

Pham Van Dong

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Formidable Marxist mandarin and a leader of Vietnam's independence struggle, he helped shape his country's future over nearly 70 years

Pham Van Dong

Pham Van Dong, who has died aged 94 — on the day before the 25th anniversary of his country's final victory in the Vietnam war — was a loyal lieutenant of the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh, and one of the 20th century's longest serving prime ministers. An austere and aristocratic Marxist mandarin, he governed Vietnam for 32 years, from its independence from France through the long war with the United States, and was only finally nudged aside by more reform-minded leaders in the mid-1980s, when Vietnam began shedding the central economic controls he had put in place.

Dong was among the most well-known of the group of shadowy leaders in Hanoi, particularly during the war with the US in the late 1960s, when he gave many interviews expressing North Vietnam's determination to defeat its massively more powerful adversary. But despite his elevated government position, and his membership of the Communist party politburo, he seemed to prefer the role of a Confucian administrator aloof from the factional storms blowing through Hanoi.

His real influence came in the early days of the Vietnamese revolution, when he was among the first of a group of young intellectuals, mostly children of the mandarin elite, who joined Ho Chi Minh to fight French colonialism. Along with General Vo Nguyen Giap, he was there at the creation of the small group of guerrillas that grew into a military force capable of defeating France in 1954 and the US in 1975.

Dong was little known before 1954, when he led a Vietnamese delegation to the Geneva conference that ended French rule in Indochina. Indeed, the French foreign min-

ister, Georges Bidault, described him as a "non-existent phantom". The conference was not a success for Dong, and he buckled under pressure from the Soviet and Chinese governments to accept the division of Vietnam pending elections scheduled for 1956 — but never held. The splitting of the country along the 17th parallel kicked off another two decades of conflict.

Elevated to the post of chairman of the council of ministers, or prime minister, in 1955, Dong survived the political turmoil of the early years of communist rule in Vietnam because of his proximity and self-deprecating loyalty to Ho Chi Minh, who referred to him as "my other self" and "my favourite nephew". While others made policy, Dong was there to ensure it was carried out.

As Ho's health failed in the 1960s, Dong took an increasingly public role, travelling frequently to communist-bloc countries and giving interviews to the western press. His pronouncements that North Vietnam would endure US bombardments — and would ultimately prevail — made him an emblem of the hardness and spirit of the North Vietnamese. This prominence led many at the time to believe that he was the real power in Vietnam, although, in fact, he played little role in the negotiations to end the war.

Those sympathetic to Hanoi were charmed by his determined manner and his ability to pepper interviews with quotes from French writers. "Intelligence and enthusiasm, lucidity and culture are rarely combined to the same degree in the same man," gushed the French photographer and journalist Marc Ribaud in *Le Monde* in 1969.

Others portrayed his austere demeanour and mirthless, rumbling laugh in a



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more sinister light. Certainly, it was rare that he strayed from the evasive doublespeak of Marxist-Leninist leaders, but he had polish, fluency in French and a range of cultural references that most Vietnamese leaders lacked. A resentful Henry Kissinger, who met Dong in Hanoi in 1973 to initial the Paris peace agreement — and was infuriated by his demands — described him as "wiry, short, wary and insolent".

Pham Van Dong was born in Quang Ngai province, in central Vietnam. He came from a mandarin family infused with a strong sense of nationalism. His father was a senior court official in Hue and secretary to the deposed

Emperor Duy Tan, who was exiled to Réunion by the French in 1919 for being too nationalist. Dong's father was also sidelined from the court, a disappointment that may have forged his son's anti-colonial sentiments.

After the French lycée at Hue, Dong enrolled in the University of Hanoi, where he began a career of political activism. He ran into trouble with the French authorities in 1925 for organising a student strike during the funeral of the nationalist hero Phan Chu Trinh. He was expelled and left for China, where he studied at the Chinese Nationalist party's Whampoa Military Academy, and first met Ho Chi Minh.

On Ho's orders, Dong returned to Vietnam in 1927 to organise the Thanh Nien youth movement. Arrested in 1929, he spent nearly seven years in Poulo Condore, an infamous French prison colony on an island in the South China Sea, which served as something of a university of the revolution. Released under an amnesty ordered by a new French government in 1936, he returned to political organisation, but fled Vietnam again three years later.

In 1941, Dong joined Ho and other leaders in founding the Viet Minh, a united-front organisation aimed at ousting both the French and the Japanese, who by then had occupied Vietnam. In August

1945, taking advantage of the political vacuum at the end of the second world war, they seized power in Hanoi. Dong became finance minister, and was chief aide to Ho Chi Minh at the Fontainebleau talks of 1946 which failed to settle the issue of independence.

As the French returned to Hanoi, the Viet Minh fled to the mountains. Dong was sent to his home province to lead the guerrilla movement there. It was at this time that he was said to have been involved in the violent purges of non-communists in the Viet Minh coalition. In 1951, he became vice-premier and, before the French surrender in 1954, he was made foreign minister.

During the 1960s, Dong repeatedly told journalists that Hanoi had no intention of imposing communism on the south. Yet as soon as the battles ended in April 1975, the government started doing exactly that, interning hundreds of thousands of people in re-education camps and collectivising farms.

At the same time, tensions started to rise with the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and their supporters in Beijing. Dong led attempts to build closer ties with Vietnam's neighbours in southeast Asia and with Europe. He visited France for the first time since 1946, but failed to win pledges of support. By 1979, Vietnam was once again embroiled in war, this time with the Khmer Rouge and Hanoi's former allies in Beijing.

In the late 1970s, Dong told a visitor that "waging a war is simple, but running a country is very difficult". Indeed, his administrative skills, with which he had channelled the energies of a nation in conflict, were far less successful in peacetime. Already nearly being destroyed by decades of war, Vietnam's economy was unable to endure a rapid shift towards Soviet-style central

planning. An international economic embargo, declining agricultural production and a ruinous attempt at currency reform added to the problems.

Later, Dong would only admit that "mistakes were made" after 1975, when the country suffered from what he called "subjectivity and leftism", jargon for the leadership's determined push for socialism that left Vietnam bankrupt and dependent on Moscow.

For much of his time as prime minister, Dong wielded less power than his position would suggest. Increasingly, the reins of policymaking were taken over by the Communist party chief Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, the politburo member who negotiated with the US and, with Kissinger, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. "When I say something, nobody listens," Dong was reported to have said. "I cannot even choose my own ministers."

His character was too remote and arid to capture public affection in the way that Ho Chi Minh had. On the other hand, his self-effacing approach enabled him to escape blame for many of the failures that afflicted Vietnam. Dong was said to speak out rarely in meetings, and was never quick to express an opinion.

In 1986, he stepped down as premier and gave up his seat on the politburo. He held the post of special adviser to the Communist party central committee, and appeared regularly at ceremonial occasions. Dressed in a white Mao suit and dark glasses, his face lean and cadaverous, he was increasingly something of a Banquo's ghost, there to remind the new leadership, in their suits and ties, of their abandonment of all but a thin veneer of Marxism.

Dong's communist credentials remained impeccable to the bitter end. "Capitalism won't go far," he said in 1994. "It carries within it the seeds of its own destruction." He wrote tirades about the dangers of Vietnam's rush towards the market, and was critical of the country's rising inequalities and corruption. But his message was lost on a people enjoying a measure of economic and political freedom that he had never allowed them.

Although a prolific writer, Dong never produced a memoir. His life was sublimated to the cult of Ho Chi Minh, whom he never failed to quote in any interview or article. He wrote a hagiography of Ho in 1960, but most of his other works were collections of speeches and heavy articles published in the Communist party newspaper.

Dong's private life remained resolutely private. Little is known about his marriage, except that his wife suffered from mental illnesses and was frequently hospitalised. He is thought to have had a son and a daughter. His family were never publicly acknowledged, so that, like Ho Chi Minh, he could portray himself as devoted only to the revolution.

In later life, his health was often precarious. He had a pacemaker inserted in the late 1970s, and, from the mid-1980s, his sight failed, leaving him completely blind for the rest of his life. He lived in a modest house in the grounds of the presidential palace in Hanoi, not far from where Ho Chi Minh had also spent his final days. He remained a busy public figure to the end, writing critical articles and appearing at state functions.

Robert Templer

Pham Van Dong, politician, born March 1 1906; died April 29 2000