

Viet Nam a Year Later

The Buddhists, a Crucial Third Force

By Beverly Deepe
Of The Herald Tribune Staff

SAIGON.

In the past year and a half, the Buddhist religion in South Viet Nam has developed into a political third force which can and does break or shake the governments in Saigon.

Buddhism entered the political arena under the leadership of a frail, magnetic monk whose ideological leanings have, at least in the past, been Marxist. And the tactics of the Buddhist political drive are based on opposition to the Saigon regime.

As a result, this small republic—at 65,000 square miles smaller than Idaho—is divided into a state within a state governed by a government within a government within a government. There is Saigon and its governing apparatus, the Communist Viet Cong and their apparatus, the Buddhists and theirs.

Just as the Communists maintain a shadow government which parallels that of the Saigon government, reaching from the central level to the village, so the Buddhist movement is hastily, and efficiently, organizing a government to correspond to that of both the Viet Cong government and the Saigon government.

BUDDHIST 'FAMILIES'

Like both rival governments, the Buddhist organization runs from the provincial level down to Buddhist associations in the villages and the "All-Buddhist Families" in the hamlets. Individual Buddhist "families" are being organized in each hamlet in the same manner that the government establishes "family and inter-family" cells to check Viet Cong movements and penetration.

The records are now issuing details of how to organize records and registration, not unlike a military staff bureau.

There are many things clear about the Buddhist movement, and there are many unanswered questions.

These things are clear:

First, it is a political movement of significant dimensions—and it is growing.

Second, as a political movement, it can survive only by being a movement of protest, and its immediate enemy is the Saigon government—any Saigon government. The Buddhists will oppose the government consistently, though not enough to make it collapse until they are ready to become the Saigon government themselves.

Third, by opposing and thus weakening the Saigon government, the Buddhists are obviously aiding the Communists. The only question is whether or not the Buddhists are directed by the Communists.

The Buddhists seek to isolate the Saigon government from the foundations of its support. One tactic is to drive a wedge between the Americans and the Saigon regime—and this is the significance of the Buddhists' anti-American propaganda. Like the Communists, the Buddhists are clearly anti-American and will remain so.

Another tactic is to drive a wedge between the Saigon government and the Roman Catholics, as the Buddhists are doing under the disguise of ridding the country of the old Catholic-oriented Can Lao party set up by the late President Ngo Dinh Diem.

Like the Communists, the Buddhist leaders are anti-Catholic—and will remain so.

PENETRATING THE ARMY

The Buddhists also seek to divide the Saigon government—which is the significance of placing three-man Buddhist committees in army companies and battalions. Thus, the Buddhists penetrate the national army on one side while Viet Cong secret agents perform subversion on the other.

The Buddhist strategy requires that they refuse to become a significant part of the government until they are ready to become the government and have the political personalities to take it over. That time is not this year. A representative of their movement declined to be considered for the position of Chief of State, and the Buddhists also did not seek the Premiership in this week's government reorganization.

The time when the Buddhists decided to try to swallow up the government may be when a permanent constitution and permanent government replace the current transitional ones in November, 1965.

Both the Communists and the government have been seeking the support of the Buddhists. The Reds supported Buddhist demonstrations against the government last summer. And the government, under Gen. Nguyen Khanh who desperately needed Buddhist support, made major concessions to the Buddhists before the latest reorganization.

POLITICAL BLOCKS

In effect, by attempting to ensure that he would maintain dominant political influence in Saigon, Gen. Khanh gave up significant authority. The Buddhists were permitted to block appointments of military corps commanders and even Cabinet ministers.

The Buddhists successfully demanded the destruction of police records on Buddhist leaders. In provincial capitals, pro-Buddhist mobs have "arrested" Can Lao party members and turned them over to the provincial government for prosecution. The military careers of young district and province chiefs are no longer broken by their military superiors but by Buddhist bonzes (monks).

The Buddhists now can be expected to move into the educational field to widen their influence over students and into the social welfare and cultural fields to increase their influence over labor unions and other organizations.

So far, little conflict has developed between the Buddhists and the third Vietnamese "state"—the Communists. Buddhist monks at the village level, the core of Communist strength, coexist peacefully with Viet Cong cadres. And at higher levels, a similar neutrality exists between Buddhist and Red.

A RED FRONT?

This state of affairs raises a fundamental question: Is the Buddhist movement actually just a front movement for the Communists?

The man who knows the answer is an anemic-looking monk named Thich (Rev.) Tri Quang.

For 64 days last year, while the soon-to-be ousted Diem regime was cracking down on the Buddhists, Thich Tri Quang took refuge in the air-conditioned, third-floor conference room of the United States Embassy, where Marine guards served him vegetarian meals prepared by an expert Chinese chef.

The major—if not the sole—American influence he took from the Embassy was a yen for air-conditioning. He installed a unit in his small room at his cream-colored, curve-roofed Buddhist Institute "So I can work better."

Now, a year later, Thich Tri Quang is openly labeled a Communist. Police sources report that he has met members of the National Liberation Front for South Viet Nam, the political arm of the Viet Cong guerrillas.

Even last year—as the politico-priest directed the celebrated Buddhist crisis in which seven Buddhist clergy burned themselves alive—a handful of Western officials in Saigon said he was a Communist. But they were hooted down in the chorus of criticism against President Ngo Dinh Diem and his family.

Now—since Thich Tri Quang directed his "demi-coup" by student demonstrators which forced Gen. Khanh from the office of President last August—an increasing number of Saigonese, including fervent Buddhist believers, accuse the graceful monk of being a Communist cadre. Others say that while he himself may not be a Communist, his policies and tactics are openly aiding the Communists.

Thich Tri Quang has yet to answer publicly these charges. He refused an interview request by this correspondent. He has yet to make a clear-cut public anti-Communist statement.

With one and a half coups behind him, he is a dominant political figure in Viet Nam and may almost singly decide the future of the country.

The little monk radiates a magnetic spell over those who have met and talked with him.

"I've met Ho Chi Minh," one former Communist ex-

Henry Cabot Lodge, former United States Ambassador to South Viet Nam, told a gathering at New York's Midtown International Center for foreign students last night that "although we are not yet victorious, much has been accomplished" in the Viet Nam war. He cited the "impressive ability" of outgoing Premier Nguyen Khanh and "vivid recognition that the war is above all a political matter, in which the adherence of the people to the government is the crucial factor." That adherence is being challenged, however, by two competing political systems—the Communist network and the murky-motivated Buddhist movement which Herald Tribune correspondent Beverly Deepe analyzes below in the fourth report of a series.

plained. "I've met Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap" (head of the North Vietnamese Army who defeated the French). "But I think Tri Quang is tougher than both."

Another described Thich Tri Quang this way:

"His face is pale—without blood—you might say cold-blooded. He has very intense eyes which pierced through me as I talked to him. Even before I had spoken a sentence, I felt he already knew what I would say."

"He's very logical and talks better than a Communist cadre. He mixes his language with Communist and Buddhist terminology."

One official who met him explained, "Tri Quang was born a prince—he was born to have authority—he was born to give orders."

Actually, Tri Quang was born in the early 1920s of peasant stock in the province of Ha Tinh, one of the poorest provinces in the country, near the birthplace of such revolutionaries as Ho Chi Minh and Gen. Giap. He was named Pham Van Bong, but was later to adopt a number of aliases. His father became a Buddhist priest late in life. His mother died a natural death in 1945.

One of Tri Quang's elder brothers is an important personality in Communist North Viet Nam, reportedly a political cadre of a regiment or division. And a younger brother, Pham Van Thang, now in his early 30s, is reported to have come to South Viet Nam early this year as political cadre of a Viet Cong guerrilla battalion. Three months ago, he was reported to have come to Saigon to meet Tri Quang.

VISIT TO HANOI

Tri Quang reportedly studied for the Buddhist priesthood in Tu Dam pagoda, still his headquarters, in the old imperial capital of Hue, 400 miles north of Saigon. In August, 1945, after the Viet Minh guerrillas temporarily seized power there, he went to Hanoi, where he later told a friend, "I studied Marxism." At the outbreak of the Indochina war against the French, he reportedly fled to a Communist stronghold where he made two close friends, Hoang Trong Ba and Nguyen Dang.

On May 8, 1963, Hoang Trong Ba was the closest adviser to President Diem's brother in Hue, and Nguyen Dang, as chief of province, reportedly ordered government troops to fire on Buddhist demonstrators on Buddha's birthday. The May 8 incident touched off the crisis that toppled President Diem a year ago.

The 20-year-old friendship with Tri Quang, Ba and Dang and the presence of all three in Hue at the start of the Buddhist affair has led some to believe that there was a plot between them to provoke the incident.

Another article in this series will appear tomorrow.