

A Dilemma: Subversion by Political Priests

This is the first of two articles on South Viet Nam's attempts to cope with Buddhist priests.

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South Viet Nam's anti-Communist generals and American policymakers, in the midst of their present sharp but relatively unimportant feuding, are quickly approaching one of the most important decisions of the war—how to deal with subversive elements in the country.

The current problem of subversion is mirrored best in the Buddhist movement, led by political priests who—if not pro-neutralist or pro-Communist agents—appear determined to oppose, weaken and attack anti-Communist governments which the United States supports.

The overthrow last month of the High National Council by the Vietnamese armed forces has been of some importance to the Buddhist political-priests: it assists them in their attempts to topple the Huong government, which remains their goal.

The question facing the anti-Communist generals and the American policymakers is simply whether or not to crush the Buddhist political priests, who wield enough mass support to topple governments or make them inoperative in prosecuting the war against the Communist guerrillas.

The appropriate time to remove these Buddhist political priests from the scene—either violently, through assassinations and arrests, or simply by sending them on missions abroad—was before the military stepped into the political scene. That time is past. But the point of no return, when the action could be taken, has not yet been reached. A decision to remove the Buddhists would have worldwide repercussions—but a decision not to do so will have long-range implications.

The decision not to crush the Buddhist political priests, who apparently will oppose future anti-Communist governments, implies the adoption of a policy of containment of subversive elements rather than a policy of eliminating these elements.

The decision taken by the American policymakers and the anti-Communist generals has the effect of creating the mechanisms for negotiating in future years with the Communist bloc, with the least loss of prestige for the free world.

A consistent alternative to American policymakers in Viet Nam in the coming years—or maybe decades—would always be the possibility of negotiating with the Communist bloc and forming a Laotian-style neutralist coalition government. One of the important elements in this coalition government would be the Buddhist movement,

tion government—with the least loss of face for the free world.

A decision to crush the subversive Buddhist elements in the movement would have a chain reaction of repercussions—in Viet Nam, in America and throughout the world. It would give the world an unpleasant picture of the anti-Communist forces to have them crack down on those subversives who wear religious robes. It would mean that American policymakers would have to admit a mistake in their policy last year, which led to the withdrawal of support of Ngo Dinh when he raided Buddhist pagodas.

It may be that the mass power of the Buddhists would arise in the streets, to be pitched against the armed power of the Vietnamese military—with disastrously bloody consequences.

But the decision not to crush the Buddhist subversive elements then leaves open only three other possible alternatives.

One is to give the Buddhists control of the future governments. This is considered an extreme measure virtually paving the way for a neutralist government in Viet Nam. The second is, if possible, to suppress them enough to drive them underground—but this makes them more dangerous and less accessible to government intelligence. The third is to attempt to contain them—and this is considered the probable course of the future.

The effect of this will be the acceptance of the existence of non-Communist or even pro-Communist elements in every sphere of Vietnamese life, but the power of these elements would be contained by attempting to diminish their power or balance them off against staunchly anti-Communist forces.

Hence, in the balance of power the pro-neutralist Buddhist sphere of influence would be diminished by the creation of a rival anti-Communist Buddhist movement which would be allied with the anti-Communist Catholic masses.

The potential power of Buddhist schoolboys to demonstrate against the government would be balanced off against the potential power of Catholic students to demonstrate. Buddhist religious committees in the armed forces would be balanced off against Catholic committees. The power of Catholic generals to arrest Buddhist laymen in the provinces would be counter-balanced by the power of Buddhist generals in other provinces to do the same against Catholic laymen.

This neat balance of power implies a policy of containing the subversive elements rather than defeating them. The effect of this miniature coalition arrangement in the day-to-day dealings in every sphere of life in Vietnam is the embryo of a de facto coalition government at the national level at a well-chosen time in the coming years.

TOMORROW: How strong are the Buddhists now?

which by subverting and undermining anti-Communist governments is of direct benefit to the Communist bloc; it is likely to be manipulated and exploited by them.

The decision to eliminate these subversive leaders from the Buddhist movement can hence be taken only at this time by an already unpopular regime. The decision not to eliminate these elements has the effect of creating a mechanism for the implementation of a neutralist, coal-