



Vietnam floats idea of Communist Party chief doubling as president

Top leader Trong poised to secure more power in mode of Xi Jinping



Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong has spearheaded an anti-corruption drive and taken on diplomatic tasks normally reserved for the president. Reuters

HO CHI MINH CITY -- The Communist Party general secretary is already the No. 1 figure in Vietnam, but well-known journalists and other opinion leaders on their social media accounts have suggested the post should come with a powerful second job: the role of president.

The idea has been circulating on Facebook, the country's most popular social network, with more than 60 million users. The party appears to be putting out feelers to gauge the public's reaction.

This comes after President Tran Dai Quang died in office on Sept. 21. The proposal hinted that General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, 74, could take over the presidency, just as Chinese President Xi Jinping holds both positions. If it happens, Trong would likely wield more clout over every aspect of life in the country.

He would also have greater control over rival faction leaders within the party.

Unlike China, Vietnam has kept the two positions separate. Proponents of the change have said that having one person hold both titles would avoid diplomatic confusion and cut costs. This jibes with a pilot program, under which two district-level positions are being integrated to reduce the number of civil servants.

The program, in turn, is part of a broader effort to cut political personnel by at least 10% by 2021, from about 2.8 million in 2017.

Sources suggested the change for the top leadership could be made when the National Assembly convenes this month. But some Vietnamese Facebook users -- including ones living abroad -- have come out against the general secretary and president idea. They argue it would put too much power in one leaders' hands.

Vietnam's executive and judicial branches are under the party's control. Nguyen Manh Hung, professor emeritus of government and international relations at George Mason University, earlier this year said it would take time to amend the constitution and party charter before combining the two posts. Vietnamese leaders have discussed the idea in the past, but fears of creating an autocracy halted the process.

In Vietnam's single-party socialist republic, the general secretary is one rung above the president. Other important posts include prime minister and national assembly chair.

Since he secured a second term as party leader in 2016, Trong has been in the limelight both at home and overseas. He met with French President Emmanuel Macron in 2018, normally a task for the president.

In another echo of China's Xi, Trong has spearheaded an anti-corruption campaign and, over the past two years, sent many high-ranking officers close to former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to prison. Former transport minister and Politburo member Dinh La Thang was among those caught in the dragnet.

After Quang's death, Trong is suitable for both positions, argued Vu Cao Phan, professor at Binh Duong University's Institute of Politics and International Relations.

The National Assembly is expected to vote for a new president in late October, based on constitutional procedures. Normally, the Political Bureau of the party's Central Committee would recommend a nominee from its senior ranks, before putting the pick to a vote. The pool of potential candidates includes Tran Quoc Vuong, executive secretary of the party's secretariat; Deputy Prime Minister Vuong Dinh Hue; Defense Minister Ngo Xuan Lich; and Ho Chi Minh City party chief Nguyen Thien Nhan.

Yet the Politburo, which is headed by Trong, has the final say over any nominee. So the discussion about uniting the top two posts could be placed on the agenda for the assembly meeting. Sources confirmed that a majority of Politburo members supported the idea of bringing the jobs together at a meeting on Sept. 30.

