

Facebook trumps state media over death of Vietnam's Giap

HANOI, VIETNAM: As news emerged of the death of Vietnam's legendary General Vo Nguyen Giap, most journalists were forced to stay silent, leaving the landmark event to be revealed by the country's swelling ranks of Internet users.



General Vo Nguyen Giap (Image: Wiki Images)

Tributes to Giap, whose guerrilla tactics defeated the French and US armies, flooded cyberspace soon after his death on Friday (4 October). But reporters in some of the biggest state media outlets could not print a thing about the biggest event in that the country in years.

"It's really stupid - but we can't do what we want. It's just procedure we have to follow," one disgruntled editor at a top state-run news agency told AFP, adding that outlets had to wait for an official announcement, which was not released until Saturday (5 October).

Giap - second only to late revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh as modern Vietnam's most revered figure - will be given a national funeral and two days of mourning, according to a statement from the Vietnamese Communist Party.

A delay between the death of a top public figure and a formal announcement is standard practice in authoritarian Vietnam.

But social media is increasingly filling the country's information void, despite crackdowns on online dissent that have seen dozens of bloggers jailed.

"I learned the news of Giap's death from the Internet," said Do Tuan Khai, 55, who owns a coffee shop in Hanoi.

Facebook tributes confirm death

Facebook - which is periodically blocked but wildly popular in Vietnam - erupted into tributes and condolences after users heard of the military strategist's death last Friday.

Branded an "enemy of the Internet" by Reporters Without Borders, Vietnam bans private media while all newspapers and television channels are state-run.

Vietnam has also recently passed a sweeping new Internet law which bans bloggers and social media users from sharing news stories online, although it remains unclear how this will be implemented.

But the rise of blogs and social media means it will be harder for the communist party to control the official narrative around Giap as the country prepares for his funeral that will be held on 13 October, Vietnam expert Carl Thayer told AFP.

"There will be two stories. First, the official one - that he was a perfect general, strategic mastermind, everything the party wants you to hear," he said.

Shunted aside

"Then there will be the sore tale of a general who was shunted aside, which will not feature in the official narrative," he added.

Giap, who masterminded the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu and pushed the Americans out two decades later with the fall of Saigon, enjoyed near mythical status overseas as a master strategist.

But his success on the battlefield earned him powerful enemies at home, and he was pushed to the political sidelines after Vietnam's reunification in 1975.

He was eased out of the Politburo in 1982 and left politics officially in 1991.

The general spoke out until well into his 90s, writing open letters or using anniversary events to rail against everything from corruption to controversial bauxite mining. In 2006 he wrote that the Communist Party had "become a shield for corrupt officials".

"His popularity is likely to outshine any lingering resentment from the party," Thayer predicted. "He's controversial. Some people in the party don't like his legacy. But none of that will be made public," he said.

Bureaucracy

He said the official delay in releasing the news of his death may have had more to do with internal bureaucracy than a dilemma over how to treat the revered general's death.

Any official announcement has to come from the country's top leaders, who were busy with a crucial Central Committee party plenum.

While some smaller state newspapers such as VNExpress did run reports on Giap, the official Vietnam News Agency remained mute, causing consternation online.

"They do not dare to spread information on a story that the whole society has already read," one Facebook commentator, Nguyen Dang Phat, wrote scathingly.

State television only reported Giap's death on Saturday's lunchtime news, describing the self-taught soldier as a "legend of Vietnam's modern history."

"Why didn't VTV run this news yesterday?" a Vietnamese Facebook user asked.

One former correspondent at the Vietnam News Agency told AFP that it was "such a shame" that local journalists were unable to break such a major story despite being fully aware of it.

"The journalists don't like it at all. But they've got used to it. All newspapers belong to the government so we have to wait for the green light to publish," she said.

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge

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