

Vietnam's new leadership up for grabs as Communist congress opens

All eyes on Trong, who might defy tradition by remaining as general secretary

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HANOI -- Vietnam on Monday kicked off the political gathering that will chart the nation's course for the next five years, as the Southeast Asian country seeks to become a new regional hub for low-cost manufacturing and an alternative to neighboring China.

The National Congress, held roughly every five years by the Communist Party of Vietnam, will set diplomatic and economic policies for the one-party state through 2026 and decide the new leadership. Attention centers on the fate of 76-year-old Nguyen Phu Trong, the party's general secretary and country's president.

About 1,600 delegates nationwide representing 5.1 million Communist Party members will gather in Hanoi, the country's capital in the north. The event concludes Feb. 2.

The U.S. and China, Vietnam's two largest trade partners, will scrutinize the secretive selection process for the new leadership as Hanoi joins the geopolitical front lines between the two superpowers.

Vietnam looks to leverage its economic advantage as one of the few countries that expanded gross domestic product in 2020, up 2.9% thanks to efficient handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

Here are three things to know about the Communist Party of Vietnam's National Congress.

Why is the National Congress important?

The National Congress chooses new leaders including the general secretary, the Communist Party's highest post. The party gathering also discusses and adopts the so-called political report, the document that steers Vietnam's basic economic, political and diplomatic policies over the next five years.

The Communist Party of Vietnam was formed in 1930 by Ho Chi Minh and others. The first National Congress was held in 1935, and the event that begins Monday will be the 13th.

Historically, the National Congress has produced major changes. At the sixth congress in 1986, the party adopted the doi moi policy of reform and opening to the world. This included the

introduction of a market economy system, and the policy has played a pivotal role in Vietnam's direction since.

The 11th congress in 2011 adopted a policy allowing capitalists such as entrepreneurs to join the party on a trial basis for the first time, adjusting the system to better reflect public opinion in the party's decision-making.

What will the next leadership be like?

Discussions are expected to begin Tuesday after operational meetings on Monday. If things go well, Vietnam's new leadership will be announced by Feb. 2, the final day of the congress.

The selection process is complicated. The congress first elects the Central Committee, comprising 200-strong members. The committee then votes for the Politburo, the party's executive committee, which traditionally has around 20 members. The Politburo, in turn, nominates the "four pillars" of Vietnam's leadership: the party's general secretary, the president, the prime minister and the chairperson of the National Assembly. The Central Committee then votes to approve the four pillars.

In Vietnam, the general secretary wields the most power, followed by the president, who is the head of government. The prime minister oversees economic policy.

Trong, the general secretary, began doubling as president in October 2018. The country's leadership positions have been held by three people since, including Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, 66, and Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, 66, the first chairwoman of the National Assembly.

All eyes are on Trong, who is in his second term as general secretary and has held the party's top position for 10 years. Party rules stipulate that an individual can serve as general secretary for only up to two terms. But some speculate Trong may remain as he benefited the party through an anti-corruption campaign and achieved positive results in the fight against the pandemic.

Some think Phuc may be promoted to president if Trong continues to serve as general secretary, Reuters reports.

Party tradition gives Trong the greatest influence in choosing his successor. Duong Quoc Chinh, a Hanoi-based political analyst, told Nikkei Asia in December that Trong's recommendation will carry the most value.

Trong is regarded as an absolute loyalist to the Communist Party regime.

"The anti-corruption campaign he led will create many enemies to Trong," Chinh said.

"Therefore, installing a successor who is loyal to him is vital to Trong even after he steps down as general secretary."

Most general secretaries have come from northern or central Vietnam, areas where Communist rule is considered crucial, but the party also has given weight to regional power balance among the north, central and south. Trong hails from Hanoi, the north.

Speculation that the new leadership might include no one from the south has drawn great attention to the top four posts.

What will be stated in the political report?

The Communist Party is expected to target average annual growth between 6.5% and 7.0% for the five years beginning in 2021, while embracing the goal of Vietnam becoming a developed country before 2045 by raising per-capita GDP, now about \$3,500.

Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's ideologies are to be affirmed, yet Vietnam also is expected to advance the doi moi policy further and seek high economic growth by continuing free trade while maintaining one-party rule.

On the diplomatic front, the congress likely will note Hanoi's territorial dispute with Beijing over the South China Sea. But Vietnam's new regime is expected to continue striking a balance between the U.S. and China.

The U.S. receives the most Vietnamese exports, while China is the Southeast Asian country's biggest trade partner. Though Vietnam is considered anti-Beijing due to the South China Sea issue, ties with China are deepening as the superpower increases its economic presence in Asia.

Vietnam has generally benefited from former U.S. President Donald Trump's tough stance on China and the U.S.-China trade tensions.

"Others hope that [new U.S. President Joe] Biden will adopt a similarly tough stance on China while being more predictable and less aggressive in pushing for punitive trade measures against Vietnam," Le Hong Hiep, fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, noted in a recent report.