

# Inner War: Battle for the Masses

*Chief among the subversive elements in South Viet Nam is the movement led by Buddhist priests. These militants oppose any government in Saigon that is anti-Communist and U. S.-backed. This second of two articles examines the movement's organization and assesses its strength.*

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## SAIGON.

The Communist-oriented militant Buddhist movement is in a warming-up phase of its campaign to overturn the government of Premier Tran Van Huong. Its potential power over the masses has yet to be tested.

A sudden flipflop in Buddhist tactics in December produced the illusion that the militant Buddhists had lost the masses—the thing they wanted most.

Some political analysts in Saigon have been saying that the Buddhist movement has not been able to capture the popular support it mustered to spark the overthrow of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in November, 1963. Certainly the street demonstration yesterday—which came after a day of anti-government speeches by Buddhist monks—was weak as anti-government protests go.

A more realistic appraisal of the situation is that the Buddhist leaders just haven't yet issued an all-out appeal for public backing.

According to this line of reasoning, the Buddhist movement spearheaded the initial stages of the anti-Diem coup through hunger strikes, demonstrations and spectacular suicide burnings of Buddhist monks and one Buddhist nun. The second stage was led by the students, politicians, intellectuals. In the final stage, the armed forces violently overthrew and assassinated Diem.

In the year following, however, the opposition movements—against Gen. Nguyen Khanh in August and against Tran Van Huong until mid-December—were spearheaded by the students, schoolboys and politicians. The Buddhists were a supporting element in the rear.

On Dec. 12, however, the Buddhists reverted to the tactics used successfully under President Diem. Launching a series of hunger strikes in protest against the Huong government, the militant Buddhist leaders again decided to spearhead the oppositionist attack. During the past year, the Buddhists have officially and loudly denied any direct, immediate link with the oppositionist movement—though they had been consistently implicated. Now, as in the struggle against President Diem, the Buddhist clergy have actively entered into the political arena.

In their fight for alleged religious freedom against the Diem regime, the Buddhists paved the way for a sweeping political dissident movement in the urban centers which included non-Buddhist elements, intellectuals, students, political party oppositionists—and even some Catholics.

It is argued that the Buddhist militants now have lost this wide range of support. But from the Buddhist point of view, many of these elements have been willingly sacrificed to attract other factions.

The Buddhist movement appears to have lost the support of their strongly anti-Communist elements—such as the refugee Buddhist laity who have escaped from North

Viet Nam and the Buddhist laity of the economically conservative class. While the Buddhist militants regularly announce anti-Communist communiques for foreign consumption they transmit pro-neutralist communiques for internal Vietnamese consumption.

While losing some of the conservative anti-Communist rank-and-file, militant Buddhist leaders have continued to strengthen both their vertical organizations, reaching from the national level to the villages and their horizontal organization, touching persons in all walks of life.

The Buddhist wives of even the strongest pro-Huong generals continually nag their husbands to be more moderate with the Buddhists, and to oppose the Premier. The Buddhists claim to have at least 2,000 Armed Forces officers who are prepared to side with them instead of with the government in a showdown.

Similarly, Buddhist chaplains now serving with each branch of the Armed Forces and three-man Buddhist committees—de facto political cells—within each company of the Army has drawn the military more and more into the Buddhists' emotional dragnet.

A recent Buddhist communique to Vietnamese readers boasted of having 70 per cent of the police force on their side in the event of a showdown with the government.

The Buddhists have strengthened considerably their vertical organization running from the Saigon headquarters to the regional, provincial and village offices. In 1963, for example, the Buddhist movement operated in its central Viet Nam stronghold area much like a secret society. Today, however, it is conceded that the militant Buddhist wing is strong enough in terms of organization and mass support "to do anything it wishes up there."

The vertical organization of the Buddhist movement appears to copy that of the Saigon government; the horizontal organization appears to copy that of the Communist-led National Front for the Liberation of South Viet Nam.

Much as the Viet Cong political organization has created Youth Leagues and Peasant Associations, the Buddhist movement, with headquarters in Saigon, has established a Buddhist Boy Scouts, Girls Scouts, associations for trade union workers, students—and even disabled war veterans.

In addition, it has formed alliances with the political parties, many of whom are attempting to hitch onto the Buddhist support, and with other religious groups—including factions of the Catholics, now badly disunited. International, at Buddhist conferences. Viet Nam's Buddhist movement has open relations with those neutralist and Communist countries; the anti-Communist Saigon government refuses to recognize.

To capture the support of the masses, the militant Buddhists are paralleling the Viet Cong's fight for the same masses. But while Saigon in recent days has seen some results of the Buddhists' campaign against the anti-Communist government of Huong—there has not been a rumor, a whisper, a shred of evidence that the Buddhists are at odds with the Viet Cong in their struggle for mass support.