

~~SECRET/EXDIS~~

70-b

Saturday, August 26, 1967

FOR THE PRESIDENT FROM BUNKER (Saigon 4139).

I saw Prime Minister Ky the morning of August 26, shortly before his full-dress press conference at which apparently the Cabinet was going to be present. He said the other generals were in field uniform, Ky with his customary pink scarf.

I asked Ky how the electoral campaign was going and what he thought the prospects for their ticket were. Ky said it was going well and that he had also had a very good day yesterday in Long Xuyen. Ky claimed he had been urging Thieu to go on joint appearances with the civilian candidates and was sorry that Thieu had not gone to Rach Gia but he had cancelled out at the last minute on the ground he was not feeling well. He said he would have gone in his place if he had known in time. Ky added that he would probably accompany the other candidates to Da Nang and Hue, in fact fly them up there in his DC-6, as he had threatened some days ago to do.

I asked Ky about the recent charges by Ha Thuc Ky that members of the Dai Viet party were being arrested and harassed in Hue. Ky said there was a continuing problem there, and the Revolutionary Dai Viets, the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang and the extremist Buddhists were carrying on a constant factional struggle among themselves. He said this particular struggle was not necessarily related to the elections and he thought the Buddhists were trying to stir up the pot in whatever way they could. He went on to say that there had apparently been a meeting here of the An Quang Buddhists who had tried to get the civilian candidates to agree on a single competing ticket against Thieu and Ky, but they had not succeeded. Ky doubted very much that the civilian candidates would get together in this way. With respect to the various charges against the Government, Ky said there had been no substantiation of them as yet and the general election campaign committee had not received any formal complaints. He characterized Dzu's charges against the Government as "wild" and then described the background to his comment to the press that he would build him a cage.

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In terms of the election outcome, Ky said he thought their ticket could get about 40-45 percent of the vote and he considered this about right, since a higher percentage might be misinterpreted. He also said that the Vietnamese people were very independent in their voting choice and it was difficult to predict the outcome with any accuracy. He added that support for the civilian candidates were coming up and he did not think they would withdraw from the race. Ky said that in his recent trip to the Delta, he found that many of the people there did not even know the candidates by name, adding that he was only known to them as Mr. Moustache.

I asked Ky about the reports that dismissals of Army of the Republic of Vietnam officers for corruption or inefficiency would take place in the immediate future. Ky said this action would not be started before the elections but that thereafter, General Cao Van Vien would call in the officers one by one to discuss their cases. He said they had evidence of corruption on some 20 to 30 general officers. Vien would point out to the individual officers that the Government and the armed forces inspectorate have evidence on hand regarding such corruption and would then permit them to resign rather than be formally charged. Ky added that when it was merely a question of inefficiency, the Government of Vietnam would try to help out the officers in finding new civilian jobs. Some six or seven generals have already been retired and are drawing pay, but since they are blocking promotion for more promising officers, they would be asked to resign as well. Ky said that all of this had been discussed and a final decision taken at a meeting of the top generals two days ago.

Comment: Ky's estimate of the probable percentage that he and Thieu will get indicates that he has lowered his sights from the 50-60 percent that he projected a week or so ago. His comments and general attitude belie the many rumors around town that he would sabotage their ticket or throw his weight to a civilian ticket such as Suu-dan. Ky was in good form and cheerful spirits and apparently eager to take on the press in full array after our talk.