

Viet a Year Later

The Shadow That Rules Most of a Nation

IN THE YEAR that has nearly passed since the overthrow of the regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem, the South Vietnamese government has wavered on a precipice of instability. But a second government, known more to world Communists than to the free world, functions in much of the nation. This second of a seven-part series assesses the Red Viet Cong guerrillas' political program.

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SAIGON.

South Viet Nam, the battlefield of opposing Communist and anti-Communist armies, is also a country of two governments—the American-supported Saigon regime and the Communist-dominated “shadow” government of the National Front for the Liberation of South Viet Nam.

Throughout much of the country, it is the Red-run “shadow” government that functions in reality while the Saigon regime provides the chiaroscuro.

The Viet Cong guerrilla fighters in the field are only the military arm of the revolutionary movement in which politics and military affairs are inseparably welded together.

A lawyers in his 50s named Nguyen Huu Tho is the Communist chief. The 40-plus provinces of South Viet Nam have in reality two province chiefs, one representing the Saigon government; one representing the National Front (NFLSV). In the 250-odd districts of South Viet Nam, there's a district chief representing the government and a district commissar representing the Front.

This “shadow” government operates its own schools, has its own strategic hamlets (called combat hamlets complete with anti-helicopter defense), erects bridges, collects taxes, operates hospitals and first-aid wards, broadcasts regularly from a clandestine radio station and has organized the Liberation Press Agency.

AIDS ABROAD

Although no government has fully recognized the NFLSV, the organization maintains representatives in Havana, Prague and Algiers, and a press agency in East Berlin. Several months ago it established a permanent delegation in Jakarta, and more recently another in Peking. It also maintains a “people's representative” on the Afro-Asian Solidarity Council in Cairo. It seems to be concentrating on non-Asian countries, mainly in Africa.

Officials in Saigon recently reassessed the political capabilities of the Front. For the first time they expressed fear that the Front may attempt to send regular diplomatic envoys to Communist countries, establishing full diplomatic relations. Such a move would be the most significant development for the Communists internally within the last three years. It would pave the way for a diplomatic offensive as a prelude to a political peace settlement favorable to them.

The hard core of the NFLSV is the People's Revolutionary party—the Communist party in South Viet Nam—which is directly related to the Lao Dong (Communist) party in North Viet Nam.

The Front is organized into three broad groupings: Associations (Peasants, Youth, Women and Workers are most important); Political Parties (Democratic party and Socialist Party, both non-Communist, and the Communists); and the Youth League (comparable to Komsomol in Communist nations). These organizations are created by and infiltrated by the Communist PRP, presumably to give the appearance of spontaneous people's uprising instead of organized political subversion, to recruit and train non-Communists for party membership and to gain the cooperation of non-Communist but anti-government intellectuals, workers and students. The Communists dominate the Front in terms of leadership, though not necessarily in numbers.

PARTY RULES

The Front itself and the Communist party operate in tightly knit paralleling organizations at five levels: The Central Committee; the inter-zones (about eight); the provinces (more than 30), districts (more than 250); the villages (about 2,500). Below the village level are hamlets, which are not considered committees or administrative units.

The Central Committee of the Front is generally presumed to have its headquarters in the jungled province of Tay Ninh on the Cambodian border 60 miles northwest of Saigon.

The Communist party organization parallels, as well as dominates, the Liberation Front. But below the village committees are hamlet cells, which vary in number from three to five members.

The cells report to the village committees, the village to districts and on up the command ladder. Low-echelon advice on local conditions goes up while orders and policy decisions are down.

In this way, the Communist party's policies appear to be based on much closer rice-roots contacts than are the decisions of the Saigon government.

As for the Viet Cong guerrillas, they studiously follow Mao Tse-tung's systematization of guerrilla war—including the Red Chinese leader's emphasis on combining war with politics and thus winning the support, or acquiescence, of the civilian population. This emphasis is reflected in the division of Communist party administration into 10 sections—one of them military, the rest dealing with politics and subversion.

It is also reflected in the fact that throughout the Communist organization political commissars outrank soldiers of equivalent military rank. A sergeant who is also a high-ranking commissar can give orders to high regimental commander.

The hard core of the Communist army and political apparatus consists of more than 13,000 South Vietnamese who remained in the North when the country was divided in 1954, were trained in warfare and subversion and infiltrated into the South starting in 1961.

SEEMS HOME GROWN

But the hard core, through persuasion and coercion, has gained enough recruits so that the South Vietnamese revolt sometimes appears homegrown. Take, for example, the “strategic hamlet” of Cana, in the relatively secure province of Ninh Thuan, 130 miles northeast of Saigon.

In government listings, it is one of the most secure of

the fortified hamlets. But in fact, refugees' stories show, it is completely dominated by the Reds in a tactic known here as “termite war.”

The Communist guerrillas come into the village to play soccer games against the government's hamlet militia, some of whom are their blood relatives. The Communist political agents in the village agitate and organize

kangaroo courts against those persons with “incorrect attitudes.” They once beheaded a hamlet chief.

When the guerrillas need weapons and ammunition, they arrange a “Hollywood battle” with the government militia—there's lots of noise, the weapons are handed over, but no one gets killed. When the Communists need more guerrilla recruits, they hold a “mock kidnapping” of the hamlet's youth.

In areas where the government is in firmer control, the Communists still make themselves felt through so-called “people-divider” teams of secret agents. Their activities range from barring sale of vegetables to American soldiers' houseboys in the Ca Mau Peninsula to encouraging bloody rioting between Buddhists and Roman Catholics.

Secret Communist cells are known to exist in almost every high school in Saigon. One Communist-front organization was uncovered in a high school in the old imperial capital of Hue, 400 miles north of Saigon. Some university students and professors in Saigon—and even more in Hue—are known to have pro-Communist sympathies. But seldom report them.

Communist cells are known to exist in the Saigon labor unions; newspaper offices—and individual agents reportedly work within the government itself. Communist agents are considered to play a part in the actions and policies of the Buddhist movement.

FORMER MEMBERS

Some of the strongest leaders of the Buddhist movement were formerly members of the Communist party—they admit this—but the question is whether they have been converted to anti-Communism, as they profess. Roman Catholic laymen and priests say that Communists have even infiltrated the tightly-knit organization of the Catholic Church.

The biggest question is how many agents have already infiltrated the regular army, police and secret police; pro-Communist agents and sympathizers have been picked up in the regional forces.

With these kind of tactics, the Communists have little difficulty getting participants for mass demonstrations—which they represent as popular uprisings against the government.

Another article will appear tomorrow.