

Is Asia 'Domino Theory' Passe?

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President Johnson's key decision at the Honolulu Conference—to press for elections in South Viet Nam as quickly as possible—could well become the turning point of Viet Nam's post-colonial history.

Oversimplified, the gist of that decision was this: The Johnson administration would be prepared—or possibly forced—to accept a political settlement which, though not quite capitulation, is far short of victory.

It meant the President is more interested in attempting to end the war than in attempting to win it.

On this analysis, military sources of high reliability in Saigon believe the Administration now considers the "domino theory" passe. And they fear that by failing to hold a hard line in Viet Nam, the United States will prove that the Communists have found a successful, low-cost method for seizing power in other small nations.

IMPLICATION

Prime implication of Mr. Johnson's decision for elections is that America's position is shifting from one of support for a powerful group of staunchly anti-Communist generals to one which is willing to back a government run by civilians who, at best, would be largely neutralist.

It would be reasonable to expect that such a civil ruling group eventually would merge in some degree of political cooperation with the National Liberation Front, the political base of the Viet Cong army, the sources believe.

These military figures say that the election decision means that the United States tacitly has agreed to let the Communists negotiate their way into a real say in South Viet Nam under the legitimacy of recognized domestic political institutions.

This, they argue, is a jump from the pre-Honolulu American position that the Communists would have a say only "around the table"—in a multi-nation conference in the general pattern of the 1954 Geneva Conference.

Reliable South Vietnamese sources report that at Honolulu Mr. Johnson proposed to Premier Nguyen Cao Ky that elections for a national legislative assembly be held this June—shortly after a new constitution had been drafted and run through a referendum.

Gen. Ky agreed on the principle but not on the schedule, the sources said. He wanted two years to broaden the area and population in South Viet Nam that could be insulated against Communist domination—and thus Communist victories at the polls.

The two men compromised, roughly splitting the difference and setting an election

day target for sometime early in 1967.

At Honolulu, it was emphasized that Mr. Johnson was throwing his prestige behind Gen. Ky—the man, the administration, and the 10-man junta.

But in fact, the President backed only the man. His decision to press for elections undermined the foundation of the junta, the only solid base of power on which Gen. Ky can rely.

As Gen. Ky and his delegation to Honolulu, accompanying Vice-President Humphrey, returned to Saigon in mid-February, the word quickly spread: President Johnson wanted elections as soon as possible.

Murmuring in the background was growing. South Vietnamese resentment of the handling of things at Honolulu. The Hanoi radio-propaganda line said "Ky went to Honolulu to report to his American boss." The short notice for the conference, and its announcement in Washington rather than both capitals, made the Hanoi line credible in Saigon.

Soon after Honolulu, religious and political opposition forces began secret consultations. For action, they needed only the proper pretext.

That pretext turned up on March 10, 27 days after the Honolulu conference ended, from its membership Lt. Gen. when the junta voted to oust Nguyen Chanh Thi, the dynamic former paratroop commander who had led an abortive coup d'etat against the Diem regime on Nov. 11, 1960.

Two days after Gen. Thi's ouster, the Buddhist leadership began, at a press conference, a campaign to undermine the junta by rushing election of a civilian legis-

lative body—citing President Johnson as support.

"In fact, the Buddhists pulled a lulu on the President," one Vietnamese political source said. "They took his words at Honolulu and pinned him to them."

These same Buddhists led the anti-government drive against the late President Ngo Dinh Diem, and in November, 1963, with unofficial American backing, toppled his regime. Since then, their strength—and suspicions about their movement—have grown.

In Saigon yesterday, some 2,000 Buddhist students marched through the streets, executing in effigy members of the junta and demanding installation of a civilian regime. One leader, speaking to the rally, said: "We do not accept an anti-Communist struggle if the sovereignty of Viet Nam is lost."

During the demonstrations, leaflets bearing the name of the National Liberation Front and urging support of the Buddhist agitation were circulated.

PENETRATION

The Buddhist movement—especially its central Viet Nam elements—is considered deeply penetrated by Communist agents. Some anti-Communist Buddhists estimate that from 50 to 70 per cent of these organizations are infiltrated. And it is that central element which is strongest.

The behind-the-scenes leader of the central Vietnamese wing is Thich Tri Quang—an anemic Buddhist monk whose title Thich means Venerable.

He was given political asylum in the American embassy here during the Diem coup crisis, in the first tour of duty

of Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge.

Acclaimed as one of the most astute politicians in the country, Tri Quang is widely considered to be a Communist, although there is substantial dispute about what kind, with many putting him in the Tito mold.

In his early years, he studied under Thich Tri Do, now head of the North Vietnamese Buddhist Association. He thus can argue in the best Marxist terminology as well as Buddhist theological language.

While badly splintered, the South Vietnamese Buddhist movement can be unified quickly with invocation of the common enemy: the Roman Catholics. In this lies the significance of recent Buddhist demands for the purge of Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu, chairman of the junta and Chief of State, a Catholic convert.

Part of the Buddhist cant against the Catholics is that they are tainted with "an imported foreign religion"—which is widely identified the colonial French regime. They also are accused of complicity in Diem-era persecution of Buddhists. But the Catholics are the most firmly anti-Communist of the South Vietnamese.

Thus, by attacking the Catholics—and the Americans—the Buddhist movement is abetting the ambitions of the National Liberation Front. For all their demonstrations against the Right, the Buddhists have yet to raise a placard against the Communists.

It is increasingly difficult to determine whether the Buddhists represent a legitimate protest movement or are a Communist front organization.