

# In Viet—The Military Coup That Became an Army Purge

By Beverly Deepe  
A Special Correspondent

SAIGON.

*The blur of political forces at work in South Viet Nam came momentarily into clearer focus during the abortive army coup Sept. 13. In this second of two reports special correspondent Beverly Deepe analyzes the motives behind the coup attempt and the very different results it produced.*

If the abortive coup in South Viet Nam Sept. 13 was not an attempt to overthrow Gen. Nguyen Khanh, neither was it primarily organized as a pretext to purge the Army—though this has been an effect of it.

The key leaders of the coup were all officially out of a job and their replacements had been officially announced in a government news bulletin. But their replacements had not been officially installed in their new jobs.

Brig. Gen. Lam Van Phat had been removed from his job as Minister of Interior and his replacement named, but the installation was to take place on Monday morning. Brig. Gen. Duong Ngoc Lam had already been replaced as Mayor of Saigon. Brig. Gen. Nguyen Thieu was to hand over his job as Chief of Staff of the Joint General Staff on Monday morning.

Another side effect—and perhaps a secondary reason for the coup—was to smoke out anti-Khanh political leaders. This was done when key political leaders showed up for a meeting called by Maj. Gen. Duong Van Duc.

Also it revealed some of Gen. Khanh's own ministers were against him. Gen. Duc telephoned one of Gen. Khanh's super-ministers to ask him to become Premier and to head the Khanh government but without Gen. Khanh.

## INTRIGUE

The super-minister, Nguyen Xuan Oanh, who had been a Harvard lecturer and Gen. Khanh's Vice-Premier in Charge of Economics, accepted the offer to betray Gen. Khanh. He called a meeting of Gen. Khanh's Cabinet and four other ministers showed up at the Prime Minister's office. Many suspect that both Gen. Duc and Mr. Oanh were simply agents provocateurs, who were setting a trap for the others, but in the meanderings of Oriental intrigue, it will never be known. The effect of these maneuvers was to crush the Right-wing Dai Viet party which helped Gen. Khanh, but also the Buddhists.

The primary purpose of the coup now definitely appears to have been a flimsy effort to solve the Buddhist

situation—and to pull Gen. Khanh away from a pro-Buddhist position.

The Buddhist situation, obviously the most critical problem in the country, involves not only the Buddhist movement, which is the center of their orbit of power, but also pro-Buddhist students and Buddhist-dominated politicians and professors. It involves the threat of the northern provinces seceding from the central government and the possibility that a neutralist "buffer zone" will be established between Communist North Viet Nam and anti-Communist southern provinces. There are many in Saigon who suspect the British and the Americans will approve this plan in the future, and the Paris talks by Laotian leaders are being closely watched as a prelude to future developments in Viet Nam.

## ALTERNATIVES

An increasing number of persons in Viet Nam now suspect the Buddhist movement to be pro-neutralist or pro-Communist. This was the main argument of the coup leaders, plus appeals for a strong central government that would block any hope of some provinces seceding from the nation. Saigon observers are quick to point out that Washington announcements also used this anti-Buddhist interpretation of why the coup was staged.

To deal with the Buddhist problem, the Vietnamese government and Gen. Khanh, there are two total solutions: Both are extreme alternatives—to give the Buddhists the government—or to crush them by raiding the Buddhist pagodas as President Ngo Dinh Diem did. The first alternative is now considered totally unacceptable because it could mean an eventual Communist takeover of the country. The second is considered too radical at this moment—it's a question whether that choice will ever be taken.

## MIDDLE

But between these two extremes lies a vast middle ground of minor alternatives, none of which solves the problem. One is to negotiate with the Buddhists and to

make concessions to them. This Gen. Khanh attempted in late August, but they pushed him out of the Presidency and forced him to set up the triumvirate of generals to lead the country.

Another of these middle-ground alternatives was the Sunday coup. It was a warning to the Buddhists that there would be limits to the number of concessions—and that the Buddhist priests must stop meddling in the nation's politics.

For the Buddhists, Gen. Khanh was the carrot and the coup makers were the stick," one Vietnamese observer noted. "Now they've purged the coup leaders and have made the young officers (who saved Khanh) the stick."

Whoever was the "puppet-master" for the coup seriously miscalculated the effects on the Buddhists and the future forces that were set in motion.

For the Buddhists, the coup only meant they missed one day of sermons," one Vietnamese observer laughed. The day after the coup, associates of Gen. Khanh made it clear to the Buddhists that they would have either to abolish the anti-government committee threatening to have the northern provinces to secede from the union—or to force it to become pro-government. But few believe the Buddhists will stop their "anarchistic" programs and declarations in Viet Nam.

## IT HELPED

Instead of harming the Buddhist position, the coup helped them considerably. The coup attempt came at a time when the Buddhists themselves were losing prestige and popularity among the masses. For example, Buddhism was becoming a political movement in which the mass support came from opportunists, not from Buddhist believers. The Buddhists were failing to capture the full support they had last year under President Diem. Buddhists followers who were refugees from North Viet Nam—and who helped the Buddhist cause in the fight against Diem—began to doubt the Buddhist leadership. They threatened they "would join the Catholics" if the Buddhist political policies continued to help the Communists.

But the coup has now stopped this anti-Buddhist trend. The coup attempt has had the effect of giving the Buddhists more public sympathy. The population, already irked at the role of the Americans in the coup, will give more weight to future anti-American statements by the Buddhists.

But most serious of all, it will give the Buddhists an excuse to play politics within the Armed Forces. Their reason: If the Catholic, anti-Communist officers and units in the Army can take political matters into their own hands, why shouldn't the Buddhists?

## THREAT

The Buddhist bonzes for weeks in the pagodas and in their public announcements have been telling Buddhist officers that if they are betrayed by their leaders "they must lay down their weapons and go home." If the officers and enlisted men—who are predominantly Buddhist in religious composition—do this, it will mean the collapse of the Armed Forces. It will make prosecution of the military war against Communist Viet Cong guerrillas impossible. But most significantly, it will hamstring the only anti-Communist political power to balance the Buddhist pro-Neutralist power.

During the last week of August, in the great theater of Vietnamese politics, the Buddhists took off their masks so to speak, and the Vietnamese people saw them for a blurred instant as pro-Communist.

During the coup attempt, another set of actors came onto the stage and for a brief minute also took off its masks. Gen. Khanh became the great compromiser. The commander in chief of the Army became the great betrayer—his neutrality forced him to betray both Gen. Khanh and his officers who made the coup. He has lost considerable prestige in the Army, at a time he needs it most—and when the Army needs him. The chief of staff, Gen. Thieu, the architect of the coup attempt, is considered to have betrayed not only his officers, but the political party to which he had been loyal.

The Americans had never been trusted much here—but now they will probably never be trusted again. The little sergeants and privates, the paratroopers and pilots, who enacted the play on the streets of Saigon—thought they were actually making a coup. They are now disillusioned.

When all the masks were removed for a brief instant last Sunday, the real faces were revealed. And few of the faces were very pretty.

Only the Viet Cong Communists and the Buddhists applauded the performance.