

# VIET-NAM BULLETIN

*Viet-Nam Info Series No. 8*

1967: YEAR OF DEMOCRACY



In one robust, creative year democracy digs deep in South Vietnam, deriving strength not from 'above', but from village structure up

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF VIETNAMESE DEMOCRACY

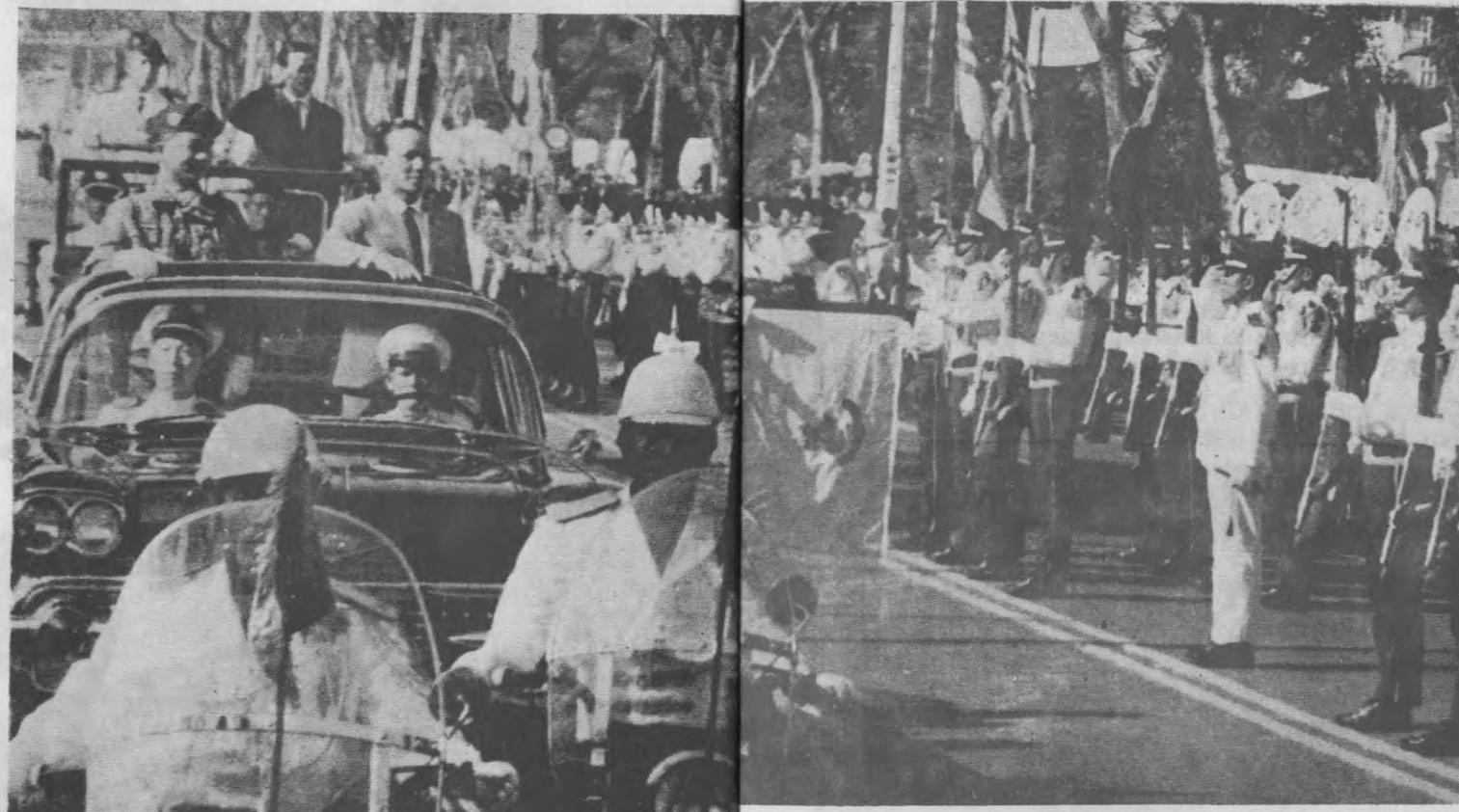
by TRAN NG HUNG

To those of us living in the political turmoil of Southeast Asia, the word «revolution» is commonplace; a term used to identify, first, the fight for independence from the colonial powers of Europe and, later, to label the agonizing process of re-structuring Asian nations along modern lines. However for many, revolution still means «tearing down», a destruction of the existing order. Red China today is experiencing a continuing internal turmoil, a negative tearing down, because it has not yet been able to grasp the positive sense of the word «revolution», which means the creation of something better, the re-structuring of society to meet the needs of the people. Communist China tries to export its revolution but the «Thoughts of Mao» offer no viable new plan for China's own future. In Vietnam, we are witnessing both a fight against this negative Communist revolution and a positive battle for a strong and modern Vietnamese society. The history of our revolution in Vietnam is a dramatic story of the courage of a people, my people, in fighting off tyranny, not once but twice within my lifetime, and continuing on to build a new democratic society. The fifteen-year struggle of Indo-China to free itself from France is a familiar story. In that battle thousands of Vietnamese served the national cause. In the North, leadership fell to Ho Chi Minh and his group of Communists. The very nature of the struggle demanded tight discipline and secretiveness which is so characteristically a part of the international communist structure. But few looked beyond the struggle to the future.

## Massive wave of rebellion

In the Geneva Accords of 1954, we achieved independence from foreign domination, but at the cost of subjecting half the Vietnamese people to the grim fate of a Communist government. In the South, a government was formed under President Ngo Dinh Diem. Nearly a million fled the North to seek liberty under Diem. We all hoped that his govern-

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President Nguyen Van Thieu and Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky on way to inauguration last November.

ment would not only be free from external domination but also from internal tyranny. From 1955 until 1963, the Diem regime developed as a fiercely independent but domestically tyrannical government. We had won the first phase of a revolution but not the second. On November 1, 1963, the people arose in a massive wave of rebellion and threw out Diem. He had failed to foster democracy and freedom. In the wake of this second revolution, the people of Vietnam were confused, dispirited and divided. Only military leaders, united by their hatred of the Communist Viet Cong and conscious of the immediate need for national self-preservation, were in control. Political life of the country was in chaos.

To build a democracy upon the ashes of the Diem government required time—and Vietnam did not have time. Realizing the weakened condition of the nation, the Viet Cong launched a major effort to take over the country. They were so confident of victory they openly infiltrated entire units of the North Vietnamese regular army to the south. Communist political cadres found a favourable reception among peasants in the countryside. Diem had all but destroyed the traditional autonomy of the Vietnamese village, the basic unit in which lies the strength of the nation. He had placed authority in the hands of corrupt officials from Saigon, destroyed political party organizations and turned minority groups

against their Vietnamese brethren in a crude attempt to force all people into a single national mould. He allowed cruelty, corruption and force by officials to replace honesty and service to the people. Viet Cong forces took control of large sections of the country. Only the army, although confused and demoralized by the uncertainty of governmental control in Saigon, stood against the Communists. The army's losses were staggering in 1964, and early 1965. It was then that other nations came to the aid of Vietnam—American, Australian and Korean troops arrived to bolster the military defenses and to keep the enemy at bay.

## Chaos not always bad

Politically, there was little hope of creating a strong democracy. The nation fought for survival. Political parties are not created overnight but must develop slowly through trial and error. After Diem there were no political parties to speak of, merely the secret remnants of old nationalist factions commanding the support of only a few followers. By the very nature of the fight against the enemy, basic freedom was in jeopardy. Police control became an everyday reality. Terrorism often led to counter-terrorism. There were those elements in the country who wanted peace at any price. Ambitious men were willing to sell the nation for the security of a Swiss bank account. Some factions, such as the militant Buddhists, ignored the Communist challenge and concentrated their ire on the government, adding to turmoil and chaos. Chaos is not always an evil thing. At times, it is a strong forge in which the will of a people may be hammered into an effective weapon. Slowly and with agonizing confusion, Vietnam began to build a new government. From a military junta of dedicated officers emerged the desire to mould a new democracy.

When elections were called in September of 1966 for delegates to a National Assembly to draft a Constitution for the Republic of Vietnam, the foreign press yawned and dismissed the idea as preposterous. News commentators noted the many divisions within the body politic of the nation, divisions of religion, of personality, of regional interests, of peasants versus city dwellers, of military against civilians. Most of all, many news analysts believed the

# Rights of the people imbedded in charter

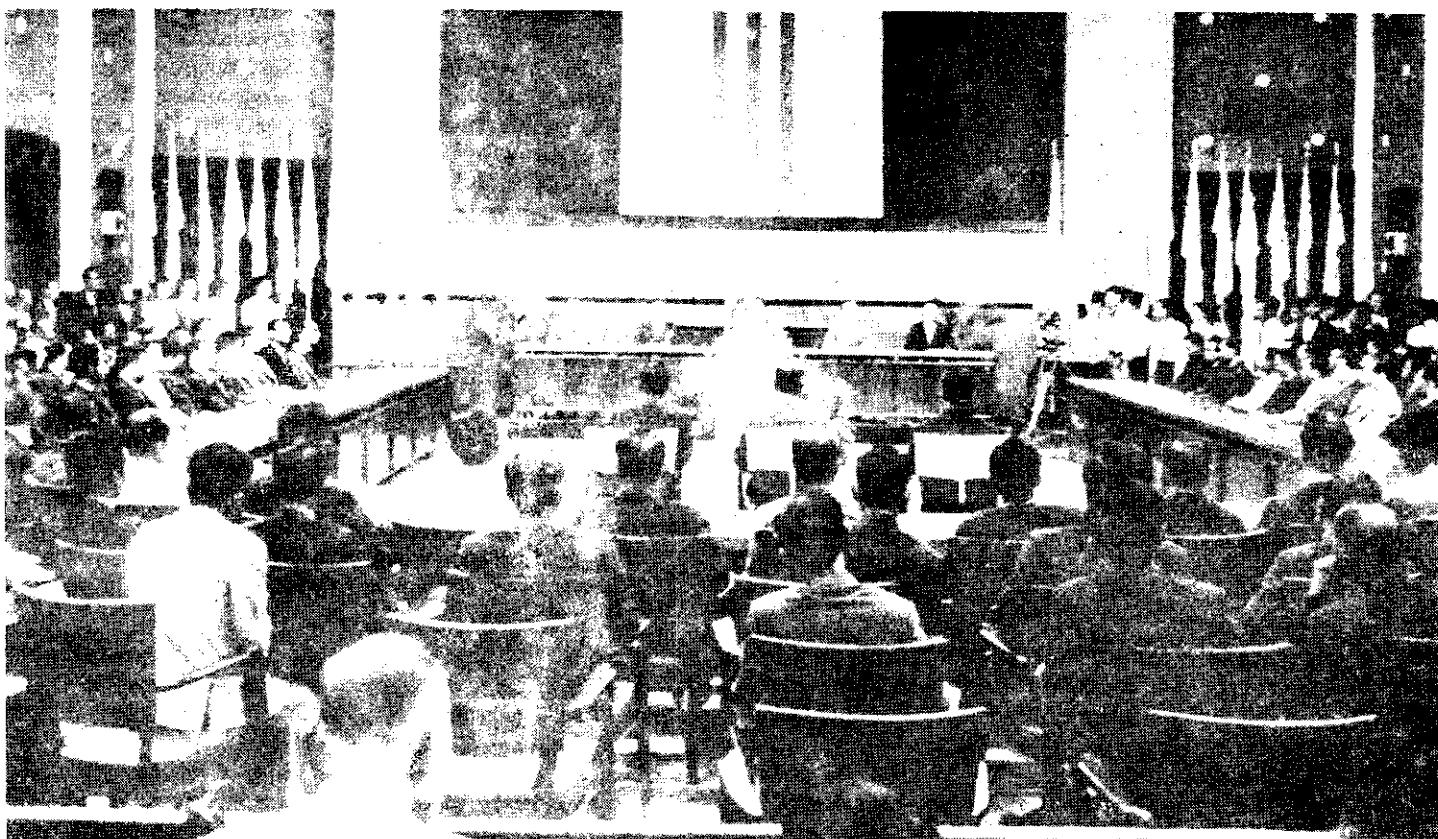
myth of the Viet Cong, the insinuation that these insurgents directed from Hanoi really represented the people, especially the rural peasantry. But the elections were successful and one of the most unique constitutional assemblies in Asia gathered a year ago to draft a new code for the Vietnamese nation. Still the foreign press was not convinced and dismissed the notion that these men could draft an effective constitution. Many newsmen also failed to appreciate that eighty per cent of the voters, of a nation at war, cast ballots to select the assembly delegates. They over-looked the political impotency of the Viet Cong to prevent this remarkable

feat from taking place. Typically, the enemy reacted to the political challenge of a constituent assembly with murder, kidnapping and terror. But there are times that terror cannot deter a determined people.

## Burst of energy

The Assembly vacillated in its work during the first month and caused many observers to wring their hands in despair. But that period, November and December of last year, was important. The deputies talked and argued and came to understand — in that strange process which is the heart of true democracy — what it was

that the voters wanted of them. Then in a burst of creative energy, perhaps not equalled since the formulation of the «Rights of Man» by the French Revolutionists of 1789, the Constitutional Assembly drafted a basic code of 117 articles upon which a strong, unified and free Vietnam can be developed. The Constitution, promulgated without major changes by the military junta, is not a mere duplication of ideas from other constitutions. It is a document based on the history of the Vietnamese people, drawing upon their heritage while distilling from other nations their hard-learned lessons in democracy. The Constitution calls for a strong president, aided by a premier as head of cabinet. Strength, as we have learned the hard way, is vital to the survival of government and the endurance of a nation. Emperor Bao Dai was bound by weak authority, and failed to achieve independence from the French. But too strong a leader is also a threat. President Diem was strong, but he allowed



Feverish tempo characterizes sessions of bicameral National Assembly.



The President delivers address after oathtaking of nine members of Supreme Court last October.

strength to slip into tyranny. To counter-balance a strong presidency is a powerful legislature; a two-house Parliament with an Upper House of 60 Senators and a Lower House of 137 representing the nation's 44 provinces. An independent court system and a unique separate inspectorate were created to serve as watchful eyes over both the Executive and the Legislature.

#### No discrimination

Fundamental to the new Constitution are the rights of the people, imbedded in the nation's basic code of law. The Chinese, Cham, Cambodian and Highland minorities are to be protected and assured equality under the law. All citizens may vote and hold office. There is no discrimination on any grounds: race, color, sex, religion or creed. All men and women are guaranteed the right to enjoy the benefits of a free society.

But this Constitution had to be implemented. A President had to be elected plus a Senate of sixty members and a Lower House of 137 members. The whole machinery of government had to be given life. Again the foreign press was critical and forecast failure. Two of Vietnam's military leaders — Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky — sought the presidency, opposed by what seemed an endless stream of eager civilian candidates. The ruling junta, declared the newsmen, would never allow a civilian to rule. In a dramatic gesture Premier Nguyen Cao Ky stepped down and took second place on a ticket with Chief of State Nguyen Van Thieu. In a campaign characterized by lively — and sometimes ludicrous (as democratic contests often are) — debate, the people listened and understood. On September 3, 1967 they flocked to the polls, ignoring threats of the Communists and an unprecedented outbreak of pre-election terror by the Viet Cong. They elected Thieu

as their new president; not overwhelmingly, but with a comfortable margin over his civilian opponents. Hundreds of foreign observers, many highly skeptical, watched the polling and declared it to be surprisingly free and fair. Even the losing candidates, after complaining loudly, admitted privately that, all things considered, it had been a reasonably fair fight. A month later, the people again went to the polls and chose 137 representatives out of candidates lists of 1650 hopefuls. On October 30, the military junta stepped down in what was a unique occasion in modern history. The men who had helped overthrow the tyranny of Diem, who had managed through the dark years that followed to preserve the independence and integrity of the nation, and had guided it toward democracy, freely resigned and accepted the rule of a new and untried government.

One of the fallacies of the so-called «emerging nations» is that

# Not 'instant' but durable democracy

# A protective wall for Southeast Asia

the trappings of a national government — a president and a legislature and a constitution — are often considered sufficient in themselves. «Instant democracy,» one might call it. To be effective, a democracy must find its roots deep in the history and character of its people. In Vietnam, as in most Asian countries, social order traditionally rests upon the family and the village where there is stability, endurance, continuity, peace and considerable freedom. There is an old saying in Vietnam that the emperor's authority ceased at the bamboo fence of the village. Communists invariably destroy the village social structure and reshape it into a kind of communal factory, a place of sterility and devoid of character. Even Diem, who could hardly be called a Communist, failed to realize the essential role of the village in Vietnam. He took away its autonomy and imported officials from Saigon to control village life. Last spring, this error was corrected. By decree, the Saigon Government handed back to the village its autonomy, the right to govern itself and to control its own future. In a series of local elections from April through June, more than two-thirds of Vietnam's villages and hamlets elected new councils and administrators. Democracy returned to village life. The change is not yet complete. Only those villages felt to be secure from Viet Cong terrorism held elections. Province chiefs, and district chiefs still do not altogether trust the local elected officials. But the village, once again, free and able to choose its own council and administrator, has become the sound base on which a truly strong democracy for the entire nation can be built. This is not mere «instant democracy» from above, but durable and effective democracy from below.

Still, the enemy expected South



President Thieu and Vice President Ky at oath-taking.

Vietnam to fall. In control of North Vietnam, with an infrastructure of veteran cadres in the South, and with easy access through jungle trails, the Hanoi war of «liberation» was sure to be won. Later, the Communists reasoned, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and all of Southeast Asia would be conquered the same way. But South Vietnam has not fallen. Premature action in Indonesia led to the unmasking of the Communist conspiracy there. Red China has played a poor game of political chess with the free nations of Southeast Asia. Bogged down in Vietnam, the Communists are now attempting to spread the conflict, to embroil more countries in their negative revolution. Infiltrators have appeared in northeast Thailand, in Cambodia and even Burma, hoping to force the Free World to spread its counter-insurgency forces thin. The resistance of the Vietnamese against the Communists has encouraged other nations. Mainland China, which prior to 1965 conducted widespread subversive activities throughout Asia, now finds itself increasingly isolated as its efforts to infiltrate Asian countries are now effectively resisted. The door to Southeast

Asia has been slammed shut to Chairman Mao.

Today, South Vietnam is a shield, a protective wall for all free nations of Southeast Asia. Because the Vietnamese and their allies are making great sacrifices, the peoples of Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma have a new lease on life — their life of freedom and independence.

## Winning Battle

Our task of building democracy in Vietnam is far from complete. In fact, it will never be finished. Our political organizations are still weak and divided, our leaders need experience and time to gain the support of the people. In social justice, education, health, improvements in rural life, a better civil service, and in the myriad of details that make for an effective democracy, we still have much to do. Today, we are locked with our allies from many lands in a bloody struggle for national survival. We are fighting Communism and its negative revolution. We are winning that battle just as we expect to win our positive revolution of rising expectations.

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A weekly publication of the Embassy of Viet-Nam  
2251 "R" Street, Washington D.C. 20008  
Telephone: 234-4860

U. S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
Washington, DC  
Permit No.41866

BULK RATE

Viet-Nam Info Series 8  
1967: YEAR OF DEMOCRACY (9-69)