

New Saigon Regime Is Believed Moribund at Birth

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SAIGON.

South Viet Nam now has a provisional constitution. It has a transitional chief of state. It has a transitional Premier.

This set-up, which became effective Tuesday, has but a whisper of a chance of lasting barely more than 49 days, in the view of many Saigonese.

Some Saigonese, who possess both a sense of humor and superstition, explain that the newly-announced provisional constitution has seven chapters and 49 articles, numbers which are symbolic in a Buddhist funeral. They explain that when a Buddhist believer dies, his soul wanders around helplessly for 49 days, when it becomes re-incarnated.

"And that is the new constitution," one Vietnamese business man explained. "It's soul will wander around lost for 49 days and then it will re-appear in another form. It already has the smell of death around it."

But at least at its inception, the new government, headed by Phan Khac Suu, has the public support of the Americans; the Armed Forces; the Buddhists, considered to be penetrated at some levels by the Communists, and the staunchly anti-Communist Catholics. This support is considered to last only if the new government makes concessions to each power group.

Some observers believe that the new government, the ministries in Saigon which supervise the provincial administration, may be a middle battleground between the two most powerful groups on the nationalist side—the military power of the armed forces versus the mass political power of the Buddhist movement, which has developed in the past year into a significant, if not dominant, force. Instead of having the armed forces vying with the civilian government, as originally thought, it would appear that the armed forces may be pitched against the political forces of the Buddhists.

During the next two months, the new government must decide the new ministers, the new budget, the new province chiefs, who are scheduled to be civilians instead of the army officers now present. But, for example, will the new budget be drawn up and implemented according to the needs of the armed forces in their fight against Communist guerrillas and secret agents, or will it be slanted to the social needs of the civilian population in line with the "social justice" pleas of the Buddhists?

THE FIRST ROUND

The current political maneuverings to decide on the new government announced this week are regarded as the first round in a long series of more to come. The next crucial session is scheduled to be the selection—perhaps by popular election—of a "National Congress," which would act as the House of Representatives while the 17-man High National Council would act as the Senate. The "National Congress" would be responsible for approving the newly-appointed government and for drafting the permanent constitution to be finished some time next year.

Leaders of the Buddhist movement, which is considered to have pro-neutralist and pro-Communist leanings, reportedly believe they have more mass support at lower levels than any other political party or organized group—and hence they can wind up with a majority of the votes in the "National Congress." They already claim to have a majority of the votes on the High National Council—two of their members are considered to have pro-Communist leanings.

Current plans for the selection of the "National Congress" are that the members would be elected in government-controlled or influenced areas, but areas under Viet Cong Communist control would not be accorded election privileges. This arrangement, which may undergo many

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changes before the final decision is made, would be in marked contrast to the legislative elections held throughout the country only a year ago.

In short, barring unforeseen developments, such as an escalation of the war in Southeast Asia, South Viet Nam faces a glimmer of a prospect of having a de facto coalition legislature of both anti-Communists and pro-Communists based on an official recognition of a de facto partition of the country into government areas and Communist-held areas. A year ago, this prospect would have been considered unthinkable.

Observers here believe that the strongman of the new regime will not be a member of the civilian government, but will be Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, former Premier, who is scheduled to be commander-in-chief of the armed forces, the highest-ranking officer in the army and a member of the important four-man High Security Council.

STRONGER THAN EVER

Some observers believe that, barring assassination, Gen. Khanh, as chief of the armed forces, has more actual power than at any time since he entered the limelight during the Jan. 30 coup. He may be one of the few men in history who sustained two "half-coups" and yet came out more powerful than ever. For Gen. Khanh entered the Premier's office Jan. 30 as a front-man for the powerful Dai Viet political party and his long-time friend, Lt. Gen. Tran Thien Khiem, who supplied the military power and plans for the coup. In addition, Gen. Khanh was forced to ask Maj. Gen. Duong Van Minh, leader of the first junta, to remain as chief of state, which had the effect of draining popular support from Gen. Khanh.

Hence, Gen. Khanh did not have total support of the army or of his political party—and both turned against him during the late August onslaught of pro-Buddhist student demonstrations and religious rioting. But after his 270 days in the Premier's office; the Dai Viet party appears to have been crushed; Gen. Khanh's military rival, Gen. Kheim, is now en route to Washington to be South Viet Nam's Ambassador, and after the final round of voting for the new chief of state this week, Gen. Minh has at least temporarily lost out to Phan Khac Suu—an elderly states man-type whom Gen. Khanh willingly supports.

The important element for support for Gen. Khanh was, of course, the U. S.

During a secret military conference of 40 armed forces officers at the seaside headquarters of Cap Ct. Jacques last week end, Gen. Khanh was given a sizable vote of confidence to be named commander-in-chief of the armed forces. According to reliable sources, he received 31 of the 40 votes cast; his nearest rival, with four votes, was Maj. Gen. Tran Van Dom, former Defense Minister, whom Gen. Khanh toppled in his coup, Gen. Khanh received the votes although his young generals were openly irked that he had re-instated the four generals he had toppled Jan. 30 on charges—which he could never prove—that they were pro-neutralist.

The basic problem facing the new Phan Khac Suu government is the same one that faced the Khanh government and previous regimes—communism. But the problem has been greatly exaggerated during the last year. It has become obvious to observers here that its complexity stems not only from the growing number of military guerrillas in the countryside, but also from serious political subversion within the nationalist ranks.

While it is often easy to criticize the nationalists for divisions and in-fighting, for student demonstrations and religious conflicts, observers here believe that Communist subversion is a direct contributor to this condition.

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 university professors in Saigon—and even more so in Hue—are known to have pro-Communist sympathies. Anti-Communist professors and students know who they are, but seldom report them, for the difficulty is to get proof of their activities.

Communist cells are known to exist in the Saigon labor unions and 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.

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. Since 1962 the People's Revolutionary party (Communist) in South Viet Nam has maintained a specialized administrative section of "Action Among Enemy Troops."

Another section specializes in "Action Among the Civilian Population." Through the use of "people-divider" teams (also called agitation and propaganda teams), the Communists exploit grievances which already exist.

The concluding article in this series will appear Sunday.