Nguyễn Thị Kim Ngân also could be potential candidates for the top party post if they were granted an exemption for exceptional execution of their duties. Ngân ranks third and Phúc ranks sixth on the current Politburo.

A close look at their background experience, however, reveals that their careers largely have been outside the formal party apparatus. Phúc, for example, has extensive experience in government, first in Quảng Nam - Đà Nẵng province before being assigned to the central government as Deputy State Inspector-General, various posts in the Government Office, and Deputy Prime Minister before being appointed Prime Minister (April 2016). Phúc was born in Quảng Nam province.

Ngân also has extensive experience in government (Deputy Minister of Finance, Standing Deputy Minister of Trade) and in the National Assembly (July 2007-to the present). There is also the unspoken issue of her gender. It is an open question whether Vietnam is ready for a woman as party leader. Ngân also is potentially handicapped for the top party post by the convention that the party leaders comes from the north. Ngân is a native of the southern province of Bến Tre.

Prime Minister

The office of prime minister usually goes to the most senior Deputy Prime Minister who has experience in economic affairs. Unless an exemption is made to keep Phúc in office for a second term, Vương Đình Huệ appears the most qualified among the candidates listed in Table 2. Before his appointment as Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of the Hà Nội Party Committee, Huệ was Chief State Auditor, Minister of Finance, and head of the Central Economic Commission. He hails from Nghệ An province.

⁶ See Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam: Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong Resumes Duties," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, May 16, 2019.

Another possible candidate is Nguyễn Văn Bình, the former Governor of the State Bank, who now heads the VCP's Central Economic Affairs Commission. He was born in Phú Thọ province.

National Assembly Chair

Unless an exemption is made to keep Ngân in office for a second term, Trương Thị Mai and Phạm Minh Chính appear to be the most qualified among the candidates listed in Table 2. Because the VCP factors in gender representation, Mai might have an edge over Chính. She is the only woman left among Politburo members elected in 2016.

Mai has been a National Assembly deputy from the tenth to the thirteenth legislatures (1997 to the present) and holds a B.A. in Law and a Masters degree in Public Administration. Chính is a former associate professor with a PhD in law.

Both Mai and Chính were elected to the Central Committee at the eleventh national party congress in 2011. Chính ranks ninth and Mai ranks fourteenth on the current Politburo. Mai is head of the Central Mass Mobilisation Commission, while Chính is Head of the Central Personnel and Organisation Commission.

State President

The state president has substantial powers under the Constitution subject to ratification by the National Assembly. Both Phạm Bình Minh, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Tô Lâm, Minister of Public Security, appear to be the best qualified among the seven incumbents listed in Table 2. Minh is serving his second term in office and must retire as foreign minister. Lâm, on the other hand, is finishing his first term as Minister of Public Security and at 63 could easily stay on the Politburo in his present post. Indeed, one Politburo seat is reserved for the Ministry of Public Security.

Minh is widely known internationally, speaks English fluently, and holds a M.A. degree and Law and Diplomacy from Tufts University in the United States. He has experience in government as Deputy Prime Minister. Lâm's career has been confined to his ministry. He holds a PhD. Minh was elected to the Central Committee at the tenth party congress in 2006 while Lâm was elected to the Central Committee at the eleventh party congress five years later. But Lâm is ranked ahead of Minh on the current Politburo, at fifth position to Minh's twelfth position.

How Large Will the New Politburo Be?

Since the 6th national party congress in 1986 to the 12th party congress in 2016, the Politburo has ranged in size from 13 to 19. The average size of the Politburo over this period is 16, an even number that is considered 'unstable' by some party officials because it could lead to a tied vote.

As a working assumption, the next Politburo could range in size from 15 to 19. A Politburo of 15 would require seven new members assuming the next party Secretary General is given an exemption from mandatory retirement. A 19-member Politburo would need 11 new members based on the same assumption. In 2016, the Central Committee elected a Politburo comprising seven incumbents and twelve newcomers so a leadership change of this magnitude is not without precedent.

In addition to the ‘four pillars’, the following vacancies on the Politburo will need to be filled due to retirements: Standing Member of the Secretariat, Minister of National Defence, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Standing Deputy Prime Minister, and party Secretary of Hồ Chí Minh City.

Appendix		
Incumbent Members of the Political Bureau – Province of Birth		
Name	Province of Birth	Region
Tô Lâm	Hưng Yên	N
Vương Đình Huệ	Nghệ An	N
Phạm Minh Chính	Thanh Hóa	N
Phạm Bình Minh	Nam Định	N
Nguyễn Văn Bình	Phú Thọ	N
Trương Thị Mai	Quảng Bình	C
Võ Văn Thưởng	Vĩnh Long	S

LEGEND: **N** – North, **C** = Centre, **S** =South. Le Hong Hiep (see footnote 2 above) has drawn attention to regional imbalance as a possible issue in leadership selection.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, ‘Parsing Vietnam’s Leadership Transition,’ *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, May 22, 2020. 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.

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