

Patient Vietnamese Leader

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Duong Van Minh

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For more than a decade, Duong Van Minh has been the odd man out in South Vietnam—a general without troops, a politician without office, a national hero with little to do but play tennis and tend his orchids. The fortunes of power in Saigon have waxed and waned. But the 59-year-old retired general known as “Big Minh” has hugged the sidelines and cultivated a distinction that always has eluded his nation’s leaders: popularity with the people.

That popularity has been an intangible asset in recent years. But last night, as the floundering Saigon Government desperately sought a way out of the closing circle of Communist forces, it was a critical element in the National Assembly’s adoption of a resolution approving the transfer of presidential power to General Minh. Of those on the political scene, he alone is believed to have the standing to talk of peace with the Communist side.

Long identified with a stand of reconciliation and compromise with the Communists, General Minh had become in recent years the rallying point of non-Communist opposition to the Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu, whose resignation last Monday left Tran Van Huong at the head of a caretaker regime.

Last night’s action by the National Assembly will put General Minh at the helm for the second time in his tortuous military-political career. The leader of the 1963 coup that toppled the autocratic regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, General Minh served three months as chief of state before he in turn was ousted and sent into exile by subordinate officers.

After living quietly in

Bangkok, Thailand, he was allowed to return to Saigon in 1968, apparently with a promise to keep a low profile. At first, he in fact retreated into seclusion. But gradually, with a characteristic caution, he began to speak out against President Thieu’s policies. The volume of these protests went up slowly.

In 1971, he became a presidential candidate and then withdrew charging that, Mr. Thieu was making it impossible to hold an honest election. By 1973, he was openly questioning the Government’s repression of newspapers and political opponents.

Last year, General Minh called the Government “violence-thirsty,” and only two months ago he declared: “The Government is now nothing but a tyranny.”

General Minh’s carefully orchestrated political comeback has succeeded in a way that has done nothing to blur his public image among the Vietnamese as a steady man, patient and deliberate, neither pretentious nor particularly adroit.

Professional Soldier

Some Americans in Saigon call him a pleasant professional soldier, but not a statesman or intellectual. He is slow-speaking, and sluggish, prefers the company of military men, likes to watch American football on television and lists Winston Churchill, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower and Gen. Douglas MacArthur as his heroes.

Many Vietnamese more brilliant and worldly than the general defend him warmly.

“Westerners always misjudge Asians,” said one of his Vietnamese supporters. “Westerners judge Minh by his appearance, and that is wrong. For us, a man of virtue is much more important than a man of talent.”

The general’s size—he is 6 feet tall and weighs 200

pounds—is only one reason for his nickname, “Big Minh.” It also has served to describe his geniality and to distinguish him from Gen. Tran Van Minh, who is called “Little Minh.”

Duong (pronounced ZOONG) Van Minh was born on Feb. 19, 1916, into a wealthy land-owning family in the Mekong delta. His education included attendance at the Ecole Militaire in Paris and a tour at the United States Army’s general staff school in Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

Fought in French Forces

He entered the French colonial forces in 1940, fought against the Japanese in World War II and transferred to the Vietnamese Army in 1952. He first became a nationally known military figure in 1955, when he led a nine-month campaign that suppressed the Binh Xuyen, a sect whose private army controlled the police, the gambling dens and the brothels of Saigon.

Several years later, after similar exploits, he was well on the way to becoming a national hero.

In 1958, President Diem picked him to lead the fight against the Vietcong. But several years later, with the general’s popularity growing out of hand, President Diem named him as his personal military adviser, depriving him of a command. Those close to General Minh say his decision to lead the 1963 coup was made reluctantly, with patriotism rather than power as his motive.

General Minh is a Buddhist of temperate habits. He is married and the father of three children. He speaks fluent French and fair English, dabbles in photography and has a passion for growing orchids, the avocation of a patient man.

“To grow one orchid takes four years,” a colleague notes. “You cannot grow orchids in haste.”



Pictorial Parade

Maj. Gen. Duong Van Minh appears at bottom left in this photograph of the ruling junta in Saigon, made Nov. 6, 1963, shortly after the overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem. Visible at top right is Col. Nguyen Van Thieu; at rear left is Lieut. Col. Nguyen Cao Ky. The civilian in the front row is Premier Nguyen Ngoc Tho.