

NOTES on Vietnam, from talk with J D Montgomery who spent two years there studying administration and use of aid funds (Michigan State Univ. project) Aug. 1959

1. The Communist problem is naturally dominant, and there is an underground movement in South Vietnam, marked by almost daily assassinations of officials. The tendency of the police and authorities is to equate any opposition to the regime with Communism, and thus it is difficult to prepare political life for elections, which are due to be held.
2. The president tends to make all decisions, minor to major, for lack of the ability to delegate, and through lack of trust in subordinates. He is thus a burdened, hard-working man, devoted, incorruptible, - but there is corruption around him, and doubtless misuse of aid funds as charged in the articles in the Washington Daily News.
3. The regime is centralized, all provincial governments being under military control from the center. The police are numerous and high-handed; cases of outright brutality have been reported and investigated.

Talks in Saigon with C B Wood, counselor U S Embassy, who is to go shortly to Washington to take charge of the U S Viet Nam desk; Howard Eltingg, Jr. charge d'affaires, Vu Van Thai, director of the budget and planner, Tran Tam, secy genl Anti-Communist League, Vu Van Mau, Foreign Minister, Than Khao Rau, director of Public Relations, Ralph Smucker, Wesley Fishel, of the Michigan State Univ group, and Dr. Pham Huu Chuong, former secy Ligue des Droits de l'homme, and Mr. Phan Huy Quat, a member, and in opposition to the government; also the President Ngo Dinh Diem and his secretary Hai. And above all, Wolf Ladejinsky, adviser to the president, along with Fishel, the president's old friend from Michigan.

1. The regime is by all accounts one of transition in the midst of a truce, with overtones of civil war, marked by an increased tempo of Communist infiltration. The opposition says the measures taken to combat Communist infiltration are excessive, and that the way to fight the Communist is by freedom and democracy, not suppression. The regime defends the tough controls as necessary, maintaining that relaxation would only play into Communist hands - the same old arguments, probably more justified here than elsewhere.
2. To be specific; 1. A special military court of three judges, formerly civilian, has been created to deal with subversion, but has not yet heard cases. Defendants may have lawyers, but no record is kept other than a summary, and the defense may not see the sureté dossier. Appeals to the president are permitted. The executions recently carried out were ordered by previous military courts for offences of a year or more ago. The effect of the new order carrying the death penalty is said to be largely psychological in preventing forced collaboration with Communist agents. (2) for the elections fixed for the end of August, only candidates approved may run, and those not official are watched by police posted at their residences (3) the

press is not directly censored, but all publications are licensed, and it is said the English paper and the French are required to submit copy to the police in advance. Yet news is channeled thru a single govt agency and all distribution is thru another (4) No association may be formed nor a meeting of any sort held without a permit. Any assembly of 12 or more persons, even private for a party a wedding etc. is unlawful without notification to the police. Each meeting of the Medical Society requires a police permit. (5) Everybody is required to carry an identification card with finger-prints. (6) passports are issued by the President's office alone; students with foreign scholarships have trouble getting to France, less to the USA, and considerable to other countries. (7) Mail is unofficially censored when sent to or received from addresses on a suspect list, and the control applies both to first-class and printed matter.

3. President Diem justified controls, while talking much of the need of discipline in ethical, moral and spiritual terms, as incidental to the civil war and the fight against Communist subversion. He cited cases of assassination and sabotage, and held that the more remote sections of the country were subject to intimidation with an unguarded frontier of hundreds of miles along the Laos and Cambodian borders, to say nothing of the sea. The Hanoi radio is a constant irritant, but without great effect. He stressed the desperate economic conditions as requiring the first attention of the government with land distribution as primary. I tried to get him to commit himself as to the direction of democracy in the transition period between colonialism, the war, the division and the collapse of the economy, but he was vague beyond assertions of the need for moral and spiritual unity. He did not directly answer the question as to a village basis for democracy, but he did think that the forthcoming elections would develop an understanding of the country's problems. The opposition stated that the elections were pretty well rigged in advance, and that even nominal opponents were selected by the government. No parties are permitted.

The president justified the military courts on the ground that regular procedures are too slow, the judges inexperienced, and inclined to leniency. But he said that justice is done because he reviews every case. He evidently does not think the people capable of democratic decisions in the midst of the confusions of a new country recently independent and subject to constant Communist pressure. He would not speculate on the chances of reunification if the cold war relaxes tensions. His preoccupation is with immediate problems of defense, subversion and the economy. These he discussed without bitterness or anti-Communist fanaticism, which his critics charge him with. He is discursive and indirect in reply, but the points did come out. We discussed the camps for reeducation of Communists and sympathizers, which he said were working to accomplish reform. Mr. Fisher who visited the three camps, said there are now about 3000 men in them, learning trades, getting unwashed brains, and going back to their homes after six months to a year or year and a half. They are sent there by administrative order, no court review.

I did not think the president despite a rather lofty statement of

ethical principle, at all conscious of the "rights of man", and concerned only with security and economic welfare.

4. The opposition says (1) Communism should be fought by democracy, not by imitating Communist repressions (2) the government has no contact with the people except thru the police and the local government agents, all appointed from the center (3) the courts are weak and cannot protect rights, and the lawyers are too few and too timid to do anything for them (4) the trade unions, such as they were, are dissolved and cooperative are not encouraged (5) the elections are a facade for what is in effect a police state, but not a dictatorship (everybody, even the most friendly, call the regime authoritarian, stemming from Diem) (6) the government is shot through with favoritism (no doubt that the president's brother who acts as political adviser, and his wife, Mrs. Nhu, have large influence in behalf of their friends) (7) the army and police alike are used mainly against internal unrest or subversion (8) the people are "troubled" yet have no channel for expression for fear that any evidence of opposition will be equated with Communism. The opponents I met, the two doctors, are just good liberals with courage, but I thought them somewhat unreddistic about the conditions the government faces.

5. The U S embassy staff is quite fully informed as to all this, but does not interfere in internal affairs, nor offer suggestions. Indeed when they were offered previously, the president got his patriotic back up and rejected them. He wants aid, not advice.

6. The director of the budget, a young man of large ideas, is devoted to the Mecong River project involving four countries, with a view to a common market, regional organization and lifting the level of income from the present \$100 per capita to \$300, a modest enough ambition.

7. The doctors remarked that they saw no difference between the Viet Nam government and those of South Korea and Taiwan; both professed a democracy that conceals an autocracy, conceived in the name of anti-Communism - a combination that is calculated to please the Americans who want the appearance of democracy along with a strong hand against the Communists.

8. Tran Chanh Thanh, director of information (Secretary of State for Information) said that the radio propaganda from Hanoi always paints South Viet Nam as an American satellite, harping on its dependence, and radio Saigon replies of course with similar charges against the north as satellite of Peking. All the refugees report opposition to the north govt as so widespread that a fair vote would give the Communists only about 20%. He thinks the problem of reunification not difficult in view of such sentiments, and economic conditions and social institutions (especially the family) are not dissimilar. The Saigon radio not only replies to charges but presents the advances and democracy (!) of the South.