

The New Revolutionary Government Of South Vietnam

With the rapid collapse of the Thieu regime and the departure of U.S. government personnel from South Vietnam, that country came under the administration of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG).^{*} In the past, the Western press has largely ignored the PRG, most often referring to it as Viet Cong (a pejorative term meaning Vietnamese Communist). As a result, the PRG still remains a mystery to most Americans. In order to make sense out of the events of the last few months and to begin to draw some lessons from the tragic experience of the Indochina War, we need to understand the PRG, its goals, its policies for governing South Vietnam, and what daily life is like for the people who now live under the new administration.

The Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam was formed in June 1969 as a coalition of several independent forces including the rural-based Marxist-oriented National Liberation Front which emerged out of communist-led peasant resistance to the repressive Diem regime in 1960, and the Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces, a group of urban middle-class and professional Vietnamese who were moved to oppose the American destruction of their country during the late 1960's. By 1969, in order to unite the resistance movement and to formalize the administration of the areas it controlled, the two organizations merged and became the Provisional Revolutionary Government. The PRG has since established diplomatic relations as the legitimate official government of South Vietnam with over 40 countries. Many other countries, including India, France, Sweden, and Norway, have recognized the new government in recent weeks.

^{*}On May 1, 1975, in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), the PRG announced that henceforth it would be known as the Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam.

The new government consists of a wide diversity of leaders, both civil and military, who are indigenous South Vietnamese. Many of them have been doctors, lawyers, government workers in Saigon, or peasants in the countryside, who are now bound together by a common opposition to foreign domination of Vietnam. The PRG described the Saigon regime as "Ban Nuoc," a term which translates literally as "country-selling." In their eyes, the Thieu government, which depended on the U.S. for most of its funds and all of the military and police equipment which kept it in power, has sold out their homeland to foreigners.

Many members of the PRG are committed to building a socialist Vietnam, but they understand that the first task is to achieve national independence which means an end to war and establishment of a self-sufficient economy. The PRG is setting up its new government in a spirit of reconciliation, the only way it can hope to build the base of support that will enable it to carry out its social revolution. To achieve these goals, the PRG has issued a ten-point program outlining its policies of normalization, reconciliation, and reconstruction to be carried out in the "newly liberated" areas. From Western press reports, Gai Phong (Liberation) Radio broadcasts, and eyewitness accounts of observers in Vietnam, including AFSC staff members who have remained in DaNang and Saigon, it is now possible to piece together a description of the process that is taking place.

1. Return to Normal

The disintegration of the Saigon army in Vietnam brought chaos and destruction to the people living there. The PRG has moved quickly to bring calm to the towns now in its control, and to restore the local economy. An example of this policy is DaNang, the second largest city in South Vietnam.

Just before the PRG entered DaNang, the refugee-swollen city was in an uproar of confusion and panic. AFSC observers there

reported that the Saigon administration had broken down completely, people locked themselves in their houses, Saigon troops were looting shops and wandering around firing their guns indiscriminately, and the local police had disappeared. According to the New York Times (3/31/75), the military commander of the region, Lt. Gen. Truong, sat on a boat off the coast, watching as his soldiers ran wild through DaNang, and waiting helplessly for the PRG to come in and restore order.

On the afternoon of March 29, the PRG moved into DaNang without resistance and began to bring the city back to normal. A local home-guard made up of students and citizens with red and blue armbands was established to maintain order and prevent looting. PRG cadres have been urged to be exemplary in observing private property and human dignity. Their code of conduct orders them to "respect and protect the lives and property of the people. Do not take even a needle and thread from the people and do not use the people's property without permission." Even refugees who left their houses fleeing in the earlier panic have returned to find their belongings untouched and protected by local home-guards. (Washington Post, 4/12/75)

Industrial establishments, handicraft shops, and transportation and communications systems have continued to operate. People are encouraged to carry on their occupations as before. Markets are busy and prices have stabilized. (Far Eastern Economic Review, 4/18/75) The DaNang harbor and airport have recently reopened, and trade and travel with the North and other PRG areas have resumed. The PRG's policies are designed to restore local commerce and production, so the people's livelihoods will not be further disrupted.

A South Vietnamese businessman who recently visited DaNang told journalists upon his return to Saigon (Washington Post, 4/17/75) that people are allowed to travel freely, even to Saigon, so long as they have proper identification. Many refugees have gradually returned by bus to their native villages. Schools have reopened, and so have the local hospitals. Restaurants and cafes are full, and thousands of citizens have gathered in the city stadium and other outdoor theaters to see film shows.

Many former Saigon officials have continued to work at their jobs in DaNang, and the civil service system has been retained in an effort



Neighborhood demonstration in support of new administration in Hue

Signs "warmly welcome the victory and liberation of Thua Thien (province) and the new revolutionary administration."

to keep the new government functioning as smoothly as possible. (Philadelphia Inquirer, 4/21/75) Buddhists and Catholics who chose to remain in DaNang have played an important role in helping to set up a new administrative coalition to govern the city. Foreign journalists recently in DaNang were surprised to see flags of the Buddhist-led National Reconciliation Force flying alongside PRG flags. (LeMonde, 4/20/75) The chairman of the National Reconciliation Force in DaNang, Phan Xuan Huy, a very popular Third Force leader and former member of the lower house of the Saigon Assembly, is reportedly now acting mayor of the city.

2. Reconciliation

The participation of Buddhists and other Third Force (neutralist) Vietnamese in local governments has been encouraged by the PRG throughout its territories. (New York Times, 4/3/75) In Hue, for example, the new city administration is a broad-based coalition. Several well-known Third Force groups work hand-in-hand with the PRG in what is called the Hue Provisional Revolutionary Concord Committee. These include the Women's Committee to Defend the Right to Live, whose president Mrs. Ngo Ba Thanh is a prominent neutralist leader in Saigon, and the Buddhist-led National Reconciliation Force. Over the administration's headquarters in Hue a large banner reads, "Let's Do Away with Enmity and Return to the People and Live in National Concord." (Internews, 4/11/75)

This slogan highlights the PRG's emphasis on bringing together all Vietnamese in a spirit of national unity and reconciliation. The PRG's ten-point program strictly prohibits "all actions likely to sow discord, hatred, or mistrust among the people," and

explicitly states "All people, rich or poor, and irrespective of nationality, religion, or political tendency, should unite in mutual affection and assistance for the building of the liberated zone and for a new life in happiness." The PRG guarantees freedom of religious worship and full equality of sexes and ethnic minorities as well.

These policies are not just propaganda geared for public relations purposes, but are in fact pragmatic goals which the PRG sees as being in its own self-interest. The PRG's political analysts know that it will be easier to govern South Vietnam without resistance by offering assurances to Catholics, businessmen, Montagnards, and all the other diverse groups which make up its citizenry. While its primary sympathies lie with poor people and opponents of the old regime, the PRG intends to respect the rights of all who wish to participate in its "democratic revolution." (Far Eastern Economic Review, 4/18/75) They see this as carrying out the democratic freedoms guaranteed in the Paris Agreement but long denied by the Thieu regime.

This low-key policy of reconciliation appears to be succeeding, for many people who were initially wary of the new order have now begun to overcome their fears. One woman whose husband has been an enlisted man in the army says that she too can calmly accept the idea of living under the PRG: "I think for sure that I can live with the other side even though one brother was killed by the Communists. But all the hatred in my family is concentrated on Thieu because he is the man who really killed my brother and has forced my other brother to serve in the army. . . . My father's view is that if this regime is overthrown then we'll have peace and a chance to find my missing brother." (Washington Post, 4/13/75)

The policy of reconciliation is best exemplified by the treatment of former soldiers of the Saigon regime. Soldiers are repeatedly referred to by the PRG as "victims," not as evil criminals. In their eyes, Thieu's soldiers have been used as cannon fodder by the Americans and have suffered badly; they must be treated with sympathy and compassion. According to the New York Times (4/19/75), ordinary soldiers have been issued temporary identification papers and remain free to go where they wish. The PRG official policy toward "soldiers, officers, policemen, disabled soldiers, veterans, and civil servants" is that they may "receive assistance to earn

their living, go home, or, if they wish, to serve in the new regime according to their capabilities." (Philadelphia Inquirer, 4/4/75)

In its seven-point policy covering transfer of allegiance, the PRG specifies that "members of the Saigon army and administration now finding themselves in areas under the control of the revolutionary power" would "receive help in their search for a means of existence" - that is, land or jobs. (New York Times, 4/3/75) AFSC observers have confirmed reports of many former Saigon soldiers switching their loyalty and joining the new government.

Many Catholic priests have chosen to stay in PRG areas, including several who had helped lead the exodus of Catholics from North Vietnam in 1954. Another Saigon office worker expressed mixed feelings about the new administration, but he too resolved to stay: "It may be bad for me personally, but it will be good for the country. The country can easily be improved economically and in other ways when the other side takes over. . . . I'm not a Communist but I agree and accept many policies of the Communists. I'm happy at the victories of the other side, because when the Communists come here, we will easily solve the problems between Vietnamese and foreigners, between rich and poor, the problem of corruption, and so on. The country will improve." (Washington Post, 4/13/75)

According to Liberation Radio, the new government has gathered support from a broad range of citizens in public meetings everywhere. On April 6, more than 30,000 working people gathered in DaNang, including railway engineers, dock workers, taxi drivers, textile workers, farmers, teachers, and medical workers. Together they formed a city-wide federation of trade unions and adopted a resolution to "tighten their unity regardless of branches and trades, manual or brain works, to fully support and do their utmost to defend and build the revolutionary administration." Several days later, some 50,000 women met to establish a DaNang women's union and pledged to bring together women from many walks of life to strengthen national unity. In the rural provincial capital of Ban Mê Thuôt, more than 10,000 people "of various nationalities and religions, workers on rubber and coffee plantations, high school and primary school teachers and children poured out from various streets in the city, holding flags, posters, and pictures of Uncle Ho and headed toward the central stadium to attend a meeting." Their flags and posters carried a favorite saying of Ho Chi Minh which expresses

the feelings of many of the people of Vietnam: "Nothing is more Precious than Independence and Freedom."

3. Reconstruction

A third goal of the PRG is to rebuild the war-torn land. Its ten-point policy states that "Encouragement will be given to farmers to rehabilitate and develop agricultural production, and to fishing, salt-making and forestry enterprises. Encouragement will be given to the owners of industrial enterprises and orchards to continue to do business." Furthermore, "Talents in science and technology will be highly appreciated in the interest of national reconstruction."

For the moment, however, the new government faces a heavy burden of administering over 66,000 square miles of territory and feeding and caring for the immediate needs of its people, including eight million children.

Although the farming lands now under PRG control are very fertile, they previously have grown mainly cash crops such as rubber and tea, explained Pham Van Ba, head of the PRG's Paris delegation. The rice fields have been heavily bombed, and there is not yet enough food to feed all the people. (Far Eastern Economic Review, 4/18/75)

The PRG has urgently asked the Red Cross and United Nations for cloth, drugs, fortified foods, and other civilian supplies "to reduce the everyday difficulties of life caused by looting and forced evacuation." (Washington Post, 4/4/75) International and private relief agencies have responded with millions of dollars worth of food and emergency supplies.

The American Friends Service Committee is continuing its program of humanitarian relief to the people of Vietnam. Sweden has announced it would provide wheat, milk, and medicine, and New Zealand has already sent 25 tons of skim milk powder via UNICEF.

Ultimately, of course, the PRG must depend upon its own people. The process of local reconstruction has already begun in towns such

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as Ban Me Thuot. A young army lieutenant who stayed there for a time after the PRG came in, and later left for Saigon, told newsmen that on the day after the PRG arrived in Ban Mê Thuôt, civilian men were asked to help dispose of bodies of the dead, and women pitched in to help dig air-raid shelters against possible Saigon attacks. Students busily cleaned up the streets while PRG cadres began taking a census and distributing rice to local residents. (New York Times, 4/13/75)

The next day, the Saigon air force bombed Ban Mê Thuôt, killing or wounding 200 people and destroying two-thirds of the city. (Internews, 3/28/75) Yet the people of South Vietnam knew the fighting would soon end, and so they carried on the reconstruction. Despite the bombings, the dozen health stations in Ban Mê Thuôt have operated without interruption, headed by the doctor who formerly directed the Public Health Department under the Thieu regime. The local Catholic bishop, Nguyen Huy Mai, made his way back to the town in March against the tide of refugees headed for the coast, and he remains there now serving the needs of his congregation. AFSC's physician in Vietnam, Tom Hoskins, reports, "The new people's government of Ban Mê Thuôt is becoming active and effective. Life is returning to normal but under higher principles."

Hoskins, who has spent the last month living with the PRG in DaNang and working in a health clinic run by the local Buddhist pagoda, finds that the recent changes in Vietnam are mirrored most clearly in the demeanor of the Vietnamese themselves. "There is a great change in the expressions of hope and anticipation, and yes fear, for the future of Vietnam. The faces of the people are changing." Tom Hoskins discerned among the people of DaNang "a true commitment to building a Vietnam free of political oppression, free from hunger, ignorance, sickness — free from war."

