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Background Brief:

Vietnam: Why Did Two Deputy Prime Ministers Resign?

January 13, 2023

We request your insights into the recent resignation of two deputy prime ministers in Vietnam.

Q1. Why were both men made to resign instead of being dismissed?

Officials who are going to be charged with criminal offences under the law are not permitted to resign. They are summarily dismissed and then subject to legal prosecution. In the case of the two deputy prime ministers, they failed in their duties as senior members on party committees within the government to properly supervise their subordinates. This is not a criminal offence so they were permitted to offer their resignations.

Q2. What does their de facto removal say about Vietnam's anti-corruption campaign?

The two cases are exceptional in that they both relate to the COVID-pandemic scandals, bribery on repatriation flights for Vietnamese stranded aboard, and bribery and price hiking in the sale of masks. The two cases are also an illustration of a new front opened by the party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong. Members of the party who fail in their supervision duties and/or vouched or promoted officials later found to be corrupt will also be subject to party discipline.

Q3. What does their removal say about the current state of Vietnam's politics?

The two COVID-related cases provoked widespread outrage by citizens and members of the party after very tough lockdown restrictions were imposed on the general public especially in the south. There was palpable moral outrage.

The recent dismissals are unrelated to a so-called power struggle in the party or alleged attempts by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong to consolidate his power. They are sui generis.

Preparations for the next party congress in 2026 will begin after mid-year 2023 and gather pace thereafter. It is unlikely that Trong, who was planning to retire at the last party congress, will seek a fourth term. He has the responsibility to groom and nominate a successor.

It is too early in the present five-year cycle to know who will be the next party leader. Of the 17 members of the Politburo, only five will be under 65 years of age at the start of 2026 (Vo Van Thuong, Tran Cam Tu, Tran Thanh Manh, Tran Tuan Anh, and Dinh

Tien Dung). Party rules permit granting exemptions in exceptional cases. Three persons who will be over 65 feature in speculation about who will be the next party general secretary: Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, Vuong Dinh Hue and Truong Thi Mai.

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