

Thong Jamsri, Thailand's Last Communist Leader, Dies At 98

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BANGKOK — An ex-leader of the Communist guerrilla movement, who later took up the cause of democratizing Thailand, died today at the age of 98.

Thong Jamsri, who served as the Communist Party of Thailand's secretary-general during its twilight years of armed resistance, died of a respiratory disease, according to messages posted online by his peers.

Thong - widely known by his *nomme-de-guerre* as "Comrade Pracha" - remained a towering figure in the memories of many intellectuals who fought under his leadership in Thailand's jungles during the Cold War. He continued to campaign for civil rights long after the insurrection collapsed in the 1980s.

Thong Jamsri speaks to Voice TV in a 2013 interview.

"He held on to the ideology of a revolutionary till his last breath," newspaper columnist and ex-guerrilla fighter Atukkit Sawangasuk wrote in a tribute. "He was a former comrade who stood firmly and resolutely against military tyranny since the beginning."

Another ex-Communist and longtime friend of Thong also praised him as a fighter of the people.

"For decades, he dedicated his life to revolutionizing Thailand," wrote Jaran Ditapichai, who now lives in exile in Paris to avoid royal defamation charges. "My comrade stood on the side of the people and fought for democracy until his death."

Life Under Red Star

Thong was born on Dec. 17, 1921 in Pichit province to a family of Vietnamese political exiles. His father joined the Communist Party of Vietnam when Thong was 9. He put his son on the same path, enrolling Thong in schools founded by Chinese Communists, first in Sakon Nakhon and later in the capital.

Communism was illegal at the time, banned by both the royal government and the civilian regime that succeeded it in 1932. The government feared a civil strife breaking out in Siam, then known as Thailand, as one did in war-torn China.

When Thong was just 15, he was arrested for handing out leaflets calling for a socialist uprising and sentenced to nearly two years in prison. Once his jail term was complete, the 17-year-old Thong joined what later became the Communist Party of Thailand.

Thong spent much of his adult life under the party's flag, rising up the ranks from a lowly apparatchik to the Politburo. He fought alongside other guerillas when the party launched an all-out

offensive in northeastern and southern jungles for much of the Cold War.

He was eventually selected as the party's fourth and last secretary-general in 1982, just as the armed struggle was shrinking under overwhelming government firepower and thinning allies; China, Laos and Vietnam had withdrawn their support for the Thai Communists by then.

Although Thong tried to bring much needed reform to a party mired in orthodoxy, it was too late. The armed insurrection fell apart as the Cold War was coming to an end. Fighters trickled back to the cities and resumed their civilian lives. Thong himself left the jungle in 1993.

But Thong never entirely surrendered - as the last remaining representative of the Communist Party of Thailand, he never signed a formal ceasefire with the government.

During the ensuing years, Thong took up jobs as a writer and columnist, often lashing out at authorities he deemed to be undemocratic - most recently the military government of Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha. Through his speeches and writing, Thong called for a more democratic society and less power in the hands of the military.

He also continued to preside over ceremonies to commemorate fallen comrades and other efforts to preserve memories of the guerrilla war, which is mostly forgotten by the public.

In an online post written after Thong's death was announced, his biographer Nitirat Sapsomboon said Thong was most notable for his attempts to instill not only reform and but also morality within the ranks of the Communist Party of Thailand.

During his tenure, Thong called upon his comrades to be humble, learn to accept criticism, and treat female compatriots with respect.

"He laid down important lessons for all Communists, and a lesson in the history of struggles for fairness in society," Nitirat wrote.

His cremation ceremony will take place on July 14 at Wat Phra Pathon Chedi in Nakhon Pathom province.

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