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ABN # 65 648 097 123



Background Brief:

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Le Kha Phieu, 1931-2020

August 12, 2020

Q1. You characterized Le Kha Phieu once as presiding over "reform immobilism." What did you mean by that, and is it be accurate to call him a conservative on the question of liberalization?

ANSWER: The term political immobilism was first used by Brantly Womack, University of Virginia. It was appropriated with due attribution.

The term political immobilism captures Le Kha Phieu's inability to address pressing economic issues and failure to curb party in-fighting and factionalism during his tenure as party Secretary General.

The fourth plenum (December 1997) which elected Phieu party chief also appointed the former ruling troika as advisers to the Central Committee. In this role they cast a long shadow over Phieu by regularly attending high-level policy meetings. Do Muoi, for example, retained his office in the headquarters of the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP). During Phieu's first year as secretary general, Muoi not only attended meetings of the Politburo but continued to sit at the head of the table.

Phieu reportedly became so frustrated at the constraints on his power by Vietnam's system of collective leadership that he began to seek ways of shoring up his position. At one point he advocated merging the posts of party Secretary General with that of state president along lines of China's Jiang Zemin. Phieu also suggested amending the party statutes to abolish the position of advisors to the Central Committee. In 1999, the VCP became embroiled in particularly bitter infighting over leadership questions that Phieu failed to resolve.

Le Kha Phieu presided over ten plenary sessions of the Central Committee during his tenure in office as party Secretary General (December 1997-April 2001). He faced three major problems: serious political instability in Thai Binh province, the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98, and factional in-fighting in the VCP.

It is clear that Phieu's focus on political stability and party unity continually trumped economic concerns. When economic issues were raised, Phieu and his supporters preferred to stress the mobilisation of internal resources and piecemeal reforms in preference to advice from external donors such as World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and United Nations Development Program to step up the pace and scope of reforms. Phieu also rejected out of hand conditional financial inducements by

international financial institutions to underwrite the costs of reform efforts. In short, Phieu's leadership style led to 'reform immobilism'.

Q2. What would be a good way to characterize Le Kha Phieu?

ANSWER Phieu is best characterized as an ideological conservative whose tenure was marked by constant factional in-fighting with party reformers. It was Phieu's staunch defence of ideological rectitude that first won him support in the party and military and later proved his undoing.

Le Kha Phieu was a general in the Vietnam People's Army who fought in Cambodia in the 1980s. He was first elected to the Central Committee of the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) in June 1991 at a time when socialism had collapsed in Eastern Europe and was in disarray in the Soviet Union. Three months later he was appointed head of the army's General Political Department where he directed the ideological campaign against the threat of peaceful evolution.

In 1992, Phieu was appointed to the VCP Secretariat. This marked an important shift in his career path from the military to the party. Shortly after he was appointed to head the party's Internal Political Protection Commission where he dealt with internal security and disciplinary matters.

Phieu was a consistent proponent of strong administrative, internal inspection and control measures to combat corruption. For example, in 1999, Phieu decided to launch a two-year national campaign of criticism and self-criticism of its party 2.3 million members to counter the degradation in the party's ranks caused by corruption, excessive bureaucracy, individualism, and internal disunity. The object of the campaign was to rid the party of its degenerate members and restore unity

In November 2001, Phieu berated Bill Clinton during his official visit to Hanoi about U.S. imperialism and ordered party officials to accord the visiting American president a low-key welcome. These statements and actions were not what reformers who wanted to open up Vietnam's economy supported.

Q3. And what happened to him politically? Why was he ousted from his position?

ANSWER: At the eighth national party congress in December 1996 there was no consensus on who should replace the then party leader Do Muoi, aged 79. It was agreed to let Do Muoi continue in office and replace him before the end of his five-year term. In December 1997 at the fourth plenum (eighth party congress), Do Muoi agreed to step down and Le Kha Phieu was appointed party Secretary General to complete the five-year term. Since 1976, party secretary generals were normally elected at a national party congress held every five years.

Phieu aroused the wrath of the former leadership troika because of his efforts to abolish their positions as Advisors to the Central Committee. In October 2000, the former leadership troika signed a joint letter to the Central Committee criticising Phieu, inter alia, for weak leadership. Phieu was also accused of nepotism due to his appointment of cronies from his native Thanh Hoa province. And finally, Phieu was accused of pursuing a 'pro-China' policy, by approving concessions to China in border negotiations.

By early 2001, Le Kha Phieu had come under fire on a number of issues. He was criticised for ineffective leadership, failure to revive Vietnam's stagnant economy, inability to root out widespread corruption in the party, and 'anti-democratic' behaviour (because he reportedly sought to become both party leader and state president).

In April 2001, on the eve of the ninth party congress, the Politburo voted twelve to six to recommend Le Kha Phieu's reappointment as party leader. A few days later the Central Committee overturned the Politburo's recommendation. The major factor was that Phieu had used the resources of specialized unit known as A10 in the General Department II, the military intelligence organisation, to conduct wire taps on senior party officials. Phieu reportedly used the dossiers compiled by Unit A10 to defame several retired generals who had been pushing for a range of political and economic reforms and to influence factional in-fighting on the eve of the ninth national party congress.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Le Kha Phieu, 1931-2020," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, August 12, 2020. All background briefs are posted on Scribd.com (search for Thayer). To remove yourself from the mailing list type, UNSUBSCRIBE in the Subject heading and hit the Reply key.

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