

# Political Realities in Vietnam

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THE ABORTIVE REBELLION in Saigon last November, coming on the heels of a military coup in neighboring Laos, focused worldwide attention on the political situation in the Southeast Asian republic. Interest was especially high in the United States, which has given approximately \$1.3 billion in aid to Vietnam since 1954 and is committed to come to its defense in the event of a Communist invasion. American press coverage of the uprising indicated considerable American sympathy with the rebels and a readiness to accept a dénouement that would have seen President Ngo Dinh Diem and his government ousted. Another current of opinion, however, while uneasy about certain aspects of the Ngo Government, was dissatisfied with the rebel alternative. These contradictory expressions suggest the dilemma of many observers in analyzing the development of the Republic of Vietnam during its five years of existence.

It is well known that Ngo Dinh Diem and his colleagues surmounted grave obstacles in neutralizing the challenges to their power from dissident private armies and in developing a degree of national unity in the face of strong traditional village and regional ties in the non-Communist remnant of the former State of Vietnam. It is also a matter of record that his régime effectively eliminated the last vestiges of French colonialism from the country and made many basic changes in its social, economic and political life. Why, then, should American observers have feelings of uneasiness? Why should anyone have attempted to overthrow this constructive nationalist government? The answers to these questions are several and complex. They lie in the quality of political leadership in the Republic of Vietnam, in the character of political opposition, and in the nature of men's expectations.

There are two salient facts that influence politics in South Vietnam today. One is the violent subversive activity of the Communists. The other is the Republic's achievements in the economic and social fields. Much journalistic attention has been directed to the presence or absence of civil liberties in Vietnam. Similarly, the story of the successful absorption of 860,000 refugees from the Communist north has been retold countless times. However, the absence of a runaway inflation, the continuous and striking rise in the production of rice, rubber and various new crops, the increase in general wage and salary levels, the creation of a new class of small landowners, and the growth of peasant income have received relatively little notice.

Prices in Vietnam have been stabilized since 1956, and in consequence so has the cost of living. The population lives better now than it did in

1955, even though fewer consumer goods are imported than previously. The grave excess of imports over exports that existed in 1954 after eight years of civil war is not yet fully corrected, nor is it reasonable to expect that it will be for many years. However, major advances have been recorded in rice production and exportation, rubber production, and the development of new industrial crops such as kenaf, jute, ramie and cotton. Modest industrial development is taking place. This is not to suggest that Vietnam has solved its basic economic problems, but rather that it has made significant economic progress.

In the realm of social welfare, Vietnam's record compares very favorably with those of other newly independent nations. Take land reform, for example, often regarded as the hallmark of a progressive regime in Asia. In the face of increasingly violent Communist efforts to block and undermine the program, the Vietnamese government has persevered in its efforts to carry out a massive redistribution of rice lands. When the program is completed this year, more than 1,500,000 peasants will have benefited from it.<sup>1</sup>

Parallel with the agrarian reform have been programs designed to raise living levels in the rural areas, where 88 per cent of the Republic's 14,000,000 citizens live, and to ameliorate some of the hitherto endemic problems of the peasants. For example, the government-sponsored national agricultural credit program has been efficiently managed and extremely effective. A five-year malaria-eradication program is already half-completed. Training programs for teachers, midwives, medical technicians, nurses, tractor drivers, and mechanics have created thousands of newly skilled workers. Roads and canals have been constructed speedily to link the thousands of towns, villages and hamlets for the first time in history. Viewed separately, these accomplishments are not spectacular; in sum, however, they represent rural social change on a major scale.

Perhaps the factor of change is best illustrated by two bold programs undertaken by the Ngo regime on a "crash" basis: the land-development centers and the *agrovilles*. The former, located primarily in the plateau regions, represent the government's approach to four basic concerns: overcrowding in the infertile coastal plains of Annam; exploitation of virgin upland soil; national security; and the introduction of new industrial crops to conserve foreign exchange. Life in the new settlements, located along the desolate and vulnerable frontiers with Laos and Cambodia, has not been easy, but the land is fertile and crops have been good. The 200,000 settlers are today counted as loyal and productive citizens.<sup>2</sup>

The fertile rice lands of the Mekong delta have presented somewhat different problems. The region is thinly settled; farms are scattered throughout the area; communications are grossly inadequate; contact

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1. See John T. Dorsey, Jr., "South Vietnam in Perspective," *Far Eastern Survey*, December 1958; J. Price Gittinger, "Progress in South Vietnam's Agrarian Reform," *ibid.*, January 1960 (I) and February (II).

2. See Wolf I. Ladejinsky, "Vietnam: The First Five Years," *The Reporter*, December 24, 1959; Wesley R. Fishel, "Vietnam's War of Attrition," *The New Leader*, December 7, 1959.

between isolated peasants and their government is infrequent and unsatisfying. This has been the target area for most Communist terrorism during the past three years, with the efforts steadily increasing in tempo and intensity. Villages have been victimized, "taxes" collected, agents placed, communications disrupted, tractors, bulldozers and barges blown up. During 1960 at least 1,200 civilians (including local officials) and more than 1,600 soldiers and police were killed in encounters with Viet Cong (Communist) forces. Communist units, fully armed and well supplied from North Vietnam, have infiltrated the country through the sparsely populated jungles of southern Laos, and, in bands of 50 to 200 men, have operated in guerilla fashion against the Vietnamese National Army and Civil Guard. (Communist losses in 1960 are estimated at 6,800 killed in action.<sup>3</sup>)

Peasant support for the Saigon government has declined as a result of continued Communist depredations. Some observers report that the mass of the people is politically indifferent, though anti-Communist. What has seemed clear is that after 90 years of colonial domination and eight years of civil war, the Vietnamese peasant's goals generally are security, enough money to sustain his family, and a plot of land. The administration in Saigon has been able to assure the latter two requisites, but it has not been able to provide armed protection for every isolated farm and every lone traveler, and it is reliably estimated that 10,000 armed Communists are now operating in the delta region and in the zone stretching from the Laotian frontier to the sea, east of Saigon.<sup>4</sup>

To meet the challenge of insecurity and the political problems it poses, President Ngo has essayed an imaginative nonmilitary approach. Late in 1959 the government began to build *agrovilles*—rural towns—at strategic locations throughout the southern part of the Republic. The first, at Vi Thanh, was completed and its population installed on March 12, 1960. By late September, 15 such towns had been established. Like the centers in the plateau, the *agrovilles* provide their peasant inhabitants with schools, clinics, markets, social centers, technical and financial aid, electricity and, above all, security. However, much peasant resentment was incurred during the process of regroupment as a result of rigid, clumsy implementation of presidential directives by ambitious and insensitive local administrators who coerced peasants into construction work on the new settlements at harvest time, and otherwise showed ineptness in dealing with those who should have been satisfied beneficiaries of a forward-looking policy. Recent visitors to the *agrovilles* report that the manifest advantages of the new settlements have overcome the initial unhappiness, however, and an additional evidence of success is seen in the fact that the Communists have not yet ventured to attack an *agroville*.

The splitting of the Vietnamese portion of Indochina in 1954 augured ill for the administration in the French-sponsored southern half, the assumption being that within two years it would follow the northern half of the country into the Communist camp. Ngo Dinh Diem was regarded as having taken on an impossible task. As the prime minister

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3. Private communication to the writer.

4. Private communication to the writer.

with the impassive face and shy manner bested one after another of his adversaries, feelings of futility and fatalism among observers changed to incredulity and then to hope. A national referendum in October 1955 legalized the ouster of Bao Dai and the establishment of a republic, with Ngo Dinh Diem as its first president. Democratic phrases punctuated the speeches of virtually every public figure in the country; a Constitution was promulgated and a National Assembly elected; a buoyant revolutionary spirit swept the country, Abroad as well, hopes rose, and republican Vietnam's allies found the outlook suddenly brighter.

However, expectations that the end of colonialism would bring immediate democracy were unrealistic. Ngo Dinh Diem was indeed a revolutionary, but a cautious one. He was strong-willed and determined, and convinced of the righteousness of his cause. After years of underground intrigues he was suspicious of strangers, distrustful of anyone whose attitudes (and antecedents) he did not know thoroughly. He relied for advice on those whom he knew to be trustworthy: his family and a few intimate friends. The result was a tight group of leaders, who looked inward rather than outward for guidance and support. During the tense weeks of 1954-55 many in the inner circle, increasingly discouraged about the possibility of overcoming the "feudalistic" sects (the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao) and the Binh Xuyen gang, urged formation of a "government of national union." But the premier, his brothers, and a handful of associates rejected the idea of union with such elements, and the dissenters were dropped from the administration.

Yet the men who broke with Ngo were nationalists and believed that compromise was the only way of avoiding disaster. Still other nationalists were never taken into the government, either because they were considered too ambitious or were hostile to the Ngo family, or because they set too high a price on their cooperation. Dr. Phan Quang Dan, who came forward as a leader in the recent uprising, was regarded as falling into all three categories, and when he and Ngo Dinh Diem were unable to agree on terms for his joining the cabinet, he became a prominent member of the opposition.

The non-Communist "opposition" in the Republic of Vietnam is usually considered to comprise the intellectuals and the educated youth, who voice their dissatisfaction with the existing state of things. If this categorizing is correct, the opposition must number relatively few people. There are only a few thousand intellectuals in Vietnam, including the lawyers, pharmacists, doctors, engineers, teachers, small businessmen and non-professional university graduates. Most live in the Saigon metropolitan area. Moreover, in the writer's opinion, the majority of educated Vietnamese who hold government positions, including most of the army officers, should not be counted among the intellectual opposition. In many Saigon offices they are aware of a lack of dynamic leadership and revolutionary impulsion, and their support for the regime is often only half-hearted, but this lack of fervor is not equivalent to active opposition.

The numerical strength and economic weight of the intellectuals is probably quite inferior to that of the Chinese community in Saigon-Cholon, whose dissatisfactions and grievances, however, very few Viet-

namese critics share. Furthermore, the Saigon-centered intellectual oppositionists have thus far shown little evident interest in the problems of land tenancy and land reform, or in social welfare measures in general. One might infer therefore that their interests are not always identical with those of the mass of the people.

The difference between a country such as Vietnam and an "advanced" Western country must not be overlooked. Many advanced countries possess traditions of democracy, institutions for democratic controls, responsible, broadly based opposition parties, general literacy and participation in political life. Such conditions do not prevail in most "underdeveloped" countries.<sup>5</sup> The mass of the people in a country like Vietnam cannot be vitally concerned with freedom of the press if they see no newspaper from the day of their birth to the moment of their death. Improvements in their lot must come through governmental action, which suggests that for the Vietnamese rural population effective and competent administration is infinitely more important than a "liberal" administration.

And yet, most observers contend that Vietnam's leaders have too inflexibly restricted the areas of freedom. It is in some measure because of this rigidity that the regime has failed to enlist the active cooperation of the intellectuals in Vietnam, other than those directly involved in the business of government. However, given the obvious necessity for countering insurrection with a firm hand, and given also the demonstrated factionalist attitudes and activities of the majority of the intellectuals, whether they could be induced to support *any* regime may be seriously questioned.

The coup of November 10, 1960, was managed by a small group of middle-level army officers in collaboration with a scattering of oppositionist politicians. During the 36 hours before the last rebel paratroop units surrendered, the insurgents grappled with the problems of mounting a *coup d'état*, such as the evidently unanticipated canniness of President Ngo Dinh Diem, blockaded inside the palace, and the fact that the other 98 per cent of the armed forces, plus the entire police force, remained loyal. Furthermore, neither the civilian "opposition" nor the general public joined in the uprising. But even as the revolt failed, there were dark suggestions that it would not be the last. In the five years since the establishment of the republic, President Ngo had accomplished much in the way of fundamental change and material progress for his people. And yet, quiet, reserved and undramatic leader that he is, he had not succeeded in the basic task of developing strong popular support for and recognition of the achievements of his regime.

The leaders of the coup publicly justified their action by stating that they intended to strengthen, liberalize and cleanse the government, which they accused of nepotism and of inefficiency in the fight against the Communists. The government's reaction to the charge of nepotism was to point out that the projected rebel government would merely have substituted another family for the one currently in power. As a

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5. An able, general analysis of these aspects of political development is that of Edward Shils, "Political Development in the New States," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, April 1960, pages 265-92.

matter of fact, it would be hard under present circumstances to find competent leaders who would not bring relatives into the government. This state of affairs is due to the size of Vietnamese families, the strength of family ties and the fact that education—and therefore qualification for public office—is found only in relatively few persons belonging to a small number of formerly privileged families whose members had the good fortune to receive an education under the colonial regime. The question, then, is not whether an uncle in the government has nephews in high positions, but whether the nephews are qualified. A family such as the Ngo—aristocratic, cultured, prominent and talented—would have members in official positions under any open regime. And in the restricted society that prevails, these persons have status and power by virtue of their kinship and loyalty as well as their ability.

Although the president himself is the only member of his immediate family to hold an official position in the government, two of his brothers, Ngo Dinh Can and Ngo Dinh Nhu, who wield much informal political power, have frequently been accused of corruption, as has Nhu's wife, a member of the National Assembly. Such charges have been investigated, but no evidence has yet been advanced to persuade impartial observers that any of the family has been personally enriched through his position. The unofficial status of Nhu and Can nevertheless gives rise to gossip and lends credence to accusations of their abuse of power. If such criticisms are difficult to assess objectively, there is no denying that the very existence of such family relationships at the center of power inevitably creates uneasiness and distrust, and thereby increases the vulnerability of the regime. Certainly the November conspirators believed that hostility toward the reputedly excessive political power of members of the president's family was exploitable.

At the time, many critics voiced the hope that the revolt would alert the regime to the unrest in the country and that a measure of reform, including some relaxation of restrictions on political activity, would result. At this writing, the Saigon administration has announced certain initial reforms. For one, village youth will henceforth be represented on village councils by elected councilors. This move is said to be a first step toward holding popular elections for the village councils as a whole. Second, 14 of the 20 agencies attached to the president's office are to be transferred to appropriate cabinet departments. Third, to strengthen coordination and control of governmental activities, various departments will be grouped under Coordinating Secretaries of State (specifically, for economic development, security, and cultural and social affairs).<sup>6</sup> And the Secretary of the Interior, charged with provincial administration, announced at a press conference that the government was going to take "new drastic measures against civil servants found guilty of abuse of power, brutality, or vexation toward the population; they will be mercilessly punished and immediately suspended."<sup>7</sup>

Despite the insecure conditions in parts of the southern provinces, President Ngo has ordered that presidential elections be held as pre-

6. *Vietnam Press*, February 7, 1961 (Morning), H.1-H.7.

7. *The Times of Vietnam*, February 8, and 21, 1961, reported the discharge of two district chiefs for "abuse of power" and "maladministration."



scribed in the Constitution. Accordingly, on April 9, 1961, voters throughout the country will choose their chief executive and vice-president. President Ngo and the vice-president, Nguyen Ngoc Tho, are running for re-election, and the odds heavily favor them over two sets of opponents: Nguyen Dinh Quat, a wealthy Saigon businessman and rubber planter, teamed with Nguyen Thanh Phuong, former commander of the armies of the Cao Dai; and Ho Nhat Tan, a doctor of Oriental medicine, whose running mate is Nguyen The Truyen, an outspoken nationalist opponent of the present regime.

This election will constitute a major challenge for the Saigon government. The campaign and the balloting, which are being supervised by a committee representing the various candidates, will be scrutinized closely for indications of democratic (or undemocratic) conduct on the part of the regime, for what they may reveal of Ngo Dinh Diem's popular strength, for what they may show about the extent of discontent in the country, and for evidence of the effectiveness of a threatened Viet Cong effort to keep the peasants from the polls. The Ngo Government has gone far toward translating the independence gained in 1955 into a better life for the people of the truncated nation. The April election, an important exercise in the mechanics of representative government, will test the regime's avowed intent to take the people of Vietnam down the road toward an eventual democratic system.

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