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Background Brief:

Who Will Be Vietnam's Next President: Implications for Combatting Corruption

January 17, 2023

We request your analytic input into the following two questions:

Q1. Who are the likely candidates to replace President Nguyen Xuan Phuc? What would they bring to this office?

ANSWER: There are at least three possible candidates to become Vietnam's next president. The first is Nguyen Phu Trong who would concurrently hold the posts of state president and general secretary of the party. This was the formula used when President Tran Dai Quang died in office in 2018. The other two candidates are the Minister of National Defence, Phan Van Giang, and the Minister of Public Security, To Lam.

The role of the state president is largely circumscribed by the state constitution that enumerates the president's duties and responsibilities but subjects these powers to approval by the National Assembly. In reality, the President is directed by and answerable to the Politburo.

If General Secretary Trong assumed the post of president he would undermine the prestige of that office and deny someone else in the Politburo from gaining valuable experience. Either Giang and Lam would suit the office. In the past, former Minister of National Defence Le Duc Anh and the former Minister of Public Security Tran Dai Quang both served as state president.

Q2. In his article entitled "'Red Card' for the President? Vietnam's Biggest Political Drama in Decades" (<https://fulcrum.sg/red-card-for-the-president-vietnams-biggest-political-drama-in-decades/?fbclid=IwAR2KJmx8pYCB09H-cf2hhhBdvp3MAo4CWVPhCTbNptMZBwaXKpH-UZxGtxY>) author Le Hong Hiep wrote:

On the contrary, the purge of corrupt leaders may pave the way for cleaner and more capable leaders to rise, helping the Party fight corruption better and improve its governance. As long as the leadership reshuffles do not lead to radical policy changes, their impact on the economy will also be limited. In fact, amidst all these personnel changes, Vietnam still recorded a GDP growth rate of 8 per cent in 2022, the fastest pace in 25 years."

What is your assessment of Hiep's argument?

ANSWER: Any conclusion that we draw about the future of Vietnam's anti-corruption campaign is premature at this stage. Hiep refers to factions in his article and seemingly assumes all the potential candidates to fill vacancies, with the exception of the current Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, are not corrupt. Vietnamese writers last year referred to arrests for corruption as the "tip or the iceberg."

It is equally plausible to speculate that if factions exist, as Hiep claims, they will hunker down to defend their positions at the expense of their rivals. Good guys do not always win.

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