

# Year Later: Viet Buddhists at It Again

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## SAIGON.

South Viet Nam's Buddhists, who helped bring about the overthrow last November of President Ngo Dinh Diem, are on the political warpath again to the embarrassment of Premier Nguyen Khanh's strong-man regime.

The spectacular self-burnings of monks, hunger strikes and mass demonstrations which shook the Diem regime last year have not recurred. But the Buddhist movement, in diligently building up its religious and political strength, is subtly undermining the strength of Gen. Khanh's American-supported government in the process.

The big question now—one of the biggest for the future of embattled South Viet Nam—is whether the Buddhist leadership will take an anti-Communist, neutralist or even pro-Communist stand as Buddhist strength continues to develop.

The Buddhists, who were granted full religious equality by Gen. Khanh May 15, have been celebrating Buddha's birthday—which occurs tomorrow—with a series of

*IT WAS JUST a year ago, on Buddha's birthday, that a militant minority in South Viet Nam began a dramatic protest against the rule of Ngo Dinh Diem. The figure of a burning monk became a rallying symbol throughout the world, triggering the fall of Diem last November. Tomorrow brings Buddha's birthday again, and with it reports of a new Buddhist militancy—this time against the U. S.-backed Khanh leadership, which is struggling desperately against the Communist Viet Cong. Special Correspondent Beverly Deepe tells of the new development and what it can mean to the grim Southeast crisis.*

festivities and prayer meetings. Multi-colored Buddhist flags, banned under the Roman Catholic President Ngo Dinh Diem, and brightly lit lanterns decorate the windows of shops and homes throughout Saigon.

Although Gen. Khanh has gone out of his way to placate the Buddhists, current Buddhist policy frequently reflects an anti-government line and a reluctance on the part of many Buddhist leaders to take an open anti-Communist stand.

"The Buddhists have adopted a wait-and-see attitude," one high American source said. "They are not completely behind this government."

According to highly informed sources, the principal objective of the Buddhists at this time is to expand and solidify their strength. Buddhism is the principal religion of South Viet Nam, with an estimated 30 to 40 per cent of its 14 million people practicing Buddhism.

The Buddhist leadership now is building and staffing primary and secondary Buddhist schools and higher-level institutes, planning and collecting funds for larger pagodas and establishing grass-roots support both in the city and the countryside.

According to a Buddhist spokesman, Thich Duc Nghiep, the Buddhists are sending mobile teams into the Vietnamese villages propagating the faith and telling the population to be "good citizens." He explained, however, it is difficult for the teams, totaling 50 men, to take a direct anti-Communist line for fear Communist guerrillas would kill them.

Meanwhile, Buddhist pub-

lications are taking an anti-government stand. Reliable observers believe the Buddhists can rekindle the anti-Diem emotions of the population by accusing the Khanh government—or the "remnants of Diem regime in the Khanh government"—of being as oppressive against them as President Diem was.

At the center of the Buddhist establishment is the Venerable Thich Tri Quang, who plotted the strategic moves of last year's crisis. He is a small, frail bonze (monk) with hypnotic hands and intense eyes, whose title is secretary (and hence strongman) of the Institute of Buddhist Clergy. His source of power, however, is his immense control of Buddhism in the northern two-thirds of Viet Nam, with his headquarters in the holy city of Hue, a center of Buddhist learning and of the most militant Buddhist followers in the country. It was in Hue that the Buddhist revolt began last May—a protest against barring the Flying of Flags on Buddha's birthday, in which nine persons were killed.

The Diem regime accused him of being a Communist, and this charge is still circulated by some factions. However, during the final stages

of the clash with the Diem regime, he was granted political asylum in the American Embassy.

American officials here note that "he has never made any strong anti-Communist statement." Even some fellow Buddhist priests and lay leaders consider him "headstrong and fanatical."