

Reds in Yellow Robes?

By Beverly Deepe
A Special Correspondent

SAIGON.

Yes, Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu was probably right about the Buddhists.

But no one will ever know for sure. When the lovely spit-fire sister-in-law of former President Ngo Dinh Diem labeled the militant Buddhist monks as "Reds in yellow robes," she caused an internal and international furor.

And her attacks indirectly aided the monks—who were later to spark the overthrow of the Diem regime 16 months ago—by making her the symbol they needed to attack. Her vitriolic remarks also sabotaged the attempts at compromise between the Buddhist militants and the President.

Still one of the most powerful—and puzzling—factors in Vietnamese politics, the Buddhists this weekend are holding a mass conference in Saigon to determine their future policy and assess their grass-roots strength.

In behind-the-scenes talks, leading priests and laymen are expected to decide their stand on key issues of peace negotiations with the Communists and American intervention in South Viet Nam. Two prominent priests—Quang Lien and Phap Tri—have already called for the withdrawal first of Communist guerrillas and finally of American troops from the country. But their views have been repudiated by other Buddhist leaders.

High-ranking Buddhists will also discuss their attitude toward the government of Premier Phan Huy Quat. The regime has avoided answering recent Buddhist demands for the release of students and priests jailed by the previous government, for destruction of police files on Buddhists and for permission for civil servants to join Buddhist associations. The religious leaders also will study comprehensive reports on the strength and sentiment of their followers at the village level.

Are these men—or some of them—"Reds in yellow robes" or not? Observers here believe no one will ever really know. They would never carry Communist party cards.

Vietnamese politics are so obscure that a ranking Buddhist leader would never at this time be caught in a meeting with Communist cadres.

"And even if they are Com-

Maybe Mme. Nhu Was Right

munist agents," one ex-Communist explained, "they will selflessly sacrifice themselves and fade into oblivion once the Communists have taken over."

PLAY GAME

But anti-Communist elements in Viet Nam believe the Buddhist militants are "playing the game of the Communists" because of their past actions, their present policy and their "anarchistic" tendencies which have shriveled the effectiveness of every government since the fall of Mr. Diem.

And without an effective competing government, the Communist political subversion and organization has mushroomed in size and strength. From this viewpoint, the Buddhist militants have obviously aided the Viet Cong Communists.

In the past three weeks, the Buddhists have reached an important turning point. They have apparently entered a new phase. These are the new developments since the February bombings of North Viet Nam:

«Except for the Viet Cong Communists, the militant Buddhist organization is the most important power grouping in Viet Nam.

Their potential power now appears to overshadow not only the country's government but the armed forces, which have become since the Feb. 19 coup attempt more divided and less politically oriented. Neither the armed forces nor the government appears prepared to resist the growing strength of the Buddhists militants.

«During the Diem regime, the militant Buddhists were a clandestine, semi-underground political dissident movement, which used religious persecution as their battle cry. After the fall of Diem, they became a political movement of protest, which successfully neutralized or spearheaded the toppling of each of the successive governments. Now, as of mid-February, they have become part of the government of Premier Phan Huy Quat—and have acquired a sizable chunk of that government through pro-Buddhist representation in it.

«At least momentarily, the

Buddhists appear to have ended their period of protests against the government—since they have become part of the government. However, they now have developed a new issue—peace. Their current appeals for peace may in the future become protests for peace, which would again serve to increase the Buddhist power over the masses.

«During the 16 months following the fall of Diem, the Buddhists had been a third government—operating between Saigon and the political backbone of the Viet Cong guerrillas, the National Liberation Front.

In an important position paper, a leading monk said the militant Buddhist movement was against both the Communists and the anti-Communists, whom he described as the Catholics and the Americans. It was clear from their policy that their immediate enemy was the Saigon government and not the Viet Cong.

MAIN LINK

Now, that they have become a substantial part of the Saigon government, however, it would appear timely for them to declare war on the Communists.

But they have not. Instead they launched their peace offensive, which places them in the position of rising as an arbiter above other parties—Saigon and the Viet Cong.

It is reliably predicted that in the coming months the Buddhists will become the central link between Saigon and the Viet Cong, paving the way for the coalition government which the Viet Cong have always wanted as part of their neutralization of the country.

«The Buddhist concept of peace is ambiguous. One Buddhist priest gives one concept to Western and local correspondents only to have it denied, contradicted or clarified by another priest.

More significant than the official statements given to the press are the sermons which the Buddhist priests are giving to the masses, their source of power. No one really knows what they say in their sermons.

The foreign embassies, the Prime Minister's office, the secret police, and

the foreign press send a number of reporters to the Buddhist sermons. Each comes back with a different version and a different emphasis. "Each hears what he wants to hear," one journalist explained.

This Buddhist peace offensive is the talk of Saigon. The Buddhists are considered pro-neutralists, their version of peace closer to the Viet Cong's than to the free world's. Saigonese see no cohesive anti-Communist element capable of stopping their offensive.

Since mid-February a trend has developed to draw a sharper line between the anti-Communist military war and the political subversive war.

Since the February dismissal of Lt. Gen. Nguyen Khanh as Commander in Chief, the armed forces, which had been a super-government, has less political power. The Armed Forces Council has taken a tough anti-Communist stand against the guerrillas but has virtually ignored the subversive element.

The government of Premier Quat has taken a tough stand against both the Viet Cong guerrillas and the Communist subversives. But the government has chosen to ignore the Buddhists as part of the subversive movement.

During his first press conference, the Premier interrupted one translation, took it upon himself to become the spokesman for the Buddhist position, carefully explaining that the Buddhists were for a "nationalistic" sort of peace. This "soft" stand on the Buddhist issue is one of the most important developments since the departure of Gen. Khanh.

STRUGGLE

All last year, mostly in behind-scenes intrigue, the two contenders for power were Gen. Khanh and the Buddhist politico-priest, Thich (Rev.) Tri Quang.

In August, Gen. Khanh, then Premier and President and Tri Quang collided; the priest won momentarily as pro-Buddhist demonstrations toppled Gen. Khanh from the Presidency.

But Gen. Khanh, with brilliant maneuvering, quickly re-established himself as the strongman—until Feb. 20 when pro-Buddhist generals allied themselves with pro-Catholic generals to vote for his dismissal.

Gen. Khanh then left Viet Nam. Now the secret police and