

Gen. Khanh Re-Emerges as the Strong Man

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SAIGON.

A year ago yesterday, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, in his first swift coup d'etat, entered the Premier's office with three stars, a modest black goatee and a reputation for being an expert poker player.

Today he sports four stars, a Genghis Khan goatee plus moustache and the air of a winner of an important round of political gambling.

A year ago he was the front man for other generals and political rivals; today he is the behind-the-scenes strongman, officially Commander-in-Chief of the Vietnamese armed forces and chairman of the Armed Forces Council, which has openly become a super-government making the key decisions in the anti-Communist sphere of influence in Viet Nam.

One of the surest bets in Viet Nam is that this spring the 37-year-old General will be elected President with de Gaulle-like powers—barring an assassination.

He is, in short, the man of the moment—but the mo-

ment in a lost year and a losing war. Gen. Khanh is the strongman governing a shrinking anti-Communist sphere.

FULL CIRCLE

"We have now come full circle back to January last year," one Vietnamese politician explained.

"This year has been a repetition of history—but also the evolution of history. There are many changes in the year. When Khanh first came to power, he was eager to be a government official. Now he still longs for these things, but he vigorously protests he does not want them.

"He's using as a political axiom to acquire the Presidency that old French proverb: 'If you follow the woman, she will flee; if you retreat, she will follow you.'

"Khanh has learned his political ABC's well; he's much more mature," the politician continued. "He the Americans; now he's built the image of being mildly anti-American and a more independent Vietnamese leader."

came to power clinging to

During the past year Gen. Khanh failed to lead his nation in the anti-Communist war—a task the free world assigned to him—but he survived, which is all that Viet Nam expected of him. His policy of survival, considering the initial odds, was in itself a political achievement, according to Vietnamese observers.

When he entered the Premier's office, American policy was to build a strongman regime. Visits by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk aided this objective.

This policy in 1964 was only partially successful. During the coming months, the policy will be continued in an almost last-ditch attempt to maintain a politically stable government with a high degree of centralized power resting in the hands of Gen. Khanh. The prospect is that this plan will be implemented at all costs.

Last January, as the front man for a coalition of Right-wing generals and political parties, Gen. Khanh felt that

his immediate enemies were to his rear—not the Viet Cong Communist guerrillas in the front line.

Now, a year later, despite being toppled from office by rioting students, he has in one way or another exiled all personal political and military rivals and eliminated all anti-Communist organizations that would compete for his position.

But as Gen. Khanh's power increased so did that of his enemies and potential opponents. Gen. Khanh has established for himself and the armed forces more and more control, but the Viet Cong have tightened their political-military grip on the peasant masses and the Buddhists have increased their political influence on the urban masses.

"The armed forces—and Khanh—have more and more control over less and less territory and fewer and fewer people," one Vietnamese observer noted.

Gen. Khan's current state of decision is in marked contrast to his low point five months ago when, in a moment of immobility, he was

unable to counter the riots organized by the Buddhists and political parties. They toppled him from the Presidency but enabled him to retain a fiber of power.

Since then, he has inched his way back into a position of power—but simultaneously the Buddhist political movement has grown more decisive and powerful.

TASK

The coup d'etat last week overthrowing Premier Tran Van Huong bestowed upon Gen. Khanh the "task of solving the present crisis," in which he will again be confronted with the Buddhist leaders who had previously engineered his downfall. But to solve the crisis does not mean to end it—it will mean only to soften it.

Gen. Khanh, already adopting the role of the great compromiser, will through concession and counter-concession, pressure and counter-pressure, seek to contain the power and scope of the political Buddhist monks.

Hence the unity of the nation will rest, not on unity among various religious or

regional groupings, but upon a pofusion of checks and balances in which factions will be pitched against each other rather than against Gen. Khanh or the government.

While containing, though not solving, the immediate problem of political instability within the anti-Communist sphere, Gen. Khanh is faced simultaneously with the even greater threat from his true enemy—the Viet Cong Communists, who throughout the past year have mushroomed in military might in the countryside and increased their political influence nationwide.

Saigonese concede that Gen. Khanh is the most capable leader on the anti-Communist side to wage this two-front war. He is considered the best politician among the generals and the strongest general by the politicians.

The biggest gamble of all for Gen. Khanh is whether the problems are too enormous and immediate to solve or to smother. The odds are that if Gen. Khanh loses this gamble, the Viet Cong Communist will cash in on the chips.