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Afghan Leader Quits Top Post, Moscow Reports

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MOSCOW, May 4 — Babrak Karmal, installed as leader of Afghanistan when Soviet troops moved into the country in 1979, resigned today and was replaced by the former chief of the Afghan secret police, the Soviet press agency Tass announced.

Mr. Karmal, who is 57 years old, resigned for health reasons, the report said. His replacement, Najibullah, who has only one name, was described by Tass as a "great friend of the Soviet Union."

The resignation was not altogether unexpected. Mr. Karmal had not been seen in public since he left Afghanistan on a little-publicized trip to the Soviet Union on March 30, from which he returned only last Thursday, having missed the celebration April 27 of the 1978 Afghan revolution.

There have been unconfirmed reports that Mr. Karmal had been in Moscow for treatment of a serious illness, possibly lung cancer or leukemia.

The report said Mr. Karmal resigned as General Secretary of the ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, the name for the Afghan Communist Party.

Mr. Karmal is still a member of the Politburo and the President of the Presidium of the Revolutionary Council, a largely ceremonial post. Effective leadership of the country has passed to Mr. Najibullah, a 39-year-old former medical student who headed the Khad secret police until late last year, when he was promoted to party secretary charged with overall security.

As head of the secret police, Mr. Najibullah is assumed to have worked closely with the K.G.B. His promotion to party secretary last December was seen as a evidence that he was under consideration for the top leadership.

Western diplomats said Moscow may have hoped to present in Mr. Najibullah a leader less directly associated in the public eye with the Soviet move into Afghanistan than Mr. Karmal, and more capable of tackling the rivalries in the ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan.

Speaks of Need for Unity

According to Tass, Mr. Najibullah spoke in his acceptance speech of the need for unity in party ranks. He also pledged to strengthen friendship with "the party of great Lenin, the heroic, responsive and great-hearted Soviet people," Tass said.

Western analysts say 115,000 Soviet troops are in Afghanistan supporting the Kabul Government in its fight against insurgents.

The reports of today's Central Committee meeting suggested that Mr. Karmal was not present. The chairman of the meeting was the Prime Minister, Sultan Ali Keshtmand, and Tass quoted from a resignation statement that it said Mr. Karmal wrote, indicating that he did not read it.

Tass reported that Mr. Najibullah and the Central Committee warmly praised Mr. Karmal, indicating that he was not leaving in disgrace. But even if health was the major reason for his resignation, there was evidence indicating that Moscow welcomed his departure.

A Snub From Gorbachev

At the Soviet Communist Party congress earlier this year, Mr. Karmal's request for a personal meeting with Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, was conspicuously denied. Last month, the Russians warmly welcomed Prime Minister Keshtmand to Moscow, mentioning Mr. Babrak only in passing.

The change of command was announced on the eve of a new round of indirect talks in Geneva between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The "proximity talks" have been held occasionally since 1982 with the mediation of the United Nations, because Pakistan has refused to deal directly with a representative of the Kabul Government, which it does not recognize.

In recent months, Moscow has been seeking to shape a more flexible image in regard to the Afghan war. At the Soviet party congress in February, Mr. Gorbachev said the Soviet Union would like to withdraw its forces from the country "in the nearest future."

He said the Russians had agreed with the Afghans on a schedule for a phased withdrawal "as soon as a political settlement is reached that will insure an actual cessation and dependably guarantee the nonresumption of foreign armed interference in the internal affairs" of Afghanistan.

A Party Divided

The Russians have also speeded efforts over the past year to quell factionalism in the ruling party, and to broaden the base of the Government. The party has long been torn between the Parcham faction and the Khalq faction, most of whose members are from Pashtun tribes. Mr. Karmal, who is not a Pashtun, belongs to the Parcham faction. Mr. Najibullah is one of the few Pashtuns in the Parcham faction.

Western diplomats agreed that the new leader's most important qualification was probably his long leadership of the Khad secret police. According to Western experts, Khad has grown considerably under K.G.B. tutelage since the Soviet intervention.

Mr. Najibullah's official biography says he was born in 1947 to a white-collar family and joined the Communist Party in 1965, the year after he finished high school. He studied in the medical department of Kabul University, and was twice jailed for revolutionary activities before he graduated in 1975.

An early ally of Mr. Karmal, he became a Central Committee member in 1975 and joined the Revolutionary Council created after the April 1978 Communist takeover. He was sent to Iran as ambassador, then thrown out of the party for plotting against the Khalq faction, which was then dominant. He returned with the Soviet intervention in 1979, and took over khad.

Mr. Najibullah became a full member of the Politburo in 1981. He is a lieutenant-general of the army.