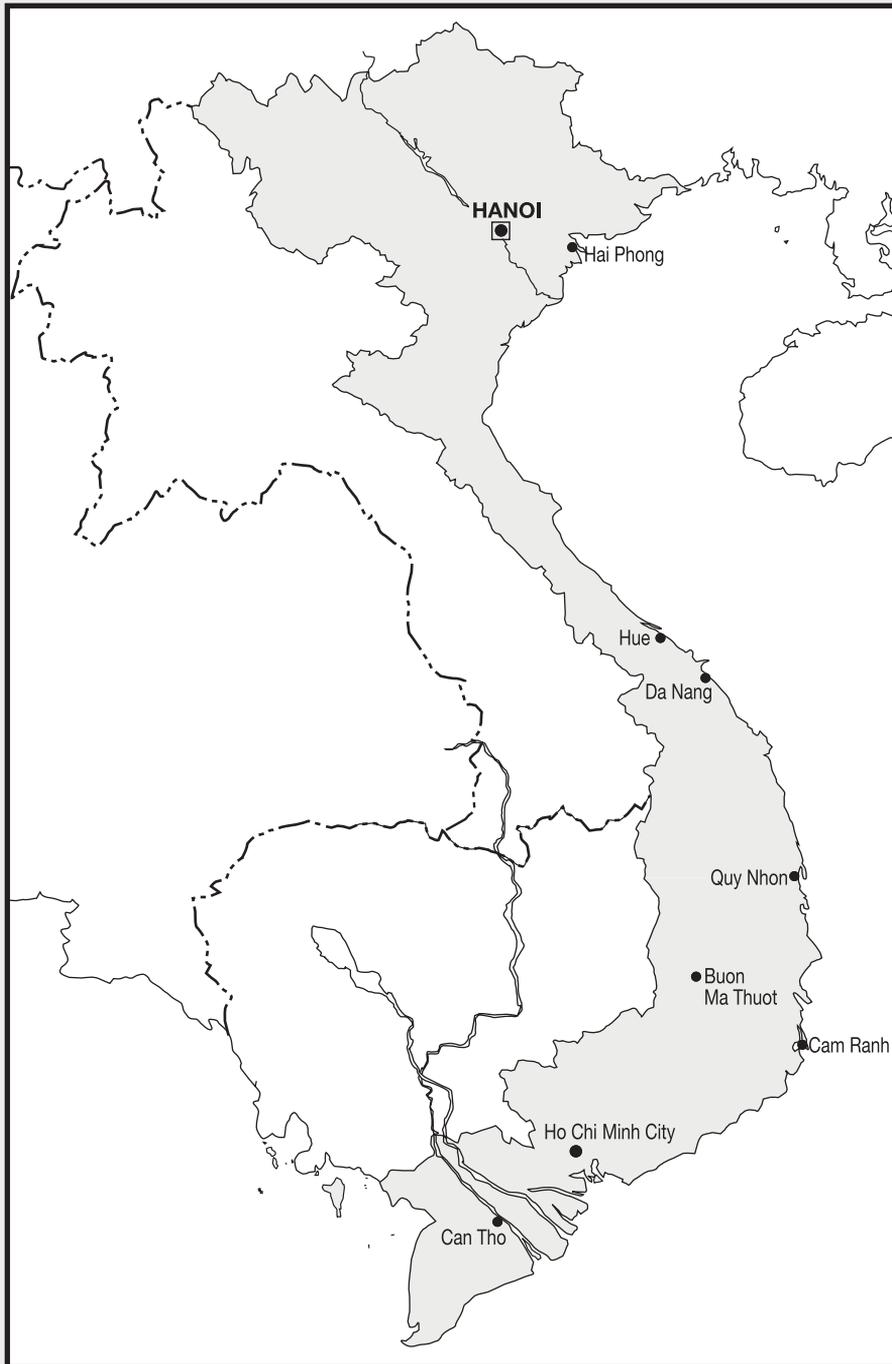


Vietnam



VIETNAM IN 2021: Leadership Transition, Party-Building and Combating COVID-19

Carlyle A. Thayer

Vietnam was officially reunified in 1976, and in December that year the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) held its 4th National Congress. Since then the VCP has held national party congresses every five years. The 13th National Congress was held in early 2021 and its deliberations shaped domestic politics in Vietnam in the years to come.

The national party congress has seven main duties: (1) to approve the Political Report of the outgoing Central Committee; (2) to adopt short and long-term socio-economic development plans; (3) to revise the party's platform; (4) to amend the party's statutes; (5) to elect a new Central Committee, which will then elect a new Politburo; (6) to decide on any other matters put before the congress; and (7) to issue a final resolution on the proceedings.

This chapter provides an overview of the 13th National Congress and the resulting turnover in party and state leadership in Vietnam. This chapter is divided into four parts: leadership transition, party-building, combating COVID-19 and a conclusion.

Leadership Transition

Leadership transition in Vietnam is a carefully orchestrated process that culminates every five years in a national party congress that elects new leaders and holds elections for the National Assembly, which in turn selects new government officials. Preparations for a national party congress generally start during the second half of the incumbent Central Committee's five-year term; this includes

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the often-contentious task of determining the general composition of the new Central Committee and selecting who is qualified to stand for election. The Central Committee is composed of sectoral groups that are given bloc representation, including local party and government officials, the military, officials who hold senior positions in the government, officials who hold senior posts in the party, and members of the Politburo.

Quotas are set for three age groups: under fifty, fifty to sixty, and sixty-one and over. This is to ensure an orderly generational transition. Party rules also stipulate that Central Committee members should retire at sixty-five years of age and that they cannot serve more than two consecutive terms in the same office. Party rules also provide for a limited number of exemptions to these stipulations based on exemplary performance. In the final year of its term, the outgoing Central Committee often holds a series of plenary sessions where straw polls are conducted before confirming the final list of candidates.

Leadership selection encountered difficulties in the lead-up to the 2021 congress. In 2016, the 12th National Congress elected nineteen members to the Politburo. By late 2020 this number had been effectively reduced by five because of the death of President Tran Dai Quang, the prolonged ill health of Dinh The Huynh, the disciplinary action against Hoang Trung Hai and Nguyen Van Binh, and the expulsion of Dinh La Thang. These vacancies were not filled. An additional complication arose when VCP General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong was permitted to hold the office of state president concurrently after Quang's death. It was unclear then if this was a temporary or permanent arrangement.

As the 13th National Congress approached, nine members of the Politburo were expected to retire as they were over the age of sixty-five. The prospective retirees included the VCP general-secretary-cum-president Nguyen Phu Trong, who suffered a stroke in 2019, the prime minister, and the chair of the National Assembly. In order to qualify for one of the top leadership positions—known colloquially as the “four pillars” (*tứ trụ*)—a candidate must have served one full five-year term on the Politburo and meet the requisite age requirement. In sum, there were only five incumbents who met these criteria unless exemptions were granted to those slated for retirement.¹

One of the duties of the general secretary is to groom a successor. Trong, whose flagship policy was a rigorous national anti-corruption campaign, promoted his protégé, Tran Quoc Vuong, to become the head of the Central Committee's Organization Committee. Vuong was over sixty-five and therefore would need a special exemption to become the next party leader. However, in December 2020 the Central Committee's fourteenth plenum conducted a straw poll of twenty-

two potential candidates for election to the Politburo. Vuong failed to obtain the backing of a majority of the Central Committee and dropped out of contention.²

This impasse set off intense lobbying by two wings.³ The party wing was composed of officials whose careers and present positions were in the VCP apparatus. The government wing was composed of officials whose careers and present positions were in the cabinet and state bureaucracy. The party wing stressed the importance of ideology in legitimizing one-party rule and constantly warned of the plot of peaceful evolution by domestic opposition and foreign forces to change Vietnam's socialist regime. The party wing preferred a candidate with strong ideological credentials. The government wing favoured integrating Vietnam with the global economy as a means of legitimizing Vietnam's one-party state and favoured Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc.

General Secretary Trong engineered a comeback by mustering support for a second exemption from the retirement age and a limit on two terms in office. This set the stage for a "grand compromise" between the two wings at the fifteenth plenum of the Central Committee that met on 16–17 January 2021. The fifteenth plenum granted age exemptions to both Trong and Phuc.⁴ A balance between the two wings was engineered when consensus was reached to nominate Pham Minh Chinh (member of the Party Secretariat and head of the Central Committee's Organisation Commission), from the party wing, as candidate for prime minister and Vuong Dinh Hue (deputy prime minister), from the government wing, as candidate for chair of the National Assembly.⁵

The VCP's 13th National Congress met in Hanoi from 25 January to 1 February and was attended by 1,587 delegates representing 5.1 million party members. The congress adopted ambitious long-term economic objectives for Vietnam as a developing country with a modern industry. Vietnam is projected to surpass low-middle-income status by 2025, achieve high average income by 2030 and become a developed country with a high income by 2045.

The congress approved the Final Report on Party-Building and the implementation of the party statutes of the 12th Central Committee without amendment, thus retaining the two-term limit in office.⁶ However, the 13th National Congress adopted a special resolution permitting General Secretary Trong to hold an unprecedented third term in office for exceptional service.

Delegates to the 13th National Congress elected a 200-person Central Committee composed of 180 full or voting members and 20 alternate or non-voting members. Of the 180 members, 120 were incumbents who had already served a full term or more on the Central Committee. Their experience working at the core of Vietnam's political system ensured continuity and stability in the

system. Seventy per cent of Central Committee members were aged between 50 and 60, 20 per cent were under 50 (the youngest was aged 34), and 10 per cent were 61 years or older. Military representation on the Central Committee rose to 12.8 per cent, continuing a trend in which military representation on the Central Committee increased at each successive congress since 1986 (7.3 per cent) for an average of 10 per cent during this period.⁷

Immediately after the Central Committee was elected, it convened its first plenum, on 31 January, to elect members of the Politburo and, from among these members, the party's general secretary. The Central Committee also elected members of the Party Secretariat. In addition, the Central Committee endorsed candidates for state president, prime minister and chair of the National Assembly for formal approval by the National Assembly.

The Central Committee's first plenum considered a list of just over 20 nominations for a putative Politburo of 19 members. Only 18 nominees received majority support. In a surprising development, two members of the military, Generals Phan Van Giang and Luong Cuong, were elected to the Politburo. For the past two decades, the military had been limited to one seat. Giang was the chief of the General Staff and Cuong was the head of the General Political Department and a member of the Party Secretariat.

After the 13th National Congress, the new Politburo began the process of planning leadership transition in the government. This involved recommending candidates for the offices of state president, prime minister, chair of the National Assembly and ministers to the 14th National Assembly for its approval. The Politburo also began preparations to nominate members of the Central Committee to run for seats in the 15th National Assembly in elections scheduled for May.

Pham Minh Chinh, head of the Central Organization Commission, presented the Politburo's report on leadership transition to the Central Committee's second plenum, which met from 8 to 9 March. The Central Committee strongly agreed that it was necessary to consolidate the leadership positions of the ministries and state agencies immediately. The plenum reached high consensus to nominate candidates for the posts of state president, prime minister and chairman of the National Assembly.⁸

Vietnam's government leadership transition following the 13th National Congress was a two-step process because the VCP wanted to change its top government leaders as soon as possible. The terms of all ministers, incumbent and new, expired in May when the 14th National Assembly's term ended. Then the process of selecting the new government would have to be repeated after elections to the 15th National Assembly were held.

The 11th session of the 14th National Assembly met from 24 March to 8 April and filled the ministerial vacancies caused by retirement, promotion or failure to get re-elected to the Central Committee (a prerequisite for ministerial rank). Finance Minister Dinh Tien Dung and Minister of Industry and Trade Tran Tuan Anh, for example, were elected to the Politburo and vacated their positions. Phung Xuan Nha, the minister of education and training, failed to get re-elected to the Central Committee and was replaced. Nha was shunted aside and appointed deputy head of the VCP's Central Propaganda Department. The National Assembly also approved a reshuffle among top leaders; it officially elected Pham Minh Chinh as the new prime minister and Nguyen Xuan Phuc, the former prime minister, as state president.⁹ The National Assembly also approved the appointment of two deputy prime ministers and twelve ministers to serve out the final weeks of the 14th National Assembly.

Elections for the 15th National Assembly and People's Councils were held on 23 May. A total of 499 deputies were elected, of whom 485 were members of the VCP and 14 were non-party independents. The 15th National Assembly convened its first session from 20 to 23 July and elected Vuong Dinh Hue as chairman. The National Assembly adopted a resolution on the government's organization for 2021–26 that left unchanged the previous structure of eighteen ministries and four ministerial-level agencies approved by the 14th National Assembly.¹⁰ The National Assembly then approved the nominees for these positions.

Party Building

Party-building refers to the process of recruitment, retention, training, ideological education, and promotion within the VCP to bolster its constitutional role as “the leading force of the State and society”. Party-building also includes measures to rectify or discipline misbehaviour by party members who transgress VCP rules.¹¹

General Secretary Trong is a specialist on party-building who has given priority to this process throughout his life. Trong spent over half of his career as a VCP member working for the party's journal *Học Tập* (‘Study’, in English), later renamed *Tạp Chí Cộng Sản* (‘Communist Review’), with a focus on party-building. For example, he rose from editor of the Party-Building Department at *Tạp Chí Cộng Sản* (1968–73 and 1976–80) to become deputy head of the Party-Building Department (1983–89). He studied Russian at the Nguyen Ai Quoc Party School and later defended his thesis on party-building at the Academy of Social Sciences of the Soviet Union (July 1983). He then rose through the ranks at *Tạp Chí Cộng Sản*, advancing from member of the Editorial Board, to deputy editor-

in-chief, and then editor-in-chief (1989–96). He later served as vice chairman and chairman of the VCP's Theoretical Council (1998–2006).¹²

Trong was elected general secretary of the VCP in 2011 at the 11th National Congress and re-elected in 2016 at the 12th National Congress. During his first two terms, party-building and the campaign against corruption became his trademarks. Under his tutelage, internal party rules, regulations, directives and other policy documents were scrutinized, reviewed, updated and revised on a continual basis.¹³

Trong's unprecedented re-election for a third term meant that party-building and anti-corruption will continue to have high priority. He is the head of the Central Steering Committee on Anti-Corruption. As noted above, the 13th National Congress approved the Final Report on Party-Building. The VCP Central Committee's second plenum in March considered this report and included it in the work programmes for the Politburo, Secretariat and Central Committee for the next five years. The second plenum also endorsed six key missions that reinforced Trong's agenda to implement the Central Committee's Resolution No. 4 (11th and 12th terms) on urgent party-building issues, committing to

build the apparatus of the entire political system to make it really clean and strong; perform well cadre work, especially at the strategic level; continue to renew the party's leadership methods; step up the fight against corruption, waste and negative actions; renew the growth model, restructure the economy, improve the quality of growth, labour productivity, and competitiveness of the economy, proactive and active international integration.¹⁴

At its second meeting in March, the Central Inspection Commission recommended that the Secretariat expel Tat Thanh Cang, a former member of the Central Committee and the permanent deputy secretary of the Ho Chi Minh City Party Committee, from the party for violating party regulations and state law on the management of two state-owned companies. The Central Inspection Commission also recommended the expulsion of Le Van Phuoc, a former member of Phu Yen province's Party Committee and the chief justice of the Phu Yen People's Court, for financial mismanagement.¹⁵ On 7 April, the Secretariat duly expelled Cang and Phuoc from the VCP.¹⁶

At its third meeting in May, the Central Inspection Commission recommended disciplinary action against several officers of the military commands of Bac Lieu province and Phuoc Long district and against the Standing Board of the Party Committee of Bac Lieu province's Military Command for violating party

regulations. The Central Inspection Commission also issued three disciplinary warnings to (1) Vo Thanh Ha (the secretary of the Party Committee and the chairman of Vietnam Southern Food Corporation) for mismanagement of land in District 1, Ho Chi Minh City; (2) Bui Truong Giang (a member of the Standing Board of the Party Committee of the Central Agencies' Bloc, secretary of the Party Committee and deputy head of the Central Committee's Commission for Information and Education) for violating party regulations; and (3) Major General Dang Hoang Da from the Ministry of Public Security for violating party and state regulations in managing finances.¹⁷

On 18 June, Trong chaired meetings of the Politburo and Secretariat to consider disciplinary measures recommended by the Central Inspection Commission against a number of former and standing party leaders in Binh Duong province. The Politburo issued a disciplinary warning to the Standing Board of Binh Duong province's Party Committee (2015–20 tenure) and recommended that the Central Committee considers disciplinary measures against Tran Van Nam, a former member of the Central Committee and the secretary of Binh Duong province's Party Committee. The Secretariat issued a warning to Binh Duong's party Civil Affairs Committee (2016–21 tenure) and voted to expel four provincial party officials from all party positions for violating democratic centralism.

At the third plenum, on 5–8 July,¹⁸ the Central Committee discussed regulations on the implementation of the party's statutes and VCP regulations on inspection, supervision and discipline. The plenum approved amendments that clarified the responsibilities and powers of the Central Committee, the secretary general and the Central Inspection Committee. On Trong's recommendation, two former members of the Central Committee, Vu Huy Hoang and Tran Van Nam, were expelled from the VCP after having been convicted of criminal offenses.¹⁹ Hoang was a former minister of industry and trade, who was convicted of illegally transferring state land. Nam, as mentioned above, was convicted for misusing state capital and assets.

After the third plenum, Trong picked up the pace of disciplinary action against party members with the motto that there will be no restricted zones in the anti-corruption campaign. At a meeting in August chaired by Trong, the Secretariat concluded that the party delegation to the Hanoi People's Committee abused its power by interfering in bidding for the benefit of their families and relatives, and that these offenses were very serious, caused great losses to the state budget and deserved strict punishment. The Secretariat issued a disciplinary warning to the party delegation and recommended that Nguyen Van Tu, the head of the Hanoi Department of Planning and Investment, be expelled from the party.²⁰ Nguyen

Duc Chung (a former member of the VCP Central Committee, the former deputy secretary of the Hanoi City Party Committee and the former chairman of the Hanoi City People's Committee) was also expelled from the party and criminally prosecuted for his actions.

With respect to former party leaders in Ho Chi Minh City, the Secretariat decreed that Nguyen Thanh Tai and Tran Vinh Tuyen (former members of the Standing Board of the Ho Chi Minh City Party Committee and vice chairmen of the People's Committee) and Tran Trong Tuan (a former member of the Ho Chi Minh City Party Committee, the director of the Department of Construction and the chairman of the municipal Appraisal Council) be expelled from the party.

In September, the Secretariat expelled Nguyen Huy Ban (the former secretary of the party delegation to Vietnam Social Security [VSS] and former general director of the VSS) and Le Bach Hong (the former deputy minister of labour, invalids and social affairs, former secretary of the party delegation to the VSS and former general director of VSS) from the party for violating party regulations and state law. The Secretariat also expelled Vu Lien Oanh (the secretary of Quang Ninh province's Party Committee and director of the provincial Department of Education and Training) for "violating bidding regulations".²¹ Ban and Hong were later sentenced to prison in separate criminal proceedings.

At the fourth plenum of the VCP, on 4–7 October, Trong said the plenum would focus on how "to stop and drive back degradation in political ideology, morality and lifestyle and emergence of 'self-evolution' and 'self-transformation' among party members".²² Trong stressed the need to adopt active preventive measures and to strictly handle the degradation in political ideology, morality and lifestyle, corruption and negative phenomena among party members. Central Committee members were tasked with focusing on the ways and means to strengthen party-building and rectification.²³ At the conclusion of the plenum, Trong noted that an agreement had been reached to extend party-building and rectification work "to the entire political system, with an emphasis on proactive prevention and strict handling of the degradation in political thought, morality, lifestyle as well as other negative phenomena".²⁴

The fourth plenum also revised regulations on "things that party members must not do". This represented a major accomplishment for Trong in his personal commitment to enhance party-building. On 25 October, Trong signed Regulation No. 37-QD/TW, which provided an extensive and detailed list of nineteen activities that party members should not do.²⁵ The regulation also directed the Central Inspection Commission to take responsibility for monitoring and enforcing the regulation in coordination with the Central Committee, the Secretariat and the Politburo.

In November, the Central Inspection Commission tackled an emerging national scandal in the Ministry of Health and public health system as a result of a report by the Ministry of Public Security's Police Investigation Agency.²⁶ The police investigation uncovered a network of national and provincial officials who knowingly traded in counterfeit drugs and medical equipment. Criminal charges were brought against Truong Quoc Cuong, the former head of the Drug Administration of Vietnam who was currently serving as the deputy minister of health. Thereafter, the Politburo and Secretariat issued disciplinary warnings against the party delegation in the Ministry of Health. Cuong was dismissed from office and expelled from the party.²⁷ The Politburo also issued a warning to Nguyen Thi Kim Tien, the former minister of health.

Trong's party-building and anti-corruption drive, however, raises more questions than answers. Is the current wave of disciplinary action and criminal proceedings just the tip of the iceberg, as two Vietnamese academics suggest?²⁸ How will an intensification of this drive affect party factionalism at the local and national levels? Has Trong's anti-corruption drive sparked resentment on the part of party members and their families and supporters who had benefitted from corrupt networks? Will they go underground and wait for an opportune moment to seek revenge? The case of former Politburo member Le Thanh Hai and his network in Ho Chi Minh City illustrates that it could be a protracted process and require considerable investigative resources.²⁹

Moreover, is Trong creating a Vietnamese version of a "cult of personality" around his legacy of party-building during his three terms at the VCP's helm? The release of an 824-page book of his collected writings raised speculation that this was the case. What happens if Trong becomes incapacitated or steps down from office prior to the expiration of his term?³⁰ If Trong remains in office for a full term and tries to groom a successor, will this provoke a repeat of the Tran Quoc Vuong case? Vuong reportedly failed to win majority support of the Central Committee to replace Trong because of resentment by provincial party officials that Vuong had linked his career advancement to the struggle against corruption.

Party-leaders have long recognized that corruption in its ranks is the major threat to the legitimacy of one-party rule. Widespread publicity in the party-controlled media has likely confirmed what ordinary Vietnamese know: that corruption is pervasive in all sectors—public administration, the police, the judiciary, health and education, land management, and extractive industries such as logging and natural resources. Civil society activism has grown in Vietnam in recent years and corruption scandals are grist for the mill. For example, activist Do Nam Trung posted items on official corruption on his Facebook page. This

touched a sensitive nerve; Trung was arrested, tried and sentenced to ten years in prison for conducting propaganda against the state.

Combating COVID-19

On 28 January 2021, Vietnam experienced its first two cases of community-transferred coronavirus infection in fifty-five days. This soon became the largest COVID-19 outbreak since the January–April 2020 period, when the coronavirus was first reported. The outbreak occurred at the Vietnam Poyun Electronics Company in Hai Duong province (77 cases) and Van Dong International Airport in Quang Ninh (13 cases), where repatriation flights of Vietnamese who had been working or travelling abroad landed. Chi Linh City in Hai Duong and the Van Dong Airport were locked down. The 13th National Congress abruptly ended a day earlier than planned so members could return to their homes.³¹

Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc called an emergency meeting of the COVID-19 Task Force and issued a directive to close provincial borders and track down those who had been in contact with the new cases. The minister of health dispatched hundreds of medical specialists to Hai Duong, where three field hospitals were set up. Despite these measures, the outbreak spread to Hai Phong City, Hanoi and Bac Ninh province, all in the north. As a result, large public gatherings in advance of the Lunar New Year were banned in these localities, including cultural, sports and entertainment activities, and year-end parties.

Vietnam initially sourced its COVID-19 vaccines from Russia (Sputnik V) and Moderna, while hoping to buy time with a COVID-19 containment strategy for its locally manufactured vaccines to be developed. As the pandemic spread wildly across the South in the second quarter of 2021, the government gave priority to acquiring vaccine supplies from a wider range of sources. In June, for example, it gave emergency approval for the Pfizer vaccine made in Belgium and Germany. According to a spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “At the directive of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and overseas Vietnamese representative missions are striving to negotiate with vaccine manufacturers and providers around the world to gain access to more sources of vaccine.”³²

As Vietnam appeared to be gaining the upper hand in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, it was struck with the Delta variant in June. The government responded by imposing tighter restrictions in cities and provinces. On 5 July, Trong delivered this sobering assessment to the Central Committee’s third plenum: “the fourth outbreak is spreading very quickly, is extremely dangerous, complicated, difficult

to control, and may continue for a long time".³³ Ho Chi Minh City and several southern provinces soon emerged as major COVID-19 hotspots.

These developments prompted the government to take two important decisions in August. First, the government jettisoned its Zero COVID-19 policy. This decision was taken as a result of a recommendation from the National Steering Committee for COVID-19 Prevention and Control that the Zero COVID-19 goal was unrealistic, if not impossible, to achieve while the Delta variant was active.³⁴ Another factor weighing on this decision was the financial impact of a prolonged lockdown on the economy and associated mental health issues.

The government now gave priority to vaccinating as many people as possible as well as administering a booster shot. In order to meet this objective, Vietnam stepped up testing in high-risk areas and launched an international diplomatic offensive that netted fifty-four million vaccine doses donated by numerous foreign countries as of September 2021.³⁵ Public health regulations remained in place concerning wearing masks, social distancing and the resumption of classes at schools and activities involving large numbers of people.

Second, the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) was mobilized in large numbers on 20 August to assist the civilian authorities.³⁶ According to Lieutenant General Vu Hai San, the Ministry of National Defence decreed that "prevention and control of the COVID-19 pandemic is the army's combat mission in peacetime".³⁷ The VPA assisted in controlling the movement of people in Ho Chi Minh City and the southern provinces and in delivering food because people were confined to their homes.

In late August, only three per cent of Vietnam's population was fully vaccinated; this rose to 10 per cent in September, 31 per cent in October, and 66 per cent by December.³⁸ With respect to Ho Chi Minh City, a major hotspot for the Delta variant, the Ministry of Health reported that 98.5 per cent of the population of nearly ten million received one COVID-19 vaccine jab, and of this number 48 per cent received a booster by September. On 1 October, COVID-19 restrictions were lifted; first in Ho Chi Minh City and then other southern provinces. The VPA returned to barracks.

The government now turned to planning for a post-COVID recovery. On 25 September, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh chaired a meeting of the National Steering Committee for COVID-19 Prevention and Control. He addressed local officials from 10,400 communes/wards/townships, 705 districts, and 63 provinces and municipalities via video link. Prime Minister Chinh instructed these officials to combat the coronavirus pandemic but requested that all local governments set up a working group to facilitate the resumption of economic activities.

As one researcher concluded, “Vietnam’s pandemic response plunged from being a shining example to being a cautionary tale” as Vietnam became a victim of its own success.³⁹ At the end of 2020, Vietnam recorded 1,504 COVID-19 cases and 35 deaths. At the end of 2021, the number of recorded COVID-19 cases had shot up to 1,941,866 and deaths had skyrocketed to 32,394.⁴⁰ Ho Chi Minh City had the highest COVID-19 death rate in the region.⁴¹ These alarming figures were primarily a result of Vietnam’s laggard approach to vaccination, which made its population vulnerable when the Delta variant emerged.

There were other costs as well. Public opinion polls and an analysis of mega-data on the internet revealed that public support for the government was eroded significantly in 2021. For example, according to the State of Southeast Asia survey undertaken in late 2021 by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, when asked “how has the government performed this year in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic?”, the number of respondents who replied “well” dropped from 76 per cent in 2020 to 12.5 per cent in 2021. The number of respondents who rated the government’s pandemic response “poor” and “very poor” rose from 1.1 per cent in 2020 to 23.7 per cent in 2021.⁴² Two major factors contributed to this attitudinal shift: the slow disbursement of the government’s stimulus package and the management of strict lockdown measures. As a result, tens of thousands became jobless and Vietnam’s economy contracted sharply in the third quarter.

Conclusion

During 2021, the VCP faced three major challenges: managing leadership transition, battling corruption within the party’s ranks and combating COVID-19. At the end of the year, the VCP performed credibly on all three fronts in a process of reform and renewal that is continuous.

The VCP’s highly prescriptive process of generational change is sclerotic and slows the pace and scope of generational change. In 2021, there were too few qualified candidates to take the place of those slated for retirement. While there is a tradition of granting a limited number of exemptions to the mandatory retirement age of sixty-five on the basis of exceptional performance, the 13th National Congress took the unprecedented step of approving a third term in office for the incumbent general secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, who is in his late seventies.

At the same time, a “grand bargain” was reached between the party wing and the government wing of the VCP on filling the top leadership positions. It took half a year for this transition to work itself through the system, and Vietnam remained politically stable throughout. Indeed, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh

has proven to be a competent leader in steering Vietnam down the path of post-COVID-19 recovery.

The re-election of General Secretary Trong ensured that his strong advocacy of party-building and rectification would continue unabated. During 2021, disciplinary action was taken against a raft of former and current party members holding leadership positions at national, municipal and provincial levels who violated party and state laws and regulations. At the same time, Trong kept up the momentum to update and revise party regulations and rules to ensure that the next generation will be less venal. The hallmark of his success was the adoption of revised regulations on “things that party members must not do”.

In 2021, Vietnam managed the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic by imposing strict public health lockdown measures and belatedly jettisoning its Zero COVID-19 policy in favour of a national campaign to vaccinate as many people as possible. But the human costs of this policy, measured in COVID-19-related deaths and economic hardship for the general population, eroded public trust and confidence in the government. However, the government’s success in fully vaccinating an estimated sixty per cent of the population has allowed the lifting of many COVID-19 restrictions and kick-started the economy, which is expected to reach six per cent real GDP growth in 2022.⁴³

Notes

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