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# Three-Horse Race for Vietnam's Next Communist Party Chief

**As the Communist Party of Vietnam moves toward its next National Congress, the list of candidates for key posts is narrowing.**

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We are now entering the business end of the period of horse-trading and politicking that typically dominates the months leading up to the National Congress of Vietnam's ruling Communist Party. At this quinquennial event, a new 180-strong Central Committee is elected by 1,600 delegates from across the country and the most important political offices change hands. The next National Congress, the 13th in the Party's history, is expected to take place in January, barring any pandemic-related postponement.

Who becomes State President is the most pressing question this time around. Rumors abound that there could be a permanent merger between this largely-ceremonial head of state position and that of Party General Secretary, the most senior leadership role of the Communist Party. In the early 1990s, a "four pillar" system was accepted so that the top four political offices – Party General Secretary, State President, Prime Minister and National Assembly chairperson – were occupied by different people. The idea was to prevent dictatorial rule and preserve consensus-based leadership – what the Party calls "democratic centralism." But in 2018, this informal rule was upended when Nguyen Phu Trong, the current Party chief, was elected to also serve as State President following the death of incumbent Tran Dai Quang.

For some pundits, this was foremost a move by Trong to attain maximum power. Others said it was a case of expediency, coming at the midway point between National Congresses when a reshuffle would have destabilized the already threadbare Politburo. But the merger makes some sense for Hanoi's long-term interests. Vietnam is clearly realigning its foreign policy more closely with Western and democratic partners, having greatly improved ties with the United States, Japan and South Korea over the past decade, and ratified an important free-trade agreement with the European Union this year. The problem, however, is that democratic governments are unsure of how to interact with the head of Vietnam's Communist Party, the most powerful figure in the country.

In strict diplomatic terms, the Party chief represents neither the state nor the government. So for Western governments to welcome the head of the Communist Party on a state visit would represent a tacit acceptance of Vietnam's authoritarian one-party system – a situation the U.S. government faced when Trong visited Washington in 2015, the first visit to the U.S. by a Party General Secretary. Making the Party chief also State President solves this problem. Indeed, both communist Laos and China merged their analogous positions decades ago, which now allows Xi Jinping, who is China's head of state and head of the Chinese Communist Party, to more easily control foreign policy and engage with Western governments.

Next year there must be a new Communist Party chief, as Trong will step down after two-terms. A decision should be made at a Central Committee plenum next month, but if not (like before the

last National Congress in 2016) it will be debated again at another plenum held just days before the National Congress in January. Tran Quoc Vuong, Trong's right-hand man and current executive secretary of the Central Committee Secretariat, is the front-runner if his mentor gets his way in the coming months. But the current prime minister, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, is many pundits' odds-on favorite to take the Party chief post. He has significantly improved Hanoi's competency over the last four years and has won much applause for his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which Vietnam managed to record no deaths until late July.

Another candidate for the top job is Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, the first woman to hold a major political office in Vietnam's recent history. As National Assembly chairperson since 2016, she holds one of the four main posts in Vietnam's system – albeit one routinely seen as the least powerful and meaningful of the four. Although Ngan is thought to be in the running there are suggestions that the Party isn't ready for a female General Secretary. Indeed, on this question Vietnam lags six years behind its communist neighbor Laos, where Pany Yathotou was appointed the chair of Laos' National Assembly back in 2010, becoming the first woman to attain a powerful position in Vientiane.

Yet, the possibility of a female Party leader shouldn't be written off. Technically, Ngan is number two in the Politburo, after Trong, and she is one of the few members who has sat on this elite political body for two terms, generally a prerequisite for the top job. She also has a relatively expansive CV. She was deputy chair of the National Assembly between 2007 and 2016, which makes her extremely powerful within the legislature. Trong served as National Assembly chair before he was made Party chief in 2011, so there's recent precedent for this route of promotion. She's also considered a safe pair of hands. She was tipped as a Prime Ministerial candidate before the last National Congress in 2016. Although she didn't get that post, the analyst Carl Thayer described her as “a star performer” who was “very competent as a minister” and had the legislative experience to perform well as National Assembly chairwoman.

Something that might work in Ngan's favor (but maybe not) is that she's somewhat politically featureless. It isn't abundantly clear where she sits within the Party's divisions. Is she a technocrat like Phuc, whose goal is to improve the competency of the government? Or is she on Trong's ideological wing, obsessed with reasserting the “morality” and ideological foundations of the Party? Is she an anti-China nationalist who wants to forge even closer relations with Washington so as to protect Vietnam's territorial interests in the South China Sea from Beijing's expansionist drive? Or is she on the pragmatic side of the debate in wanting to maintain close party-to-party ties with Beijing and strike a balance between the superpowers?

Granted, as National Assembly chair Ngan hasn't had much opportunity to show her true colors. One of her few visits abroad was to China last year, but this cannot be read as revealing her true feelings on foreign policy matters – although she appears less of an anti-China nationalist than others in the Party. As the head of a rubber-stamp body, she's also had few options to publicly carve out a name for herself when it comes to policy disputes. That said, she was one of the proponents of the SEZ bill that was unceremoniously dropped by the government in 2018 after prompting some of the largest public protests in living memory. This was a huge embarrassment for the Party, and Trong is thought to have been skeptical of the bill.

But because she isn't viewed as partisan in the context of the Party's divergent tendencies, she would make an ideal candidate if, at the National Congress, a balance of interests is considered the best way forward. And, at 66, there's now a way for her to stay on past the expected age of

retirement. It was recently decided that age restrictions, which normally mean officials must step down from the Politburo and senior posts once they reach the age of 65, will be waived for the Party chief post at the next National Congress. That means Phuc and Ngan, both 66, and Trong's right-hand man Vuong, 67, are eligible for the post. However, there are suggestions that age-restrictions could be lifted for other posts, too. It seems unlikely, but Phuc and Ngan could be allowed to stay on in their current positions, since they have only served one term each, and within the Politburo at the National Congress – and, if the rulebook is thrown out of the window completely, it might be possible for her to move on up to the State Presidency.

That's unlikely though, and for most pundits Ngan is behind Phuc and Vuong in the billing. This is less because she is a woman, although that probably matters for some, but because she lacks Phuc's administrative and foreign policy experience and Vuong's support from a powerful mentor. The fact that she's a southerner, and that the General Secretary post almost always goes to a northerner (like Vuong), also works against her. Phuc, who hails from central Vietnam, is less controversial. My own guess (and it's only an informed guess) is that Vuong will get the Party chief post if the "four-pillar" system returns, but Phuc will get the nod if there is a permanent merger between party head and head of state, in part because he is vastly more experienced than Vuong on the world stage. However, Ngan could potentially sneak in if Phuc and Vuong are considered too divisive.

If Ngan fails to get the Party chief post, she would be expected to retire from the Politburo next year. Indeed, of the three main candidates, the two not selected will likely retire. And if Ngan does move on, that leaves the question of who takes her place as National Assembly chair. Some pundits reckon she'll be replaced by another woman so as to fulfill the Party's apparent commitment to greater equality. Le Hong Hiep, a fellow at the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, wrote in May that her successor would likely be either Truong Thi Mai, head of the Party's Mass Mobilization Commission, or Pham Minh Chinh, head of the Party's important Personnel and Organization Commission. If the party wants to maintain a female representative in a top four position, he added, Mai will get the nod. If experience trumps gender, Chinh stands a better chance.