

Buddhist Chief Quang: Is He a Communist?

As the government of Premier Nguyen Cao Ky grows weaker, with the rural portions of South Vietnam half-conquered by the Viet Cong, and northern urban centers in rebellion, one of the emerging strongmen is a crafty Buddhist monk named Thich Tri Quang.

Thich (the venerable) Tri Quang—the name means spiritual enlightenment—is one—but only one—of the priests heading a powerful Buddhist religious-political machine that is now attempting to topple the Ky government.

The 43-year-old monk is often called the "Makarios of Vietnam"; but Vietnamese sources consider him to be the "éminence grise" of any future government.

"Tri Quang will never sit in the premier's office," one Vietnamese explained. "But, if he survives, he'll be the kingmaker—and the king behind the king."

In Saigon, the most controversial question is: What is Mr. Quang's relationship with the Viet Cong? This is his biography.

By Beverly Deepe

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SAIGON, April 11.—For 64 days in 1963, a frail, elfish-looking Buddhist monk hibernated in the third-floor air-conditioned conference room of the American Embassy.

During the 64 days of his political asylum, U.S. Marine guards lent him a radio, books, writing paper—and made certain he received three vegetarian meals a day prepared by an expert Chinese chef.

American Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, then on his first tour here, granted political asylum to the enigmatic monk as the Saigon regime raided Buddhist pagodas. In return, Mr. Quang wrote a political thesis for the American embassy, which baffled and confused the political officers even more as to his political views.

When Mr. Lodge returned to Vietnam on his second tour here in June of last year, Mr. Quang reportedly said: "Of course, I appreciate that Mr. Lodge granted me asylum in the American embassy."

But, he added arrogantly, "I don't feel it's necessary to meet Mr. Lodge any more."

'Occidental Quality'

Mr. Quang's tart statement about the second appointment of Mr. Lodge swept Saigon. But one Western diplomat explained: "The Americans presume that gratitude is more than an Occidental quality. It doesn't exist in the Orient—and they should not expect it."

On Nov. 4, 1963, when Mr. Quang left the embassy, the major—if not the sole—American influence he carried away was a yen for air-conditioning. He installed a unit in his small room at the Buddhist Institute "so he could work better," his associates explained.

Now, 2 1/2 years later, Mr. Quang is openly labeled a Communist.

Even as far back as 1963—when Mr. Quang directed the celebrated Buddhist crisis in which seven Buddhist bonzes burned themselves alive—a handful of Western officials in Saigon said he was a Communist. But they were hooted down in the cries that later sparked the Nov. 1, 1963, overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his family.

Then, in 1964, after Mr. Quang directed his "demi-coup" of student demonstrators toppling Gen. Nguyen Khanh from the presidency, an increasing number of Saigonese, including fervent Buddhists, accused the graceful monk of being a Communist.

Others say that while he himself may not be a Communist, his

politics and tactics are openly aiding the Communists in subverting the country.

A declaration, known to be written by Mr. Quang, makes the important but subtle point that Buddhism in South Vietnam is not only against Communism but also against those that "exploit" the file against Communism; these "exploiters" are clearly labeled as Catholic and American. The statement also implies that the first enemy is Catholics and Americans. The second enemy is the Communists.

"It's stupid to ask if Mr. Quang is a Communist or not," one irate Vietnamese government official once exploded. "You can look and look for a Communist party card on him, but you will never, never find it."

Father Was Priest

Mr. Quang was born of middle-class landowners, in the province of Ha Tinh, one of the poorest provinces in the country and near the birthplace of such revolutionaries as North Vietnam President Ho Chi Minh and Gen. Vo Nguyen Glap, head of the North Vietnam Army.

He was named Pham Van Bong, but was later to adopt a number of aliases. His father became a Buddhist priest late in life; his mother died a natural death shortly after the Communist takeover in 1945.

His aunt, after the loss of all family properties during the Communist revolution, reportedly set fire to the family house and leaped into the flames to commit suicide. Almost 20 years later, Saigonese recalled this incident and noted a striking parallel to Mr. Quang's tactics of having Buddhist bonzes burn themselves alive to protest against the Diem regime.

One of Mr. Quang's elder brothers is reportedly an important political officer in Communist North Vietnam.

When he was 13, Mr. Quang studied for the Buddhist priesthood in the Ta Dam pagoda, still his headquarters, in the old imperial capital of Hue, 400 miles north of Saigon, the stronghold of Buddhism in South Vietnam.

Ten years later, in August, 1945, after the Viet Minh guerrillas seized power from the Japanese, Mr. Quang went to Hanoi, where, he later reportedly told a friend, "I studied Marxism." At the outbreak of the French Indochina war, he fled to a Communist stronghold where he made two close friends, Hoang Trong Ba and Nguyen Dang, both of whom would be important later.

Shooting Incident

In 1963, at the time of the May 8 incident in Hue, which touched off the Buddhist crisis, Mr. Ba was the closest adviser to Mr. Diem's brother in Hue. Mr. Dang, as chief of province, reportedly ordered government troops to fire on Buddhist demonstrators in front of the radio station on Buddha's birthday. The resulting crisis later toppled Mr. Diem.

During the Indochina war, Mr. Quang was arrested by French authorities and held for several months, but upon release he again returned to Ta Dam pagoda in Hue as a full-fledged Buddhist priest.

Reliable sources say that in early 1951 he again traveled toward Hanoi, staying a few months in the village of Dien Ho, known as a meeting place for Communist Viet Minh cadres on their way to infiltrate into the French-held areas of the country. Reportedly, he stayed in the village several months and received some training and instruction from the Viet Minh guerrillas before proceeding to Hanoi.

In early 1952, Mr. Quang was reportedly invited to be a delegate to an international Buddhist conference; but the French "Sureté" refused him an exit permit on the ground he was believed to be a Communist.

Later the Hanoi Central Committee of the Buddhist Association sent Thich Tri Do to open the first class of high studies of Buddhism at the pagoda in Hue. Today Thich Tri Do is one of the most important Buddhist priests in Hanoi.

There were six students in Mr. Do's first class. One was Mr. Quang. Another was Thich Minh, now Mr. Quang's "executive officer" and chief lieutenant for student activities.