

Time And The Man

NY Herald Tribune 19 APR 1964

In Viet Nam

By Beverly Deepe
A Special Correspondent

SAIGON.

Vietnamese political observers say a coup against Premier Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh is only a question of time.

These observers, who accurately predicted the two previous coups, feel a third coup is inevitable—either through assassination or military might.

In fact, these observers predict a fourth coup: "The next coup will solve nothing. Anyone can seize power, but no one has enough support to stay in."

Gen. Khanh himself is concerned enough to sleep in a different house each night, to admit to foreign correspondents that his wife is worried, and to house her and their four children 350 miles from Saigon.

On the other hand, the American community almost unanimously expresses the belief that the spunky general will outride this initial period of tottering. "He is very energetic, very cunning, in fact—he's very everything," they say.

"He's dirty-tricked enough people enough not to let others do it to him," one American explained.

Yet this American viewpoint is partly based on what the Americans want to believe. Since the visit of Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara a month ago, the U. S. has clearly pinned all hopes of prosecuting the war on the 36-year-old Gen. Khanh. American officials admit that if he is toppled, the anti-Communist war effort will hopelessly deteriorate.

The American intelligence apparatus in South Viet Nam is helping Gen. Khanh build an anti-coup machine.

Saigon politics is so incredible that one Western diplomat lamented, "We may be able to save the Vietnamese from the Viet Cong, but can we save them from themselves?" The political scene is one of habitual intrigue, plots and subplots, betrayal and counter-betrayal. Unity shown in press conferences is a mirage. Politics is not infrequently manipulated by the predictions of horoscopes and fortune tellers.

Besides Khanh, Inc., there are three significant power groups operating in Saigon:

☐The Dai Viet (Greater Viet Nam) party is the anti-Communist, largely Roman Catholic group deemed most likely to toss a coup. Among its ranks are key troop-controlling generals, including the chief of the Joint General Staff, who not only commands all troops in the country but also has personal responsibility for the crack 7th Division directly south of Saigon. The division commander, also a Dai Viet, controls enough troops, if properly

mobilized and moved, to topple units loyal to Gen. Khanh in Saigon.

Yet the party itself reflects the main divisive force in the country: regionalism. The French splintered Viet Nam into three regions—the northern; the central, which was the residence for the old imperial court, and the southern, including the Mekong Delta, primary target of the Viet Cong guerrillas. The southern populace, because of a hotter climate, richer lands and easier life, is regarded by people of the other regions as the poor white trash of Viet Nam.

The northern branch of the party, made up of refugees who are highly educated and energetic, is significantly represented in the government by Foreign Minister Phan Huy Quat who attended last week's SEATO conference. He is a 43-year-old former Harvard professor who would be an important candidate should Gen. Khanh relinquish his position as Premier.

The central wing has the most rice-roots support, but the least power in Saigon.

The southern wing is divided within itself. One faction is headed by Nguyen Ton Hoan, Gen. Khanh's vice-premier in charge of pacification and the most significant civilian leading the war effort. Dr. Hoan, a Catholic who returned from nine years of exile in Paris, has been one of Gen. Khanh's supporters, but is also rumored as a possible next premier. The second section of the southern wing is anti-Khanh.

☐The second power faction is a group of

generals from the central region, headed by Gen. Do Mau, a lean, stoop-shouldered man in late 40s who has been a principal engineer in the two previous coups. He wears Carmine De Sapio-type sunglasses and is proud of his peasant birth. He is one of the most successful intriguers in Viet Nam. A kingmaker rather than a king and unofficial overseer of the Vietnamese intelligence network, he will decide in one way or another whether Gen. Khanh stays in power. Some of the generals are considered to be working for the U. S. Central Intelligence Agency, but their loyalties may shift.

☐The third group is made up of young officers around Gen. Duong Van Minh, the gold-toothed nominal Chief of State who commands more genuine popularity and prestige from the population of lower-ranking officers than anyone else. Vietnam observers predict that if the Dai Viet succeeds the next coup, and then flounders, the fourth would boost Gen Minh to power again.

But in the final analysis, superstition may call Gen. Khanh's opponents in the war of Saigon "Thang Rau De"—the one with the beak chin—which means a short life. Others call him "Thang Mat Loi"—the one with the bulging eyes, symbol of trustworthiness.

However, a bearded elder in An Binh (Village of Peace), who daily witnesses the anti-Communist war, said Gen. Khanh has "Buddha ears—big ears like Buddha, so he can do something outstanding—and his eyes are round, which is a good omen."