

From Periphery to Centre: The Self-evolution of the Vietnamese Communist Party’s Central Committee

NGUYEN KHAC GIANG and
NGUYEN QUANG THAI

The Central Committee (CC) of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) is widely regarded as Vietnam’s most important political institution. However, few studies have exclusively examined the development of the CC since the beginning of the Đổi mới (Renovation) era. Based on a new biographical dataset of 626 CC members from the 6th to the 12th National Congress of the VCP, as well as Party’s internal documents, this article examines the institutional self-evolution of the CC in three key aspects: (1) its changing structure and composition; (2) its decision-making principles; and (3) its norms of elite promotion. In so doing, we argue that the CC has moved from the periphery to the centre of Vietnamese elite politics, resembling the role of a “shadow parliament” where major policies are deliberated and passed and where top leaders are chosen. The CC has achieved this position by developing and maintaining a considerably high level of intra-party democracy, expanding the selectorate by accommodating provincial elites and the National Assembly while greatly standardizing the norms of elite promotion. We also examine the impact of the CC’s rising power on the factional dynamics by revisiting three main classifications of

NGUYEN KHAC GIANG is a PhD candidate in Political Science at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Postal address: 29 Guadeloupe Crescent, Wellington 6037, New Zealand; email: giang.nguyen@vuw.ac.nz.

NGUYEN QUANG THAI is a researcher on political economy, currently working as a research and knowledge specialist at Oxfam. Postal address: P.1301, DN1, CT3, Khu do thi Trung Van, Nam Tu Liem, Hanoi, Vietnam; email: nguyenquangthai267@gmail.com.

factionalism in Vietnam in light of the new biographical dataset. We argue that the failure to identify solid factional boundaries among Vietnamese political elites is the direct consequence of the CC's transformation since Đổi mới.

Keywords: Vietnamese politics, party congress, institutional evolution, factionalism, authoritarian resilience.

Party's Central Committee

There is a consensus among observers of Vietnamese politics that the Central Committee (CC) of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) is the most important political institution of the party-state.¹ However, despite this recognition, the CC has only been sparsely mentioned in the literature, rather than being a stand-alone topic of investigation. The most in-depth research on the CC so far was done by Carl Thayer in 1993.² In the late 2000s, a series of studies on Vietnamese politics by Edmund Malesky and colleagues shed light on the rise of the CC³ in Vietnam's power structure as well as the characteristics of the factional infighting that took place within it. Other than that, the CC has been mostly described as an arena of power struggle in annual reports on Vietnam or reviews of the VCP's quinquennial congresses.⁴ While insightful, these studies consider the CC as the explanatory variable rather than a topic of research in and of itself, and thus do not offer a detailed examination of its fundamental characteristics. This is in contrast with the study of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which has been rigorously examined over the past few decades.⁵ As a result, many analyses on Vietnamese elite politics are case-specific and time-sensitive, which inevitably lead to contradictory perceptions of how the CC works, particularly with regard to the question of factionalism.⁶ Naturally, the failure to see how the CC has evolved over the years and adapted itself to new environments has left scholars unable to account for the reasons behind the regime's relative stability.⁷ Furthermore, the lack of studies on the Vietnamese CC makes it difficult to directly compare its political development with China, which has recently emerged as one of the most interesting topics in comparative authoritarian studies.⁸

Based on a new biographical dataset of 626 CC members from the 6th to the 12th congress of the VCP,⁹ as well as the Party's internal documents, we examine the institutional origins and development of the CC in three key aspects: (1) its changing

structure and composition; (2) its decision-making principles; and (3) its norms of elite promotion. In so doing, we argue that the CC has moved from the periphery to the centre of Vietnamese elite politics, resembling the role of a shadow parliament where major policies are deliberated and passed, as well as where top leaders are chosen. The CC has achieved this position by developing and maintaining a considerably high level of intra-party democracy, expanding the selectorate by accommodating the increasing power of the provinces and the National Assembly (NA) while greatly standardizing the norms of elite promotion. Our study is one of the first attempts to collate and summarize the biographies of Vietnamese CC members over an extended period of time.¹⁰

The article proceeds as follows. We first offer an explanation of the CC's changing power since 1986, followed by an analysis of its institutional development throughout the *Đổi mới* (Renovation) era, with a particular focus on its composition and voting structures. After examining the normative sources of the CC's power, which come from the institutionalization of working procedures as well as respect for the democratic centralism principle, we delve into the patterns of elite promotion to show how central leaders find it increasingly difficult to intervene in the CC promotion process. Based on the dataset, we also evaluate the factional dynamics of the CC based on three popular classification strategies. The article concludes with our reflections on the power limits of the CC given recent re-centralization efforts by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong.

The VCP Central Committee's Changing Composition and Structure since *Đổi mới*

In communist regimes like Vietnam and China, the central committees of the communist parties, with the formal mandate to elect the top leadership, can be considered the selectorates.¹¹ Before the country officially embraced market reforms under the *Đổi mới* policy in 1986, central leaders in Hanoi dominated the CC by tightly controlling the party's personnel policy as well as keeping the decision-making process within a small group of elites. However, since the 6th Congress in 1986, the CC has gradually attained its position as the centre of Vietnam's collective leadership mechanism. Today, it is widely considered as the most important institution in Vietnam's one-party state. The expansion of the selectorate and the changing voting structure play a significant part in this transformation.

The rise of provincial representation is a particularly noteworthy factor that led to the CC's expansion. Before 1986, provinces were greatly underrepresented. The country's provinces were not guaranteed to have representatives in the CC, while the party chiefs of central municipalities Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) were not guaranteed Politburo seats. However, the situation changed dramatically in the late 1980s. From the 1990s onward, barring special circumstances,¹² provincial Party secretaries were guaranteed full CC membership.¹³ Nevertheless, the norm remained informal and had to be agreed upon by the CC before each congress, until 2017 when Regulation 90 (and its amended version Regulation 214 in 2020) was issued by the Politburo, which requires a provincial Party secretary to meet the criteria of the "Politburo or CC membership".¹⁴ As shown in Table 1, provincial representation in the CC increased from 23.4 per cent at the 6th Congress (1986) to 35.6 per cent at the 12th Congress (2016).

Why did the central elites accept more provincial representation in the CC, a transformation that would subsequently weaken their own position? The commonly accepted narrative is that the death of General Secretary Le Duan, who dominated Vietnam's post-war politics, in 1986 facilitated the transformation from a personalized to a collective leadership system,¹⁵ with reformists within the CC being able to exert more influence ever since. However, if we look at the composition of the CC, it had undergone major changes four years earlier. Before the 5th Congress in 1982, Le Duc Tho emphasized the need to increase representation for the provinces, particularly Hanoi and HCMC, in the Politburo and the CC.¹⁶ Subsequently, the number of the CC full membership increased from 103 at the 4th Congress to 121 at the end of the 5th Congress.¹⁷ The changes in 1982 have rarely been discussed but deserve more attention as an analysis of these changes helps us understand the rationale behind Vietnam's collective leadership system. We suggest there are both economic and ideological considerations behind the move.

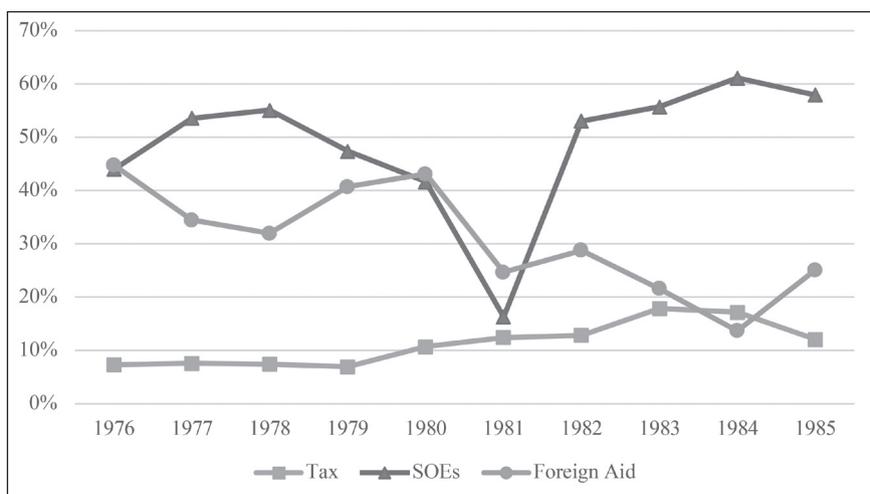
First, as the economic crisis which started in the late 1970s deepened, the centre had been unable to sustain the centralized distribution system. On several occasions, Hanoi and HCMC—where the centres of power were located—had to ask for food support from surrounding agrarian provinces.¹⁸ The sharp decrease in foreign aid in the 1980s, a result of Vietnam's military intervention in Cambodia and the deteriorating situation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc (see Figure 1), put parts of the country in a self-subsistent mode. These events increased the financial independence and thus

Table 1
Composition of the CC, 6th–12th Congresses

Congress (selected time)	6 th (7/1987)		7 th (9/1992)		8 th (1/1998)		9 th (8/2002)		10 th (8/2007)		11 th (8/2011)		12 th (7/2016)		Differences, 6 th – 12 th
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Central Party	19	15.3%	21	14.4%	27	16.4%	27	18.2%	25	15.6%	27	15.4%	30	16.7%	1.3%
Central Government	35	28.2%	39	26.7%	43	26.1%	33	22.3%	29	18.1%	34	19.4%	32	17.8%	-10.4%
National Assembly	6	4.8%	9	6.2%	9	5.5%	9	6.1%	15	9.4%	14	8.0%	18	10.0%	5.2%
President Office	4	3.2%	1	0.7%	2	1.2%	2	1.4%	3	1.9%	3	1.7%	3	1.7%	-1.6%
Military	15	12.1%	13	8.9%	18	10.9%	15	10.1%	17	10.6%	19	10.9%	20	11.1%	-1.0%
Security	6	4.8%	3	2.1%	4	2.4%	5	3.4%	6	3.8%	6	3.4%	4	2.2%	-2.6%
Procuracy and Court	2	1.6%	1	0.7%	1	0.6%	2	1.4%	2	1.3%	2	1.1%	2	1.1%	-0.5%
Provincial Party	29	23.4%	45	30.8%	49	29.7%	48	32.4%	56	35.0%	63	36.0%	64	35.6%	12.2%
Provincial government	3	2.4%	4	2.7%	1	0.6%	1	0.7%	1	0.6%	2	1.1%	2	1.1%	-1.3%
Mass organization	4	3.2%	7	4.8%	6	3.6%	5	3.4%	5	3.1%	5	2.9%	5	2.8%	-0.4%
Other (SOEs, social organizations, unknown)	1	0.8%	3	2.1%	5	3.0%	1	0.7%	1	0.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	-0.8%
Total membership	124		146		165		148		160		175		180		

Note: The time selected for position screening is after the first session of the corresponding National Assembly. At the selected time, seven (the 6th Congress), 20 (the 7th Congress), five (the 8th Congress), two (the 9th Congress), and one (the 10th Congress) CC members had not yet or no longer held the membership in those corresponding congresses. The statistics are based on available and accessible data of 626 CC members from the 6th to the 12th Congresses. The largest changes are highlighted.
Source: Authors' dataset.

Figure 1
The Vietnamese Government's Sources of Revenue, 1976–85 (%)



Source: Vietnam General Statistical Office, *Số Liệu Thống Kê Kinh Tế Tài Chính, 1955 – 1986* [Statistical Data on Economy and Finance, 1955 – 1986] (Hanoi, Vietnam: Vietnam General Statistical Office, 1988).

the relative power of the provinces vis-à-vis the central authority. The high level of decentralization in Vietnam can also be seen as a legacy of this period.¹⁹

Second, along with the worsening economic crisis, dissatisfaction towards the centrally planned economy started to emerge. In several provinces, local leaders defied the centre's orders to practise “fence-breaking” policies that rationalized and normalized economic activities.²⁰ Some of the fence-breaking provincial leaders, most notably Vo Van Kiet, would later move to Hanoi and be considered as part of the “reformist” faction.²¹ Several key central leadership members, such as Chairman of the State Council Truong Chinh, gradually changed their conservative views and leaned towards the reformists.²²

Third, the existential crisis in communist Europe also had profound psychological and ideological impacts. As the VCP scrambled to learn lessons to ensure its own survival, it identified the lack of intra-party democracy as one of the key reasons for the collapse of communism in Europe, suggesting it needed to improve and expand “the practice of democracy”.²³ Having a more diverse and enlarged

CC would help meet this goal. Between the 6th and the 8th Congress (1986–98), CC membership increased by 33 per cent. Along with the provinces, the National Assembly (NA) also benefitted from this ideological shift as its role in the system increased in importance.²⁴ Since the 7th Congress in 1991, the NA has gradually consolidated its position and the NA chairmanship eventually became one of the “four pillars” of Vietnam’s political power structure. As seen in Table 1, the number of NA representatives in the CC tripled from the 6th to the 12th Congress, with a net increase of 5.2 per cent in vote share.

The Central Committee’s Inner Workings: The Primacy of Democratic Centralism

The changing composition would not matter much if the CC only functioned as a “window-dressing institution” as seen elsewhere in other authoritarian regimes.²⁵ However, a closer look at the inner workings of the CC shows its rather surprising democratic characteristics.

Table 2
Number of Plenums in Congress’s Tenure of the CCP and the VCP

CCP Congress	No. of Plenums	VCP Congress	No. of Plenums
13th (1987–92)	9	6th (1986–91)	13
14th (1992–97)	7	7th (1991–96)	12
15th (1997–2002)	7	8th (1996–2001)	13
16th (2002–7)	7	9th (2001–6)	13
17th (2007–12)	7	10th (2006–11)	15
18th (2012–17)	7	11th (2011–16)	14
19th (2017–to date)	7	12th (2016–21)	15

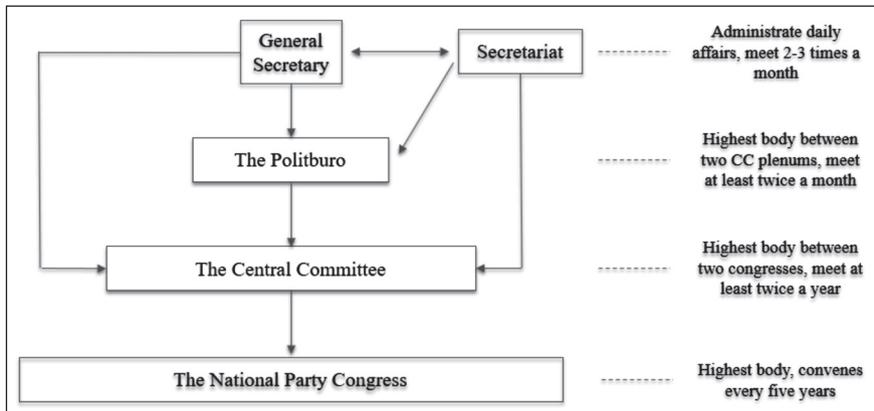
Source: Authors’ own compilation.

The VCP’s Constitution explicitly requires the CC to meet every six months,²⁶ which provides CC members with more opportunities—at least formally—to deliberate on issues and policies. In reality, the Vietnamese CC meets more often than that (see Table 2). More importantly, after the 7th Congress, the amended Party’s Constitution guaranteed CC members the right to preserve their opinions if

they were different from those of the Party's organizations.²⁷ This had a profound impact on intra-party democracy in the VCP and perhaps explains why CC members had the courage to criticize and veto decisions made by top leaders and the Politburo on several occasions.²⁸ In the mid-term National Party Congress in 1994, for example, 644 delegates were surveyed on 10 major policies which could only be passed if they received more than 50 per cent of the votes.²⁹ The practice of frequent voting on policy issues continued to be applied in later congresses. The working guidelines of the CC, issued after each congress, upholds the democratic centralism principle that requires votes and opinions in all important matters (see Figure 2).³⁰

The relative level of intra-party democracy allows the CC to operate as a de facto parliament, where major policies are deliberated and decided. The CC plenums, for example, typically take place ahead of NA sessions where most CC members are delegates or have a strong influence over delegations from their constituencies. Consequently, CC members must “embrace” (*quán triệ̃t*) the CC's decisions and carry out “ideological work” (*công tác tư tưởng*) to explain these decisions to the NA delegates. In 2008, when the NA did not approve the administrative expansion of Hanoi, central leaders were able to change their position by reminding delegates about the need to “embrace” the Party's decisions.³¹

Figure 2
Democratic Centralism in the VCP



Note: Arrows indicate the direction of reporting responsibility.
Source: Authors' design.

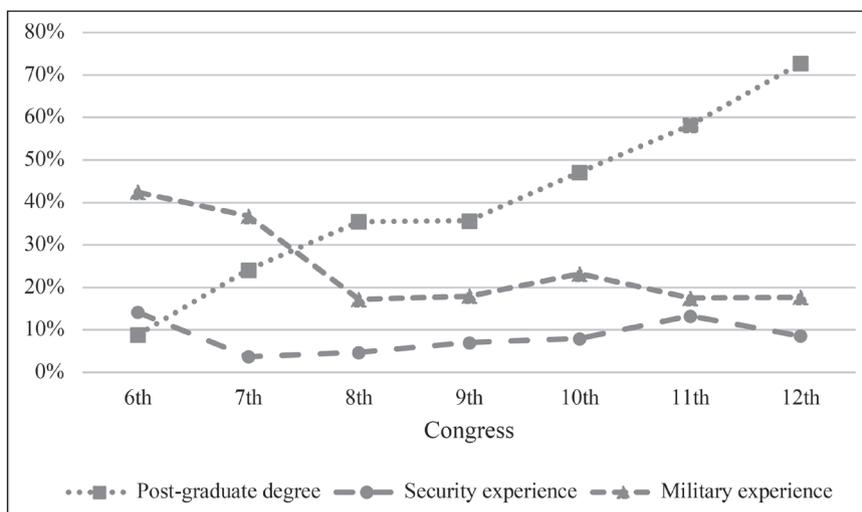
Another significant aspect of the CC's democratic centralism principle is the role of its central commissions, which administer the Party's daily affairs under the umbrella of the Secretariat (see Figure 2). If the CC is a shadow parliament, central commissions work as shadow super-ministries, imposing the Party's will in almost all aspects of social, economic and political life. Party commissions were relatively weak during Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's tenure (2006–16),³² but grew in importance after the 12th Congress (2016). These powerful institutions, particularly the Central Inspection Commission and the Central Organization Commission, have played an instrumental role in General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's consolidation of power.

The Standardization of Elite Promotion

There has been a remarkable standardization process for electing CC members since *Đổi mới*. In earlier congresses during the 1990s, when membership of the CC was more limited, there were a few surprising appointments. Vu Dinh Cu, a well-known physicist, was promoted to the CC in 1991 just six years after he became a party member. Professor Cu then served as Chairman of the NA Committee on Science, Technology and Environment, and later as the NA's vice chairman,³³ which might imply that his promotion fulfilled the technocratic needs of the party. The case of Dao Dinh Binh, who was selected by the CC to be the minister of transport for the term 1996–2001, was more intriguing. He was promoted to the CC at the 8th Congress after only serving as the director-general of an inter-regional subsidiary of the state-owned Vietnam Railways. This role was at least two ranks below a CC position. The NA refused to accept the CC's endorsement of his nomination for the ministerial position,³⁴ which might indicate the NA's disapproval of Binh's rapid rise as a CC member.³⁵ Ultimately, Binh was only allowed to serve as the vice minister of transport from 1996 to 2001.³⁶

In later congresses, such so-called "helicopter promotions" were much rarer, as certain qualifications, such as educational background and leadership experience, have been explicitly required. Under the leadership of Nguyen Phu Trong, the standardization of elite promotion intensified,³⁷ first with Decision 244 in 2014, then with Regulation 90 in 2017³⁸ and Regulation 214 in 2020.³⁹ One clear marker of standardization is the sharp increase in CC members with post-graduate degrees (see Figure 3). While 25 per cent of the CC

Figure 3
**Selected Demographic and Experience Characteristics of the CC,
 6th–12th Congresses (%)**



Note: The statistics is based on available and accessible data of 626 CC members.
 Source: Authors' dataset.

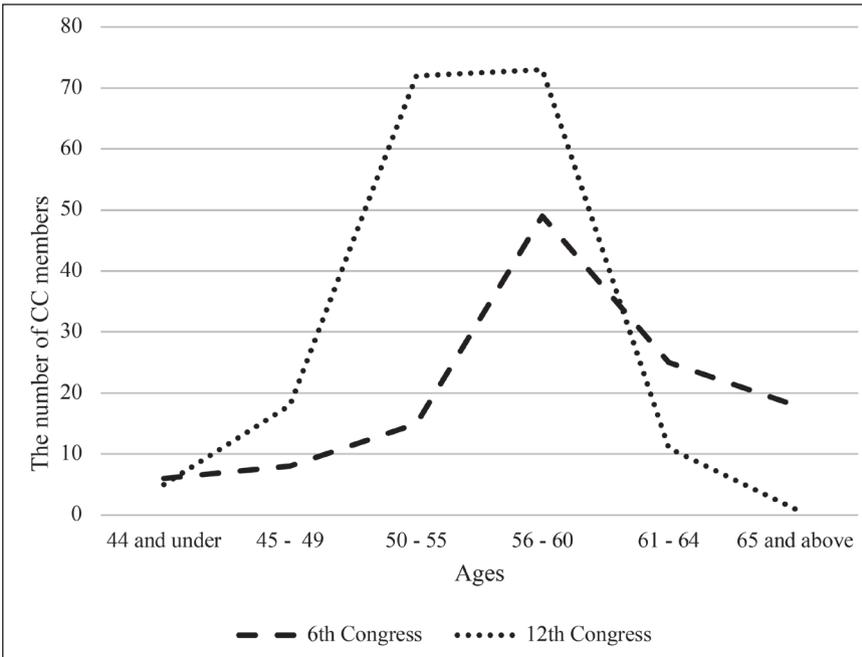
membership in 1986 never graduated from high school,⁴⁰ and only 9 per cent had a postgraduate degree, all of them had at least a university degree and the majority had a postgraduate degree (128 out of 180) in 2016.

Another important area of standardization is the age requirement. There has been much discussion about age limits (55 as the threshold for first-term members, 60 as the general rule);⁴¹ however, a standardized age distribution among CC members is also worth noting. Currently, the VCP applies a three-layer age formation system which requires a Party executive committee (*cấp ủy*) to consist of three age groups: “senior” members (who can stay one full term before reaching the retirement age); “middle” members (who can stay at least two terms); and “junior/young” members.⁴² This age formation system plays a pivotal role in stabilizing the CC structure and helps prevent leaders from overstaying their positions.

The formation was discussed in plenums leading to the 4th Congress in 1982 as the old age and health issues of CC members had become a major concern in the early 1980s.⁴³ Many CC members,

some of whom were key leaders such as Prime Minister Pham Hung, died in office.⁴⁴ However, it was not until after the 6th Congress in 1986 that the CC was able to experiment with this policy at lower administrative levels.⁴⁵ By issuing Resolution 05-NQ/TW in 1988, the CC formally required all party organizations' executive committees (including the CC itself) to guarantee the three-layer age formation; elections had to ensure that one-third of the committees were made up of new members.⁴⁶ In addition, at the 6th Plenum in 1989, the CC for the first time mentioned the need to impose age limits on senior positions in the party, state and mass organizations.⁴⁷ From the 7th Congress in 1991, the three-layer age formation was formally established.⁴⁸ As a result, there has been a substantial decrease in the ages of CC members. Candidates for CC promotion also tend to be newer party members. The average age of full CC members (see Figure 4) decreased from 58.4 at the 6th Congress (1986) to

Figure 4
Full CC Members' Ages, 6th and 12th Congresses Compared



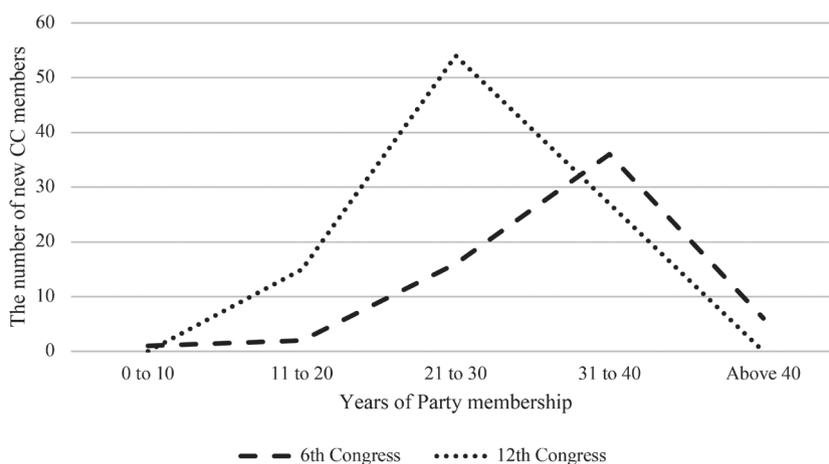
Note: The numbers in this figure do not include three CC members at the 6th Congress as the information is unavailable.

Source: Authors' dataset.

54.8 at the 12th Congress (2016), while the average years of party membership for newly elected CC members declined from 33.7 to 26.2 during the same period (see Figure 5).

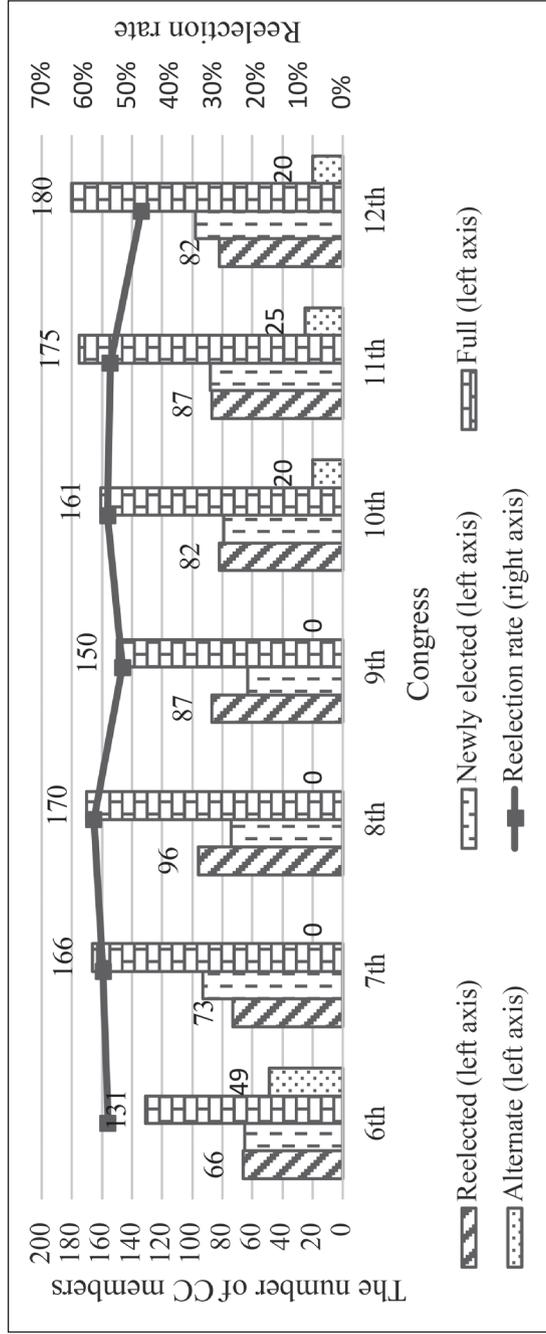
The standardization of elite promotion came together with the compartmentalization of membership, which was aimed at reducing the over-representation of several groups in the early days of *Đổi mới*.⁴⁹ Sectors are allocated a specific number of seats in the CC, depending on their relative importance in the Party. For example, a ministerial-level agency is allocated one seat, while the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Defence are normally allocated around six or seven positions each.⁵⁰ This informal norm prevents powerful factions from dominating the CC. As a result, the proportion of CC members with security and defence backgrounds has sharply decreased from more than 50 per cent in 1986 to approximately 25 per cent in 2016 (see Figure 3).⁵¹ In addition, the CC structure is also stabilized by a relatively constant re-election rate at around 50 per cent (see Figure 6).

Figure 5
Years of Party Membership of New CC Members,
6th and 12th Congresses Compared



Note: The numbers of newly elected CC members at the 6th and 12th congresses were 65 and 98, respectively. The numbers in this figure do not include four CC members at the 6th Congress and two CC members at the 12th Congress as the information is unavailable.
Source: Authors' dataset.

Figure 6
 Number of CC Members (Full and Alternate), 6th–12th Congresses
 (1986–2016)



Note: The full, re-elected or newly elected CC memberships include those elected at the congresses as well as CC meetings. The number of alternate members is counted at the beginning of each congress's tenure.
 Source: Authors' dataset.

In addition to standardizing the criteria for candidacy, the selection process has also become highly institutionalized. In theory, according to the Party's Constitution, the Party's national congress is the only institution that has the authority to select CC members. However, before 1986, central leaders were able to intervene and there were instances where an influx of cadres were promoted to the CC during plenums between congresses.⁵² Since 1986, however, this rule has been strictly adhered to. When facing the need to increase CC membership in the early 1990s, the VCP had to convene a mid-term congress in 1994 instead of a plenum. Central leaders can no longer decide personnel issues arbitrarily⁵³ and must go through a complex process that involves engagement with lower-level party organizations.⁵⁴ One notable example was the failure of Minister of Health Nguyen Thi Kim Tien to get re-elected at the 12th Congress (2016), despite being officially nominated by the CC. Furthermore, the fact that the CC must organize plenary sessions towards the end of its tenure to deliberate on personnel issues indicates that central leaders cannot always force their will on CC members (see Table 2 for a comparison with the CCP).

The increasingly institutionalized elite promotion process in the CC has made alternate membership irrelevant. While there were 49 alternate members elected at the 6th Congress in 1986, the VCP decided to eliminate these positions altogether for the next three congresses. After 2001, the VCP brought back this practice but allocated only around 20 seats (see Figure 6). The chance for alternate members to be promoted to full membership is quite high,⁵⁵ indicating that these positions are considered as the apprenticeship for future leaders rather than a competition ground for promotion as in the case of China.⁵⁶ As the CC has the authority to decide on full membership promotions, decreasing the number of alternate members significantly reduces the power of central elites over personnel matters.

The above analysis does not imply that the CC is an impartial political institution. There are cases where family backgrounds (the "princelings") can significantly affect the prospects for promotion to the CC (see Table 3). These princelings often have fewer years of party membership than other newly elected members. Given that the new generation of princelings have much better opportunities for education and careers, we expect that more princelings will be appointed to the CC in the coming congresses.

In addition, although the overall political system strives to maintain balance among geographical regions, birthplace might

Table 3
Princelings Promoted to the CC, 10th–12th Congresses

No.	Name	Years of Party membership when elected	Age when elected	End of CC membership	Relationship	Patrons
12th Congress (2016)						
1	Tran Tuan Anh	20	52	Incumbent	Son	Tran Duc Luong
2	Nguyen Xuan Anh	12	40	2017	Son	Nguyen Van Chi
3	Nguyen Thanh Nghi	17	40	Incumbent	Son	Nguyen Tan Dung
4	Le Minh Hung	16	46	Incumbent	Son	Le Minh Huong
5	Tran Quoc To	29	54	Incumbent	Brother	Tran Dai Quang
11th Congress (2011)						
1	Tran Binh Minh	19	53	2021	Son	Tran Lam
2	Nong Quoc Tuan	19	48	2016	Son	Nong Duc Manh
3	Nguyen Chi Vinh	28	54	2021	Son	Nguyen Chi Thanh
4	Truong Quang Nghia	28	53	2021	Brother	Truong Quang Duoc
5	Nguyen Thi Kim Tien	16	52	2016	Nephew	Ha Huy Tap
10th Congress (2006)						
1	Pham Binh Minh	25	50	Incumbent	Son	Nguyen Co Thach

Source: Authors' dataset.

influence promotion prospects. Our data shows that members with Northern origins always occupied a majority in the CC—albeit at a small margin—since 1986 (see Table 4).

CC members tend to be concentrated in the Red River Delta and Northern Central region, which are known as the cradle of the Vietnamese revolution (see Figure 7). Northern leaders also dominate key positions.⁵⁷ A well-known activist, resenting this situation, commented—in reference to the popular television series *Game of Thrones*—that “the North rules, but the South remembers”.⁵⁸

Table 4
Geographical Allocation of the Full CC membership, 6th–12th Congresses

Congress	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	Total
North	80	102	103	92	94	105	109	375
South	49	62	66	58	67	70	71	246
Unknown data	2	2	1					5
Total membership	131	166	170	150	161	175	180	626
North's proportion	61.1%	61.4%	60.6%	61.3%	58.4%	60.0%	60.6%	59.9%

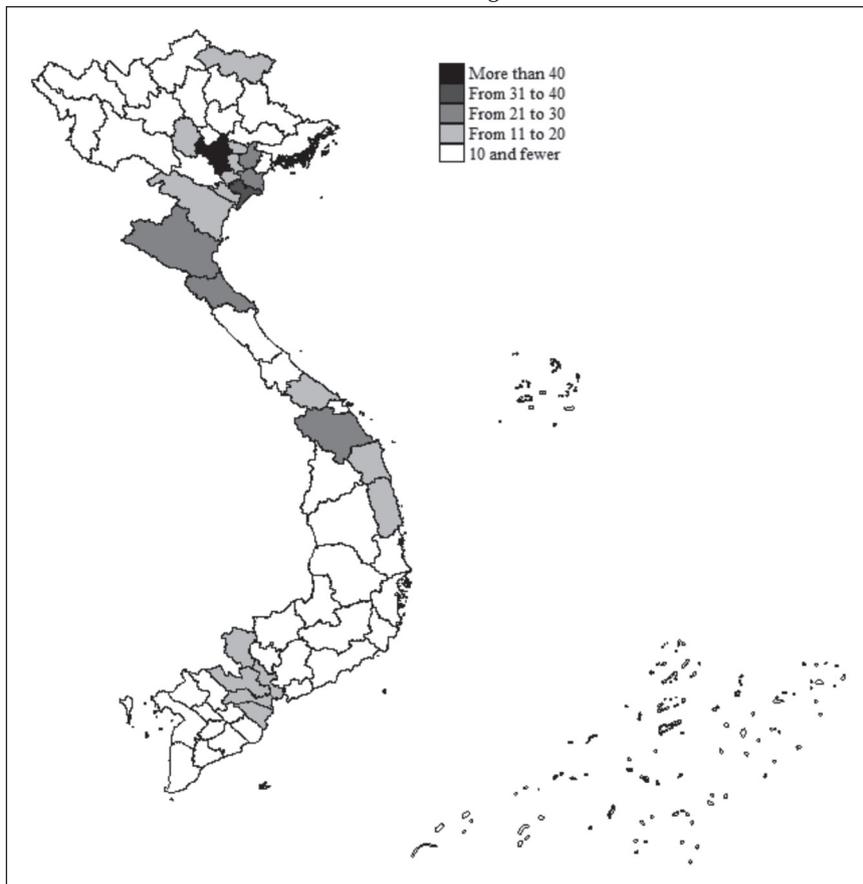
Note: The North includes all provinces north of the 17th Parallel, the old border between the North and the South during the Vietnam War. Quang Tri—the border province—is considered as Northern. The full CC members include those elected at congresses as well as CC meetings.

Source: Authors' dataset.

Factions and Power Balance in the CC

This section uses a new biographical dataset to examine characteristics of factionalism in Vietnamese politics. Despite the frequent use of the term, scholars have rarely agreed on what constitutes a “faction” in Vietnam. During the Cold War, scholars debated the divisions between pro-China and pro-Soviet Union camps, or between moderates and hardliners.⁵⁹ In the early 1990s, *Đổi mới* also saw the emergence of interest group politics which created the factional line along what Thayer called “sectoral representation”.⁶⁰ The oscillation of reform policies since the late 1990s brought back the ideological distinction of “reformist/liberal” versus “conservative/hard-line” factions,⁶¹ while the emerging regional geopolitics created the new labels of pro-China versus pro-West/pro-America.⁶² Some

Figure 7
**Distribution of the Total CC Membership by Birth Provinces,
 6th–12th Congress**



Source: Authors' dataset.

scholars put more emphasis on patronage-based factionalism,⁶³ illustrated by the power struggle at the 12th Congress between the then Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong.⁶⁴

Most of the above classifications of factions, unfortunately, do not provide clear membership criteria as well as any lists of potential factional members. Considering the new biographical

dataset, we examine the validity of three main classifications of factionalism in contemporary Vietnam, namely the occupation-based, the patronage-based and the ideology-based (or policy-based). The first two follow the clientelistic approach offered by Andrew Nathan,⁶⁵ which emphasizes factional links based on occupations and birthplaces. While occupation-based factions often do not have a factional leader, it is imperative for patronage-based factions to have one. Using the biographical dataset and additional qualitative evidence, we now explore the plausibility of these various factional classifications.

Occupation-based Factionalism

Occupation-based factionalism mostly refers to the group of CC members that have the same occupational background. The idea of the CC being dominated by different “sectoral” groups was raised in a seminal work by Thayer, in which he argued that CC members represented sectoral or regional constituencies rather than being mere followers of top leaders.⁶⁶ Although factional ties can emerge from a wide variety of occupations, we test the link in two professional areas most frequently used in analyses: the Communist Youth Union (CYU) and the security apparatus. Given the lack of more precise information, the criteria for alleged factional ties tested here is less strict: CC members can be considered as belonging to the same faction if they have ever worked in the same sector.⁶⁷

It is no coincidence that many Vietnamese leaders, when preparing career paths for their children, place them in the CYU. A notable case is Nguyen Minh Triet,⁶⁸ the youngest son of former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, who rose quickly to become a member of the CYU’s central executive committee after just ten years.⁶⁹ Indeed, our dataset reveals that CC members with youth union experience occupy a large portion of the CC membership (see Table 5).

However, there is not enough qualitative evidence to confirm there is a CYU alliance at any of the Party’s congresses. Even at the 8th and the 12th congresses, where there were 27 and 34 CC members with CYU experience respectively, they did not seem to have a close connection. If we use a stricter criterion for an occupation-based faction that requires the presence of a factional leader who holds a post in the “four pillars”, there are only four occasions where such leaders can be found (Prime Minister Phan Van Khai at the 8th and 9th, President Nguyen Minh Triet at the

Table 5
CC Members with CYU Experience, 6th–12th Congresses

Congress	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th
Members with CYU experience	15	23	27	21	23	23	34
Total membership	131	166	170	150	161	175	180
Percentage	11.5%	13.9%	15.9%	14.0%	14.3%	13.1%	18.9%

Source: Authors' database.

10th and President Truong Tan Sang at the 11th Congress). Prime Minister Khai, however, only served one year in a local CYU early in his career (1950–51), which is hardly indicative of a strong link with other CYU members. The same can be said of President Truong Tan Sang, who never worked at the central CYU. Nguyen Minh Triet is theoretically an ideal factional leader, who had a five-year stint at the central CYU. Yet there were no clear links between him and the other nine CC members who also had central CYU experience at the 10th Congress, when he was elected president. More importantly, all the three “factional leaders” are Southerners, suggesting that their presence in the top four more likely reflects a geographical allocation than an occupational one.

Another possible occupation-based faction centres around CC members who had experience within the security establishment, whether in the military or police forces.⁷⁰ This suggestion appears to be more credible, as many former security officials have taken up top posts since 1986: two general secretaries,⁷¹ three presidents,⁷² and four prime ministers (see Figure 3 for the proportion of CC membership with a security background).⁷³ However, the idea of a security-based faction has its weaknesses.⁷⁴ This grouping ignores the fact that the military and security establishments at times hold different interests.⁷⁵ Even within the same security factions, there is evidence of fierce intra-group competition. A recent case involves two police generals, Hanoi's former Chairman Nguyen Duc Chung (12th CC member) and Nguyen Duy Ngoc (13th CC member), who used to work under Chung in Hanoi's Municipal Police Department for at least six years from 2010 to 2015. General Ngoc was later promoted to Vice Minister of Public Security and took charge of an investigation that eventually brought down his former boss.⁷⁶ This goes against the notion that factional members must protect each other.

Patronage-based Factionalism

Patronage-based factionalism has overlapping characteristics with occupation-based factionalism, but include other determinants such as geographical origin, family connections or any other forms of reciprocal relationships. The biggest challenge for this conceptualization is to identify the patrons and their clients. In the case of China, general secretaries of the CCP are generally considered patrons.⁷⁷ However, Vietnam's more collective system means the general secretary is not always the most powerful man in charge, as shown in the case of Nong Duc Manh (2001–11). Manh was seen as a weak leader and his tenure saw the rise of the powerful Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung. Consequently, although the grouping of Vietnamese politicians around specific personalities has been widely discussed since the 2000s, few can name the exact factional leaders and their policy priorities or vested interests in each congress.⁷⁸

Using our dataset, we examine in detail the most famous patron, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, and examine his alleged faction based on Shih et al.'s criteria.⁷⁹ Accordingly, CC members during Dung's leadership are considered part of his faction if they share the same birthplace, educational institutions or work history⁸⁰ (see Table 6).

Table 6
Nguyen Tan Dung's Alleged Factions, 10th–11th Congresses

10th Congress	11th Congress	Criteria
Vo Thanh Binh	Nguyen Phuong Nam	Birthplace: Ca Mau
Huynh Dam	Duong Thanh Binh	Birthplace: Ca Mau
Le Hong Anh	Le Hong Anh	Overlapping work experience in Kien Giang Province (1991–95)
Tran Dai Quang	Tran Dai Quang	Ministry of Public Security (MPS) (1995–96)
Nguyen Van Huong		MPS (1995–96)
Truong Hoa Binh	Truong Hoa Binh	MPS (1995–96)
Dang Van Hieu		MPS (1995–96)
Le Duc Thuy		State Bank of Vietnam (1998–99)

Source: Authors' dataset.

Although some individuals can be seen as close to Dung, such as generals Le Hong Anh and Nguyen Van Huong, other cases are not as convincing. There have been sustained reports by Vietnam observers that former president Tran Dai Quang and Prime Minister Dung belonged to different camps in the events leading up to the 12th Congress.⁸¹ The same can be said of former Vice Premier Truong Hoa Binh. Nguyen Phuong Nam, who shared the same birthplace with Dung, was disciplined by the CC in 2015. Yet at the 12th Congress when Dung lost the race against General Secretary Trong, Nam managed to retain his CC seat. This would not have happened if Nam had indeed been a member of Dung's faction.

Policy-based Factionalism

The lack of clarity in “background sorting”⁸² makes a policy-based classification a tempting option. However, while it is easy to create new factional labels based on policy preferences, providing acceptable justifications remains a huge challenge. Some of the most well regarded reformists among the CC members, including former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and Politburo member Tran Xuan Bach, had extensive experience in the security establishment.⁸³ Furthermore, as Gainsborough points out, policy positions can easily be jettisoned to suit circumstances.⁸⁴ For example, one of the most accepted assumptions about the CC's characteristics is the autonomy of provincial CC members vis-à-vis the centre.⁸⁵ They are also believed to be more supportive of economic growth, and the high percentage of provincial representation in the CC thus represents an advantage for the reformists.⁸⁶ However, not many studies provide justifications for this assumption, except Malesky's excellent work in classifying “reformist” and “conservative” provinces based on the level of the state sector's economic contribution.⁸⁷ Additionally, a CC member might make a policy decision out of personal interests rather than considerations for his constituencies. Approaching the issue of factionalism from this angle, it might be possible to examine policy debates and case studies to identify different factions. Unfortunately, the secretive nature of the policymaking process in Vietnam makes this approach extremely difficult, if not unfeasible.

One method to identify the policy-based faction is to group CC members with similar characteristics, for example, educational background. Members who do both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees domestically or in other communist countries might have a “conservative” view, while members who study in Western countries

might have a “reformist” view. Based on our dataset, at the 12th Congress, there were 60 members from the “conservative” faction—with some notable names such as General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and Minister of Public Security To Lam—while 12 members have a “Western” educational background with just two Politburo members (then Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh and HCMC Party Secretary Nguyen Thien Nhan).

This approach faces the same problem with the occupation-based and patronage-based classifications. First, a member of a policy-based faction can change their views, and share characteristics with another group, such as Prime Minister Dung and Tran Xuan Bach mentioned above. Another example is Nguyen Van Linh, who was seen as a strong supporter of *Đổi mới*, but gradually became conservative when the crisis of communism unfolded in the late 1980s.⁸⁸ Second, CC members can switch allegiances if they see better prospects elsewhere. With his lifelong career in the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), Pham Minh Chinh was seen as a close ally of PM Dung.⁸⁹ However, before the 12th Congress in 2016, Chinh switched his loyalty to General Secretary Trong, a decision that brought him a Politburo seat at that congress and the prime ministerial position five years later. Third, there is the phenomenon of “inter-factionalism” where CC members of supposedly different camps have intertwined interests. For example, the MPS and the Ministry of Finance (MoF) are seen as having different policy priorities. Nevertheless, our dataset shows senior officials from these two ministries forging close informal ties. The son of the late President Tran Dai Quang—who used to be the Minister of Public Security—joined the MoF and has served as its Chief of Staff since 2021. Meanwhile, Dinh Tien Hai, son of former Minister of Finance Dinh Tien Dung,⁹⁰ currently serves in the secretariat of Minister of Public Security To Lam.

What can we learn from the complexity of factionalism in the Vietnamese CC? First, “fixed” characteristics, such as the sectoral lines pointed out by Thayer in the early 1990s, appear to be less significant in determining factionalism within the CC at present. Second, while patronage-based and policy-based factionalisms seem to be more dominant in recent years, it is not clear how policy preferences and patrons can be identified. Third, the lack of factional clarity in Vietnam, as a result, might imply that the CC functions as a parliamentary institution with coalitions built around temporary policy positions rather than as a battleground for patronage-based promotion. As previously analysed, this came

about due to significant changes in the CC's composition, inner-working dynamics and the standardization of elite promotion. In the absence of clear and strong factions, the CC can gain a higher level of independence.

Conclusion: The Gravity of the Centre

In nearly four decades since *Đổi mới* was adopted, the CC has moved from the periphery to the central stage of Vietnam's elite politics. Structurally, the selectorate has been expanded to accommodate the increasing power of the provinces and the NA, while elite promotion has been greatly standardized and institutionalized. The CC has also developed and maintained a considerably high level of intra-party democracy. This shows not only in high-profile vetoes against the Politburo's and the general secretaries' decisions,⁹¹ but also in the way policies are discussed and decided. Although plenums are generally not televised (except for the opening and concluding sessions) like the NA sessions, recorded minutes of several key plenums reveal a high level of deliberation.⁹²

However, the power of the CC has its limits. Central leaders—particularly General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong in the last two congresses—maintain a strong influence through the ability to set agendas, control personnel policies, and increasingly, investigate and punish CC members under anti-corruption campaigns. In addition, amendments to election regulations under Trong's watch tipped the power balance towards a smaller circle of central leaders. Under the new regulations, CC members are no longer allowed to self-nominate or nominate a person not on the list dictated by the outgoing CC. If a person is nominated by delegates at the Party's national congress, they are obliged to submit a letter of withdrawal, following which the congress will vote to decide whether they are allowed to do so.⁹³ This happened at the 12th Congress in 2016 when Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung was narrowly “allowed” to withdraw his nomination for CC membership, effectively ending his political career.

The CC, as powerful as it may seem, also failed to uphold the Party's Constitution at the 13th Congress as General Secretary Trong was re-elected for a third term, a clear violation of Article 17 of the Party's Constitution.⁹⁴ Although there are suggestions that this continuity is more about power balancing rather than consolidation,⁹⁵ it is certain that breaking a long-established rule will have a negative impact on the institutionalization process that the

CC has been carrying out over the past three decades. Whether this marks a point of institutional decay for the CC remains to be seen.

Structurally, the CC must address imbalances in the distribution of CC membership to guarantee better representation of women (the CC has always been dominated by men, although the male membership declines slightly from 94 per cent in 1986 to 91 per cent in 2016), ethnic minorities (more than 90 per cent of membership are Kinh ethnic), and other regions than the North. With Southern provinces, particularly the Mekong Delta and HCMC, suffering most heavily from the COVID-19 pandemic, on top of being underfunded in infrastructure projects for years, there is a real risk of widespread dissatisfaction, which could be a destabilizing factor in the long run. How the CC responds to these structural imbalances and challenges will define Vietnamese politics in the years to come.

NOTES

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank the editors of *Contemporary Southeast Asia* and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback. The views expressed in this article are the authors' personal findings and do not necessarily reflect the policies and positions of Oxfam.

- ¹ Edmund Malesky, "Gerrymandering—Vietnamese Style: Escaping the Partial Reform Equilibrium in a Nondemocratic Regime", *The Journal of Politics* 71, no. 1 (2009): 132–59; Khac Giang Nguyen, "Succession Politics and Authoritarian Resilience in Vietnam", in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2020*, edited by Malcolm Cook and Daljit Singh (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020), pp. 411–26.
- ² Carlyle Thayer, "Postwar Vietnam", in *The Regularization of Politics: Continuity and Change in the Party's Central Committee, 1951–1986*, edited by David Marr and Christine Christine (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 177–94.
- ³ Edmund Malesky, Regina Abrami and Yu Zheng, "Institutions and Inequality in Single-Party Regimes: A Comparative Analysis of Vietnam and China", *Comparative Politics* 43, no. 4 (2011): 409–27; Regina Abrami, Edmund Malesky and Yu Zheng, "Vietnam through Chinese Eyes: Divergent Accountability in Single-Party Regimes", in *Why Communism Did Not Collapse: Understanding Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Asia and Europe*, edited by Martin Dimitrov (New York City, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 237–76; Edmund Malesky and Jonathan London, "The Political Economy of Development in China and Vietnam", *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014): 395–419.
- ⁴ Edmund Malesky, Paul Schuler and Anh Tran, "Vietnam: Familiar Patterns and New Developments Ahead of the 11th Party Congress", in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2011*, edited by Daljit Singh (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2011), pp. 339–63; David Koh, "Leadership Changes at the 10th Congress of the VCP", *Asian Survey* 48, no. 4 (2008): 650–72; David Koh, "The Politics of

a Divided Party and Parkinson's State in Vietnam", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 23, no. 3 (2001): 533–51; Alexander Vuving, "The 2016 Leadership Change in Vietnam and its Long-term Implications", in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2017*, edited by Daljit Singh and Malcolm Cook (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017), pp. 421–35.

- ⁵ For studies on the Chinese CC, see Victor Shih, Christopher Adolph and Mingxing Liu, "Getting Ahead in the Communist Party: Explaining the Advancement of Central Committee Members in China", *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 1 (2012): 166–87.
- ⁶ On factionalism in the CC, see Martin Gainsborough, "From Patronage to 'Outcomes': Vietnam's Communist Party Congresses Reconsidered", *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2, no. 1 (2007): 3–26; Duy Trinh, "Explaining Factional Sorting in China and Vietnam", *Problems of Post-Communism* 68, no. 3 (2021): 171–89.
- ⁷ Adam Fforde believes the VCP is unable to reform itself and is thus heading towards a crisis of legitimacy. See Adam Fforde, "The End of the Party: Vietnam in 2012", *Asian Survey* 53, no. 1 (2013): 101–8; Adam Fforde and Lada Homutova, "Political Authority in Vietnam: Is the Vietnamese Communist Party a Paper Leviathan?", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 36, no. 3 (2017): 91–118.
- ⁸ Malesky, Abrami and Zheng, "Institutions and Inequality in Single-Party Regimes"; Trinh, "Explaining Factional Sorting"; Juan Wang and Nhu Truong, "Law for What? Ideas and Social Control in China and Vietnam", *Problems of Post-Communism* 68, no. 3 (2021): 202–15.
- ⁹ The dataset is manually collected and coded by the authors from various publicly available sources, including the VCP's websites, the National Assembly websites, local governments' websites, online newspapers, as well as the authors' interviews with internal sources. Data available on request.
- ¹⁰ One researcher is constructing a biographical dataset of Vietnamese elites from the first to the 12th Congress; however, this was not yet publicly available when this manuscript was written. In 2019, the National Politics Publishing House, which is under the CC, published its own book which described all CC members. Nevertheless, certain key information (party membership, positions, whether they joined the army etc.) was omitted.
- ¹¹ For a discussion on the Chinese CC as a selectorate, see Susan Shirk, *The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1993).
- ¹² When an incumbent provincial party secretary is disciplined, that person might be replaced by a non-CC member. This acting secretary, in most cases, will be promoted to the CC in the next congress. Examples include Vu Huy Hoang in 2005 (replacing Hoang Cong Hoan as Lang Son's Party secretary) and Dang Quoc Khanh in 2019 (replacing Trieu Tai Vinh in Ha Giang).
- ¹³ In discussions among CC members leading to the 9th Congress in 2001, a popular opinion was that "Provinces, municipalities, and ministries should have CC members". See VCP, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap – Tap 59 (2000)* [Compilations of the Vietnam Communist Party Documents – Volume 59 (2000)] (Hanoi, Vietnam: National Political Publishing House, 2015), p. 51.

- ¹⁴ VCP, “Quy Định Số 90-QĐ/TW ngày 4/8/2017 của Bộ Chính trị về tiêu chuẩn chức danh, tiêu chí đánh giá cán bộ thuộc diện Ban Chấp hành Trung ương, Bộ Chính trị, Ban Bí thư quản lý” [Regulation No. 90-QĐ/TW of the Politburo dated 4 August 2017 on standards for office holders, criteria for evaluating cadres under the management of the Central Committee, the Politburo, the Secretariat], 4 August 2017, <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/he-thong-van-ban/van-ban-cua-dang/quy-dinh-so-90-qdtw-ngay-482017-cua-bo-chinh-tri-ve-tieu-chuan-chuc-danh-tieu-chi-danh-gia-can-bo-thuoc-dien-ban-chap-3459>.
- ¹⁵ See, for example, Malesky, Abrami and Zheng, “Institutions and Inequality in Single-Party Regimes”.
- ¹⁶ VCP, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap – Tap 43 (1982)* [Compilations of the Vietnam Communist Party Documents – Volume 43 (1982)] (Hanoi, Vietnam: National Political Publishing House, 2006).
- ¹⁷ The biggest expansion was from the 3rd Congress (1960) to the 4th Congress (1976), when the CC membership increased from 47 to 101. This, however, reflects the need to accommodate a more diverse country after unification in 1975–76 as well as to reward cadres with significant achievements during the Vietnam War.
- ¹⁸ Huy Duc, *Ben Thang Cuoc – Tap 1* [The Winning Side – Volume 1] (Boston, Massachusetts: OsinBook, 2012), p. 553; Dang Phong, *Tu duy Kinh te Viet Nam, 1975–1989* [Vietnamese Economic Thinking, 1975–1989] (Hanoi, Vietnam: Knowledge Publishing House, 2008).
- ¹⁹ On decentralization, see Anh Vu Thanh Tu, “Vietnam: Decentralization Amidst Fragmentation”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Economies* 33, no. 2 (2016): 188–208.
- ²⁰ Dang Phong, “Phá Rào” Trong Kinh Tế Vào Đêm Trước Đổi Mới [“Fence-Breaking” in the Pre-Reform Economy] (Hanoi, Vietnam: Knowledge Publishing House, 2009).
- ²¹ Dang Phong, *Tu Duy Kinh te Viet Nam, 1975–1989*.
- ²² Huy Duc, *Ben Thang Cuoc – Tap 1*.
- ²³ In the early 1990s, the CC held a series of meetings to discuss reasons leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, as well as to “build and rectify” the Party in response to those events. See VCP, *Van kien Dang toan tap – Tap 51 (1991)* [Compilations of the Vietnam Communist Party Documents – Volume 51 (1991)] (Hanoi, Vietnam: National Political Publishing House, 2006); VCP, *Van kien Dang toan tap – Tap 52 (1992–1993)* [Compilations of the Vietnam Communist Party Documents – Volume 52 (1992–1993)] (Hanoi, Vietnam: National Political Publishing House, 2007).
- ²⁴ On the initial role of the NA, see Gareth Porter, “The Politics of Renovation in Vietnam”, *Problems of Communism* 39, no. 3 (1990): 72–88. On the NA’s current role, see Paul Schuler, *United Front: Projecting Solidarity Through Deliberation in Vietnam’s Single-Party Legislature* (Redwood City, California: Stanford University Press, 2021).
- ²⁵ On this topic, see Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (New York City, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- ²⁶ This requirement was set at the 2nd Congress (1951) and has been maintained ever since.

- ²⁷ VCP, *Van Kien Dang toan tap – Tap 51 (1991)*, p. 264.
- ²⁸ These include the objection of the ill-fated Standing Committee of the Politburo at the 8th Congress, the earlier than expected retirement of General Secretary Le Kha Phieu in 2001, and the failure to discipline Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in 2012. At the 12th plenum of the 10th CC (2010), the CC also decided not to discipline Huynh Minh Doan, Dong Thap’s provincial party secretary, against the Politburo’s recommendation. See VCP, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap – Tap 60 (2010)* [Compilations of the Vietnam Communist Party Documents – Volume 69 (2010)] (Hanoi, Vietnam: National Political Publishing House, 2013), p. 278.
- ²⁹ VCP, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap – Tap 53 (1993–1994)* [Compilations of the Vietnam Communist Party Documents – Volume 53 (1993–1994)] (Hanoi, Vietnam: National Political Publishing House, 2007), pp. 260–64.
- ³⁰ All the working guidelines state that key matters, such as decisions on personnel disciplines, require secret voting and must have the majority support in order to be passed.
- ³¹ See Huy Duc, *Ben Thang Cuoc – Tap 2* [The Winning Side – Volume 2] (Los Angeles, California: OsinBook, 2012), pp. 198–99.
- ³² The CC rejected a proposal to elect two new commission heads to the Politburo in 2013. See Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam in 2013: Domestic Contestation and Foreign Policy Success”, in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2014*, edited by Daljit Singh (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2014), p. 357.
- ³³ Bui Hoang Tam, “Giáo sư Vũ Đình Cự – ‘Nhà thông thái’ của giới khoa học Việt Nam” [Professor Vu Dinh Cu – “The Wise Man” of the Vietnamese Scientist Community], *Dan tri*, 11 September 2016, <https://dantri.com.vn/giao-duc-huong-nghiep/giao-su-vu-dinh-cu-nha-thong-thai-cua-gioi-khoa-hoc-viet-nam-20160911182644344.htm>.
- ³⁴ Huy Duc, *Ben Thang Cuoc – Tap 2*, p. 180.
- ³⁵ It is worth noting that NA delegates are organized into provincial groups, which are headed by the top officials of that province (the party’s provincial secretary or chairman) or assigned by the CC. In both cases, they are usually CC members.
- ³⁶ Binh ultimately became the minister in the subsequent 9th Congress’s tenure, but his political career came to an abrupt end when he was dismissed by the NA in 2006 as a result of the PMU-18 corruption scandal.
- ³⁷ Although selection criteria for CC membership are always released before each congress, only until 2017 was a formal regulation (Regulation no. 90-QĐ/TW) released.
- ³⁸ Nguyen, “Succession Politics and Authoritarian Resilience in Vietnam”, pp. 414–15.
- ³⁹ VCP, “Quy định số 214-QĐ/TW, ngày 02/01/2020 của Bộ Chính trị về khung tiêu chuẩn chức danh, tiêu chí đánh giá cán bộ thuộc diện Ban Chấp hành Trung ương, Bộ Chính trị, Ban Bí thư quản lý” [Regulation No. 214-QĐ/TW of the Politburo dated 2 February 2020 on standards for office holders, criteria for evaluating cadres under the management of the Central Committee, the Politburo, the Secretariat], <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/he-thong-van->

ban/van-ban-cua-dang/quy-dinh-so-214-qdtw-ngay-02012020-cua-bo-chinh-tri-ve-khung-tieu-chuan-chuc-danh-tieu-chi-danh-gia-can-bo-thuoc-dien-ban-6021.

- ⁴⁰ Mostly as a result of them joining the revolutionary movement at young ages.
- ⁴¹ Except “special exemptions” allowed by the Party’s national congress. In 2021, there were 10 “special exemptions”, including 2 Politburo members, 4 re-elected CC members, and 4 newly-elected CC members.
- ⁴² At the central level, the senior is normally over 60 years old, the middle from 50 to 59, and the junior under 50.
- ⁴³ See the Political Report in 1982. VCP, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap – Tap 43* (1982), p. 377.
- ⁴⁴ Five CC members passed away in office during the 6th Congress’ tenure (by 1991), four in the 7th Congress (by 1996) and 10 in the 8th Congress (by 2001).
- ⁴⁵ The Secretariat’s Directive No. 80-CT/TW. See VCP, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap – Tap 47 (1986)* [Compilations of the Vietnam Communist Party Documents – Volume 47 (1986)] (Hanoi, Vietnam: National Political Publishing House, 2006), p. 51.
- ⁴⁶ VCP, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap – Tap 49 (1988–1989)* [Compilations of the Vietnam Communist Party Documents – Volume 49 (1988–1989)] (Hanoi, Vietnam: National Political Publishing House 2006), p. 277.
- ⁴⁷ See the report of the 6th Plenum in 1989. VCP, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap – Tap 49 (1988–1989)*, p. 931.
- ⁴⁸ VCP, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap – Tap 51 (1991)*, p. 291.
- ⁴⁹ See the report on Party building delivered by Le Duc Tho at the 5th Congress in VCP, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap – Tap 43* (1982), pp. 310–16.
- ⁵⁰ In the case of the Ministry of Defence, this number only consists of central positions. In addition to these, each military region is allocated one seat in the CC, who is either its commander or political commissar.
- ⁵¹ However, this proportion remains high and is higher than the allocation for the military and the police (see Table 1). In 2021, for example, 23 military officers and six police generals were voted into the CC, accounting for 16 per cent of the full membership.
- ⁵² Although the practice of promoting alternate members to full membership at plenums is allowed by the Party’s Constitution, this was rarely done after 1986.
- ⁵³ Particularly when personnel matters were under the total control of Le Duc Tho. See Huy Duc, *Ben Thang Cuoc – Tap 1*, p. 239.
- ⁵⁴ Lower-level party organizations will propose a candidate to be included in “The Masterplan of Strategic-level Cadres” that includes 250 potential candidates for CC promotion. The CC will then vote to reduce the list to more than 200. This practice of “master planning” strategic cadres was initiated during the tenure of the 11th Congress (2011). See “Bước chuẩn bị nhân sự chiến lược quan trọng của Đảng” [An Important Strategic Personnel Preparation Step of the Party], *Bao dien tu Dang Cong san*, 26 June 2019, <https://dangcongsan.vn/xay-dung-dang/buoc-chuan-bi-nhan-su-chien-luoc-quan-trong-cua-dang-526554.html>.

- ⁵⁵ Eighteen out of 20 alternate members were promoted at the 12th Congress.
- ⁵⁶ Alex Payette, “What Went Wrong?: The Case of the Non-Selected Alternate Members of the Central Committee from 1992 to 2007”, *Journal of Contemporary Eastern Asia* 15, no. 2 (December 2016): 111–44.
- ⁵⁷ Nguyen, “Succession Politics and Authoritarian Resilience in Vietnam”, p. 416.
- ⁵⁸ Exchanges between the authors and a Vietnamese democracy activist.
- ⁵⁹ Tuong Vu, *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (New York City, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Quang Trung Thai, *Collective Leadership and Factionalism: An Essay on Ho Chi Minh’s Legacy* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985).
- ⁶⁰ Thayer, “Postwar Vietnam”, p. 179.
- ⁶¹ Ronald Cima, “Vietnam in 1988: The Brink of Renewal”, *Asian Survey* 29, no. 1 (1989): 64–72; Douglas Pike, “Vietnam in 1990: The Last Picture Show”, *Asian Survey* 31, no. 1 (1991): 79–86.
- ⁶² Zachary Abuza, “The Lessons of Le Kha Phieu: Changing Rules in Vietnamese Politics”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 24, no. 1 (2002): 121–45; Carlyle Thayer, “Vietnam’s Foreign Policy in an Era of Rising Sino-US Competition and Increasing Domestic Political Influence”, *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (2017): 183–99; Vuving, “The 2016 Leadership Change in Vietnam”.
- ⁶³ Most notably Gainsborough, “From Patronage to ‘Outcomes’”.
- ⁶⁴ Alexander Vuving, “Who Will Lead Vietnam?”, *The Diplomat*, 16 January 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/01/who-will-lead-vietnam/>.
- ⁶⁵ See Andrew Nathan, “A Factionalism Model for CCP Politics”, *The China Quarterly* no. 53 (January–March 1973): 34–66.
- ⁶⁶ Thayer, “Postwar Vietnam”.
- ⁶⁷ In the case of China, the factional member must be within two administrative steps from the factional leader. See Shih, Adolph and Liu, “Getting Ahead in the Communist Party”, p. 171.
- ⁶⁸ Not to be confused with former President Nguyen Minh Triet (born 1942).
- ⁶⁹ “Bầu Ban chấp hành TƯ Đoàn khoá mới” [Electing the New Central Executive Committee of the Youth Union], *Vietnamnet*, 12 December 2017, <https://vietnamnet.vn/vn/thoi-su/chinh-tri/ong-nguyen-minh-triet-trung-cu-ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-doan-416272.html>.
- ⁷⁰ See Zachary Abuza, “Leadership Transition in Vietnam since the Eighth Party Congress: The Unfinished Congress”, *Asian Survey* 38, no. 12 (1998): 1105–21; Koh, “The Politics of a Divided Party”.
- ⁷¹ Nguyen Van Linh at the 6th Congress and Le Kha Phieu at the 7th Congress. Although Nguyen Van Linh did not hold a specific military position, because he oversaw the revolutionary movements in the Vietnam War, he had close connections with the military.
- ⁷² Vo Chi Cong (6th Congress), Le Duc Anh (7th Congress) and Tran Dai Quang (11th Congress).
- ⁷³ Pham Hung (6th Congress), Vo Van Kiet (7th Congress), Nguyen Tan Dung (10th and 11th Congresses) and Pham Minh Chinh (13th Congress).

- ⁷⁴ See, for example, Koh, “The Politics of a Divided Party”.
- ⁷⁵ There have been discussions about the rivalry between the military and the police since the early times of *Đổi mới* (1986). In 2020, two lieutenant generals of the military, serving in the National Assembly’s Committee on Defence and Security, rejected Minister of Public Security To Lam’s proposal to increase the manpower of the police force. “I’m sorry Mr. Minister, the police already have too many officers”, Lieutenant-General Sung Thin Co was quoted as saying. See “Thiếu tướng Sùng Thìn Cò: ‘Xin lỗi bộ trưởng, lực lượng công an quá đông’” [Lieutenant General Sung Thin Co: “Sorry Minister, the police force is too large”], *Tuoi tre*, 17 November 2020, <https://tuoitre.vn/thieu-tuong-sung-thin-co-xin-loi-bo-truong-luc-luong-cong-an-qua-dong-20201117112648148.htm>.
- ⁷⁶ “Former Hanoi Chairman Jailed Five Years for Appropriating Classified Documents”, *VnExpress*, 10 December 2020, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/former-hanoi-chairman-jailed-five-years-for-appropriating-classified-documents-4204947.html>.
- ⁷⁷ Except Deng Xiaoping who did not hold an official position other than the Chairman of the Central Military Commission. See Shih, Adolph and Liu, “Getting Ahead in the Communist Party”.
- ⁷⁸ For example, Gainsborough argues that struggles in Vietnamese politics are “less about policy and more about access to patronage and political protection”. See Gainsborough, “From Patronage to ‘Outcomes’”, p. 14. However, except for the groupings around Do Muoi and Vo Van Kiet, Gainsborough does not elaborate on how to identify the patronage network. Recent publications, particularly after the 12th Congress in 2016, have focused on the factions built around former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong. However, there is no clear explanation on who is included in which factions and why.
- ⁷⁹ Shih, Adolph and Liu, “Getting Ahead in the Communist Party”.
- ⁸⁰ See note 67.
- ⁸¹ Vuving, for example, implies that Quang belonged to Trong’s faction. See Vuving, “The 2016 Leadership Change in Vietnam”.
- ⁸² Trinh, “Explaining Factional Sorting”.
- ⁸³ Nguyen Tan Dung fought in the Vietnam War and held the rank of major in the army. He later became the Vice Minister of Public Security in 1995. Tran Xuan Bach used to work as a provincial police chief before gaining prominence in the Party’s hierarchy.
- ⁸⁴ Martin Gainsborough, *Vietnam: Rethinking the State* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2010), p. 151.
- ⁸⁵ Brantly Womack, “Vietnam in 1996: Reform Immobilism”, *Asian Survey* 37, no. 1 (1997): 79–87; Malesky, Abrami and Zheng, “Institutions and Inequality in Single-Party Regimes”; Abuza, “The Lessons of Le Kha Phieu”.
- ⁸⁶ See Abuza, “The Lessons of Le Kha Phieu”, pp. 130–32.
- ⁸⁷ Malesky, “Gerrymandering—Vietnamese Style”, pp. 137–40.
- ⁸⁸ Huy Duc, *Ben Thang Cuoc – Tap 2*, pp. 50–53; Gainsborough, “From Patronage to ‘Outcomes’”, p. 10.

- ⁸⁹ Chinh and PM Dung both supported the plan to build Special Economic Zones. See Alexander Vuving, “Vietnam in 2018: A Rent-Seeking State on Correction Course”, in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2019*, edited by Daljit Singh and Malcolm Cook (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), pp. 375–94.
- ⁹⁰ Dinh Tien Dung was promoted to the Politburo and became Hanoi’s Party chief in 2021.
- ⁹¹ See note 28.
- ⁹² See, for example, meeting minutes of the 1994 mid-term National Party Congress in VCP, *Van kien Dang toan tap – Tap 53 (1993–1994)*, pp. 260–64, and minutes of CC plenums in VCP, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap – Tap 69 (2010)* [Compilations of the Vietnam Communist Party Documents – Volume 69 (2010)], pp. 277–79.
- ⁹³ Vuving, “The 2016 Leadership Change in Vietnam”, p. 425.
- ⁹⁴ Article 17 of the VCP Constitution states “... The General Secretary holds the position of General Secretary for no more than two consecutive terms.”
- ⁹⁵ Zachary Abuza, “The Fallout from Vietnam’s Communist Party Congress”, *The Diplomat*, 2 February 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/the-fallout-from-vietnams-communist-party-congress/>.