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Background Brief

Đỗ Mười – The Confucian Referee

October 2, 2018

Do Muoi was born on February 2, 1917 in Dong My village, Thanh Tri near Hanoi. He began his revolutionary career at the age of nineteen when he participated in political activities during the period of the Popular Front government. In 1939 he joined the Indochinese Communist Party. He was arrested two years later and sentenced to ten years imprisonment. He escaped in 1945 and took part in the August Revolution in Ha Dong province north of Hanoi.

Do Muoi was the quintessential party apparatnik whose career in the party-state bureaucracy was entirely based in northern Vietnam. Do Muoi was party secretary of Ha Nam Ninh province in 1945. The following year he took over the top party post in Nam Dinh province and moved up in rank to become the deputy secretary and political officer of the Interzone 3 party committee in 1950.

Do Muoi joined the party's national leadership when he was elected an alternate or non-voting member of the Central Committee at the Second Congress in 1951. He became a full member of the Central Committee at the Third Congress in September 1960.

In December 1976 Do Muoi entered the elite Politburo as an alternate at the Fourth Congress.

In 1978, Do Muoi was placed in charge of socializing trade and industry in the south. His measures were unpopular and brought him into conflict with southern reformers. These tensions persisted throughout his career.

In March 1982 he became a full member of the Politburo and was subsequently re-elected at three successive national congresses (1986, 1991 and 1996). Prior to the adoption of reform policies known as doi moi, Do Muoi played a major role in implementing the resolutions of the eighth plenum of the Central Committee (5th congress) and Politburo Resolution No 28 on prices, wages, and money in the state-run industrial sector. He also played a major role in reviewing the implementation of economic contracts.

Following the Sixth Congress, Do Muoi was appointed secretary of the party Central Committee in May 1987 and accompanied party Secretary General Nguyen Van Linh on an official visit to the Soviet Union. As secretary to the party Central Committee Do Muoi was given responsibility for weeding out corrupt officials from the party's ranks.

At the eighth plenum of the Central Committee (12-27 March 1991), Do Muoi was appointed to head one of five sub-committees preparing reports for the next party congress. He was given responsibility for drawing up Vietnam's economic blueprint until the end of the century.

In 1991, at the Seventh Congress, Do Muoi replaced Nguyen Van Linh as party Secretary General. The new thirteen-member Politburo elected at this time consisted of three identifiable groupings. The first and most important group consisted of party conservatives such as Dao Duy Tung, Vu Oanh, Pham The Duyet, Nguyen Duc Binh and Le Phuoc Tho. The second Politburo grouping comprised the military and security complex. The third grouping comprised southern supporters of reform with connections to the party committee in Ho Chi Minh City, such as Phan Van Khai and Vo Tran Chi. The foremost representative of this group was Vo Van Kiet, the third ranking member of the Politburo. Kiet was widely seen as the main supporter of continued renovation.

Do Muoi, as the most prominent member of the old guard, stood above these groupings. Do Muoi initially set up a three-member Politburo standing committee to conduct day-to-day business. It comprised himself, Le Duc Anh and Dao Duy Tung. It was only in October 1992 that Kiet was admitted.

While Do Muoi supported Vietnam's program of economic reform he was a conservative when it came to political change. Party technocrats supported him because of his recent efforts to loosen the party's control over the economy. Party conservatives supported Do Muoi because of his long-standing roots in the northern party apparatus.

After the party congress, Do Muoi adopted a softer line towards the party's intellectual critics in an effort to prevent their further alienation. He held meetings with groups of intellectuals in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. At the Hanoi meeting Do Muoi told the gathering, "The party and state will listen attentively to every one of your suggestions. We don't fear divergence of views during discussions." The issue of how much independence should be granted to the press in exposing corruption among high officials became an issue during the second plenum. In January-February 1992, the VCP Central Committee Secretariat and the Council of Ministers convened two national conferences on press and publishing work to resolve this matter. The first was held in Hanoi (for the northern provinces) and the second in Ho Chi Minh City (for the southern provinces). Party Secretary General Do Muoi addressed the Hanoi conference and reminded those present that "information must be guided" and that the press was the "shock force on the ideological and cultural front." Muoi also observed, "there have appeared not a few press articles and books which negated the past, distorted realities and history, sowed the seeds of pessimism and advertised a pragmatic way of living, and have had negative effects on society."

Do Muoi's innate political conservatism surfaced at the fourth plenum (January 1993). Do Muoi called on the party "to resolutely fight against all cultural poisons and overcome the current negative phenomena and devious trends in culture and the arts." This was an allusion to the growing calls for democratic reforms by Vietnamese intellectuals and their disenchantment with party restrictions on their ability to express themselves freely.

During the 1990s Do Muoi had to preside over an increasingly fractious party as conservative ideologues and reformers battled it out in the wake of the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. It was during this period that his role as party Secretary General was likened to that of a Confucian referee. This was a period when the top party posts were carefully filled to maintain geographic balance between the three regions, north, centre and south.

In 1996, at the Eighth Congress, pressure built up to quicken the pace of generational change by retiring Do Muoi (party secretary general and northerner), Le Duc Anh (state president from central Vietnam) and Vo Van Kiet (premier from the south). The party could not reach agreement and so as a compromise all three officials were allowed to continue in office with the proviso that they would step down before the next national party congress.

Massive unrest by peasants in Thai Binh province in late 1997 coupled with the effects of the Asian Financial Crisis served to usher in a turnover in leadership. In December 1997, Do Muoi stepped down as party leader and was replaced by Le Kha Phieu. Nevertheless, Do Muoi continued to play an influential role behind the scenes as Advisor to the party Central Committee, often overshadowing Phieu.

In April 2001, Phieu failed to gain the backing of the party elite and was replaced as Secretary General by Nong Duc Manh. Party reformers took this opportunity to abolish the post of Advisor to the Central Committee. Do Muoi's influence came to an end as he retired from the scene.

Do Muoi passed away on October 1, 2018 aged 101.

Career in the state bureaucracy

After Vietnam was partitioned in the mid-1950s, Do Muoi's first appointment was chairman of the Haiphong Military and Administration Committee (May 1955 - December 1956). The following year, with his appointment to the central government as Vice Minister of Commerce (December 1956 -April 1958), he embarked on a life time career in the state bureaucracy. There he developed a network of political ties that supported his political rise as a northern conservative.

Do Muoi served as Minister of Home Trade from April 1958 to February 1961. There are few career details for the next six years. There are reports that he took ill and spent this period recovering.

Do Muoi returned to the bureaucratic stage in November 1967 when he was appointed chairman of the Economic Board in the Premier's Office until April 1971. At this time, Do Muoi was appointed chairman of the State Capital Construction Commission. He served for two years until June 1973 when he was appointed Minister of Construction. He held that portfolio until August 1977.

More importantly, in a major career development, Do Muoi was appointed Vice Premier in the Council of Ministers in December 1969 and served in that post until early 1987. In this position, Do Muoi headed Vietnam's committees of economic, scientific and technical cooperation, respectively, with Romania, Iraq, and Hungary. In mid-1998 Do Muoi replaced reformist Vo Van Kiet as Chairman of the Council of Ministers. Vo Van Kiet was Acting Chairman at that time. In August 1991, following Do

Muoi's election as party Secretary General, Kiet assumed the post of Chairman of the Council of Ministers.

Throughout his career Do Muoi also served as National Assembly deputy from Hai Phong. He was first elected in 1960 to the second legislature.

Conclusion

As party Secretary General Do Muoi arbitrated between different factions and contending viewpoints with the Vietnam Communist Party. In this sense he may be likened to a Confucian referee who interceded in disputes between the old guard and younger leaders. Although Do Muoi was a member of the old guard by virtue of his age and career experience he became a transitional leader who lent cautious support for economic reforms. Speaking on the sidelines of the Ninth Congress in 2001, Do Muoi endorsed efforts to reinvigorate the party by promoting younger members. "Age must be the first qualification... younger leaders can approach issues better," he said. He also added that "given the development of science and technology, rejuvenation (of the government) is good."

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