

## Five more years

He looked quite happy during his first press conference after being re-elected into Vietnam's top position at Party Congress X. The smiling face of Party General Secretary Nong Duc Manh to some extent reflects the success of the country over the last 20 years, particularly as regards economic reform. But expectations for his next five years are certain to be much higher than in his first five.

His new five-years at the helm might prove to be a tough time, with a wide range of issues on the agenda including maintaining high economic growth and reducing poverty, keeping up the pace of reform, pushing integration efforts and, in particular, strengthening the leadership role of the Communist Party in the modern era.

### Quiet Achiever

Mr Manh regularly appeared in front of the cameras when he was first elected to the top post in April 2001 while retaining one of the four other key positions of National Assembly (NA) Chairman, before handing over to current NA Chairman Nguyen Van An. From that time onwards, however, his appearances become more infrequent.

It's not because he's shy. His everyday functions as Party Secretary mean he's never far away from the people or the public eye in general. He still conducts numerous working visits to rural areas, talking with farmers and ethnic minorities suffering the adverse effects of the fast pace of industrialisation and modernisation.

The truth is that he did a great deal of work for the people, specially the poor, during his first term, narrowing the gap between mountainous and plain areas. The reduced poverty rate, now at some 23 per cent, is a shining example. But as Mr Manh himself admits, there are still many tasks ahead in this regard. "We have many concerns such as poverty, and the gap between many in Vietnam is still large," he said.

Yet Mr Manh remains dissatisfied with the efforts of both himself and the Party's leadership in his first term. "Major and historic success has been had over time, but we still have many weaknesses and shortcomings," was his honest assessment. If the shortcomings of the last five years were to come down to specifics, then it must be said that corruption and the leadership role of the Communist Party are just two of the issues that need greater focus in his second term.

Regarding corruption and bribery scandals, it is true to say that the last five years have been the first time ever that such scandals have been publicly uncovered and a large number of senior officials investigated and even sacked. For instance, Mr Le Huy Ngo, Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development resigned after an affiliated ministry company was found to have acted inappropriately, and Mr Dao Dinh Binh, Minister of Transportation, was removed from the list of Party members attending Party Congress X because of the PMU 18 scandal engulfing his ministry.

Mr Manh's first term was indeed marked by increasing numbers of people, especially the local media, speaking freely and frankly about corruption and bribery. Criticism about the threat it posed for the country and the Party has been more widespread than ever before. With some 40,000 Party members having been removed from the Party membership register over the last five years, is this really a sign of a good term in office? "I think this is a strength," the 66 year-old Party Chief said. "Previously we did not uncover such scandals, but now we do and resolve them all under law. This is, I think, an activity we must undertake as part of the doi moi process."

Vietnam's achievements in doi moi before Mr Manh's first term were derived from the common effort of the country as a whole. But more concrete and clear results have been recorded during his term, and his period at the helm can certainly be categorised as successful. "Since 1986, Vietnam has been on a remarkably successful road called doi moi," said Mr Roger Ford, Chairman of the South China Sea Development Company. "The success of these policies has captured the attention of much of the world, and we are eager to see what new changes, if any, Party Congress X will bring."

Specifically, Mr Ford noted, international observers are hopeful that the Party will stay the course and even accelerate these renovation policies in a way that will bring the benefits of a free market and more open systems to all the people of Vietnam. Without doubt, the re-election of Mr Manh to the top post and the success of the Congress will bolster expectations that Vietnam will continue its ongoing reforms, particularly in terms of economic restructuring. Top leaders have promised to pave the way for Party members to enter into the world of private business, and many sectors, including private, household and foreign-owned enterprises, to become more involved in the economy, with the State sector remaining as the main pillar.

Mr Manh firmly believes that more competitive business activities in Vietnam since 1986 have backed up other reforms that, in the end, mean a wealthier nation serving the people better. And such competitiveness has been partly transferred to the political arena. "The democratic atmosphere in politics has become better and better," he said. "Recommendations and criticism from the people have been taken on board by state agencies because the ultimate purpose of the Party is to better serve its people." But he was quick to dismiss any claims that there was political competition within the Party itself. "I do not see any conflict for power within the Party. Perhaps there are different viewpoints here and there, but we listen to all ideas, even criticism, so that we can create a larger consensus among the public. That is the most important thing."

Changes in the Party's election process are proof that Vietnam is changing. The Party adopted a new way of election at the recently-concluded Congress, by which all Congress voted on the list of Central Party Committee members and then on candidates for the post of Party Chief and Politburo member.

According to Mr Dao Duy Quat, Deputy Head of the Central Party's Ideological and Cultural Board, there were three nominees for the top post. "But in the end, Mr Manh won with 100 per cent of the votes," Mr Quat said.

The changes haven't gone unnoticed either. "Any changes that would bring more transparency and openness to the Party's process of electing leaders would be appreciated by the international community," said Mr Ford.

### **A challenging time**

Maintaining the pace can often be a lot more difficult than getting started. Mr Manh faces a challenging time ahead as he and the Party leadership prove they can surpass the successes of the last five years. More importantly, they must also confirm that their re-election was the right move.

Regardless, Mr Manh is the captain of an impressively steady ship, say foreign observers. Political stability over the last five years has backed up the Party's efforts at reform.

According to Mr Spencer White, a strategist at Merrill Lynch in Hong Kong, the answer is yes. "I have every faith that political stability will be maintained," he said. "The Communist Party has done a great job in guiding the economy through its current growth trajectory and the population is seeing more opportunity and wealth creation than ever before. As such the system is working well."

A steady ship is unquestionably a crucial part of guaranteeing Mr Manh's success in his second term. His main theme for the term is very clear: renovating the leadership methodology of the Party. A number of Party members have said openly that the Party, at the grassroots level, intervene too much in local government management.

Therefore, some Party members have called for more democracy within the Party board itself, while remaining true to Communist principles. "For me, democracy is both the starting and ending point,"

Mr Truong Dinh Tuyen, Minister of Trade said. "We should build a democratic society, which should be an idea of the Party itself." Party General Secretary Manh understands this well, and for this reason affirmed that the Party would manage the country in terms of strategy and guidelines that will be transformed into concrete policies and implemented by the State. Importantly, he emphasised that the Party would never perform the tasks of the State. Implicitly, this means that there will be no rigid interference, facilitating a more democratic atmosphere. This will clearly be one of the more difficult tasks for Mr Manh and his colleagues over the next five years.

The challenges don't end there, of course. Corruption and relationships that provide fertile ground for bribery, bureaucracy and wrongdoings are still the major concern of the people, and this is a major challenge.

Mr Ford from the South China Sea Development Company recalled a case where he himself saw corruption, if only on a small scale. He personally observed a local police officer extort a payment of VND300,000 from an innocent taxi driver for driving a "dirty car" during a rain storm. As many local residents can attest, the experience of the taxi driver is part and parcel of everyday life in Vietnam.

Therefore, according to Mr Ford, foreign investors are interested in how well Vietnam can maintain a strong and supportive business environment and how effectively it can pass and implement strong pro-business and pro-market economic regulations. "Also, we are interested in how effectively Vietnam will deal with the disturbing problem of corruption - especially by Party and Government members, as well as police and other officials who expect envelopes or extort bribes and payoffs from rich and poor alike," he said.

Mr Manh is obviously aware of such things, and that is why he expects to do even better in his second term than in his first. Challenges are sure to accompany success in his five more years.

**By Xuan Son reports.**  
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