

NEW YORK TIMES
13 August 2020

Le Kha Phieu, Vietnam Leader Who Was Pushed Out, Dies at 88

He served for less than four years as the country's general secretary, losing his post after unusually public factional struggles.

By Seth Mydans

Le Kha Phieu, a career military man whose tenure as a hardline leader of Vietnam ended ignominiously when he was removed from office amid unusually public infighting, died on Aug. 7 in Hanoi. He was 88.

The Central Committee for the Protection and Health Care of Officials said he died “after a period of illness,” which it attributed to “his old age and weak strength.”

Mr. Phieu, who had fought for North Vietnam in its wars against French colonialists and American forces, was elevated to general secretary of the Communist Party in 1997, a time of power struggles and government gridlock.

An ideological conservative, he was considered a compromise selection. But he immediately faced constant factional strife with party reformers and, with his ouster in 2001, wound up serving less than four years of his five-year term.

Mr. Phieu was criticized for ineffective leadership, failure to revive Vietnam's stagnant economy, inability to root out corruption, subservience to China, and “anti-democratic” behavior in seeking to expand his power.

In what Carlyle A. Thayer, a Vietnam specialist at the Australian Defense Force Academy in Canberra, called a “battle royal” over his removal, he was also accused of misusing military intelligence services to conduct wiretaps on his fellow Politburo members.

Mr. Thayer described Mr. Phieu's years in office as a period of “reform immobilism,” a preoccupation with political stability that overshadowed economic concerns and limited decisive action on a range of issues, including corruption and the impact on Vietnam of the Asian financial crisis.

Mr. Phieu continued to support the “leading role” of large state-controlled enterprises, a conservative position that both Western economists and liberals within Vietnam said was one of the chief hindrances to growth.

When he was chosen general secretary, the three members of the incumbent ruling troika were named as advisers, a role that enabled them to cast a shadow over his leadership. During Mr. Phieu's first year in office, one of the three, Do Muoi, the previous general secretary, not only attended meetings of the Politburo but also continued to sit at the head of the table.

Mr. Phieu tried to abolish the role of advisers and adopt for himself the additional post of state president, moves that largely triggered the leadership struggle that led to his removal.

Mr. Phieu was a hard-liner in international affairs as well as on the economy, at a time when party reformers were seeking to reach out to the West. Just before President Bill Clinton visited

the country in 2001, Mr. Phieu warned that the battle against the West, to which he had dedicated his life as a soldier, had not ended with Vietnam's wartime victory.

"They continue to seek ways to completely wipe out the remaining socialist countries," he said. "We should never relax our vigilance for a minute."

Mr. Phieu met with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia in Hanoi in 2001, the year Mr. Phieu was ousted. He clashed with party reformers who sought to reach out to the West.

He ordered party officials to accord Mr. Clinton only a low-key welcome and then berated the president about American imperialism.

Le Kha Phieu was born on Dec. 27, 1931, in the northern Thanh Hoa province. He became a member of the Indochinese Communist Party in 1949. A year later he joined the Vietnam People's Army, beginning a rise through the ranks that would take him through the wars against the French and the Americans and the subsequent occupation of Cambodia.

He was elected to the Communist Party Central Committee in 1991, elevated to the party secretariat a year later and joined the Politburo in 1994.

Information about survivors was not released.

Seth Mydans reported as a foreign and national correspondent for The New York Times and its sister publication, The International Herald Tribune, from 1983 to 2012. He continues to contribute to The Times.