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POLITICAL PARTIES IN VIET-NAM

By Professor Nguyen Ngoc Huy

Saigon, November 28, 1970.- In Vietnam, political parties have always incurred more criticism than praise. The reason for this is simple. Up to the present time, local political organizations have failed to play a significant role. They have not fulfilled much of what the people expect of them. It is, thus, only natural that their denigrators, more often than not, outnumber their supporters.

This is not to say that Vietnamese political parties are condemned to a secondary role for ever. Politically minded elements in any modern country, especially a democracy, agree that a government by the people can only be developed on no other basis than strong mass organizations. Legislators of the Second Republic have realized this. In the 1967 Constitution, they have recognized the importance of political parties and tried to encourage the establishment of a many-partied system.

Prof. Huy is one of the leaders of the National Progressist Movement.



Miss Phuong Hong Hanh, a songstress.

The question confronting the South Vietnamese nation nowadays is whether or not the present system of political parties will some day meet with the lawmakers's expectations. It is most difficult to answer this question with any accuracy, for the political development process here is dependent on a wide variety of factors.

Besides, it must be said that the study of local political forces has always been a risky task. Even in Western democracies, political parties have always operated under a veil of secrecy, which prevents outside observers, even those endowed with the most analytical and objective mind, from fully understanding how they operate and where they derive their strength from. Those more directly involved may have a better grasp of the problem but as a rule they either do not tell the truth or only tell half-truths.

CHARACTERISTICS: My first remark about political parties in Vietnam naturally concerns their number. Although not as big as some people tend to think, it is still too big for the political appetite of the average citizen. The general public here can be said to have found it most difficult to sympathize with political parties primarily because they are too numerous.

There exist at present nine legally constituted political parties and about 15 with initial authority to operate. Thus, the number of political organizations fulfilling the requirements of Decree-Law No. 009-69 is well over 20. In the future, there probably will be more in addition which do not recognize the edict on Political Parties and Opposition Groups as a frame-work for their activities.

Parties with real mass following are very few, however. And fewer are those with offices and branches throughout the country. Still, it can be said there are presently many active political groups in Vietnam and this state of affairs can be explained by many reasons.

First of all, what amounts to a police state regime has ruled this country for a very long time and has only been terminated very recently. Prior to 1945, political activities were forbidden to the Vietnamese, forcing those who cared for the survival of the country or wished to improve the standard of living of the people, to organize themselves into secret societies seeking national independence and political power by force. In the years following World War II, the political rights of the Vietnamese citizen were given recognition but, in reality, they were not substantiated. Parties continued to exist as secret societies until 1965 when they were conceded some freedom. And only with the 1967 Constitution were political activities in the form of organized parties authorized by the law.

Naturally, in the police state period, political elements with anti-government tendencies were closely watched, often gaoled and sometimes killed. Government agents also infiltrated their ranks to spy and sabotage them from within. This explains why political parties were most careful in accepting new members and had very strict regulations to check against infiltration by hostile elements.

In addition, the secret nature of these organizations hindered the propagation of their platforms and prevented them from enlarging their popular base. The close government watch kept apart citizens with similar political trends and prevented them from joining strength. As a consequence, there were numerous competitive groups often distrustful of one another.

Also, the higher the people's fighting spirit, the more political factions there can be expected. The large number of political which came into being in the colonial period, reflects above everything the Vietnamese people's aspirations for independence and liberty. After Vietnam rebecame independent, members of these secret organizations began surfacing but soon were to find it impossible to unite for each group had its own glorious past and organizational pattern and no one agreed to play second violin merging with another.

French police state methods had led to the formation of a great number of political groups. Political developments following World War II were to result in further fragmenting the Vietnamese body politics.

EVOLUTION: Let us again go back to the year 1945, when the Vietnamese Communists took advantage of a set of favorable circumstances and seized power. They immediately moved the country in the direction of a one-party state by murdering those not sharing their political conviction.

In the meantime, the French were also preparing a comeback by dispatching tens of thousands of troops here for a reconquest of Indochina.

Faced with the new situation as was brought about by the advent of the Viet Minh regime and the French attempt at restoring their colonial empire, nationalist parties had to make their choice among three alternatives. They could cooperate with the Communists to struggle against the French or join the French in an anti-Communist crusade or fight both the Communists and the French. Most political parties whose top leaders had been murdered by the Communists, failed to come up with a definite choice. They all broke up into three factions.

Nine years later, following the conclusion of the 1954 Geneva agreements and the accession to power of Ngo Dinh Diem, a similar choice was presented to political groups in South Vietnam. Diem, who founded the First Republic, turned out to seek nothing but a one-man rule and a one-party system. Political parties again were brought to a cross-road: they had to choose between joining strength with the Diem regime in its anti-Communist fight, cooperating with the Communists in their anti-Diem struggle , or combat both the Communists and the Diemists.

Whatever they did or failed to do in the decade following World War II reflects their inability to solve the many important problems faced by the nation and gradually convinces their leaders of the necessity to unite into larger organizations. This has become quite apparent since 1965; when politicians of different trends began looking for some common ground. But all attempts at political agglomeration have failed so far. Not only have all schemes to unify longstanding political parties failed but the creation of new political alliance also has fizzled out prematurely.

These forlorn attempts, it is true, can be traced to many reasons.

Through their manifestoes and programs of action, little can be detected which may differentiate the existing political groups. All of them appear to propose to keep this country free from Communism. All of them want democracy, economic progress and social reforms....

But if their overall objectives should present no significant differences, the approaches of their leaders to these problems vary greatly. There is no consensus on how to deal with the Communists, for example. There is also no accord on what attitude to adopt vis-a-vis the government power. The wide gaps between the moderates and the extremists as well as between the conservatives and the progressists indicate rather important, nay, irreconcilable stands.

PROBLEMS: Moreover, their different organizational patterns also constitute a great obstacle to unity. A number of political parties are known to depend heavily on the nation's many religious factions and do not really control their members who owe allegiance primarily to religious leaders. Also, if some of the political parties are tightly organized with the strict internal regulations, others are simply rather loose alliances with practically no discipline. The hold of political leaders on their followers thus varies greatly from one party to another. As long as these groups are on their own and their members responsible to their leaders only, their performances were truly internal matters of concern to their particular movements only. But in a larger organization, the differences in approach and the varying degrees of loyalty not only prevent a harmonious relationship from developing but also result in a sense of mutual mistrust that ultimately spells its undoing.

In addition, there is the problem of personnel. After being, if not exactly enemies, opponents for a long time, it is difficult for political bosses to shed the complexes and prejudices they may have vis-a-vis one another. Mutual cooperation in these conditions cannot materialize soon enough.

There is finally to be mentioned the style of leadership. If some political leaders can accept the principle of collective leadership and abide by the will of a majority of their peers, others cannot and they would behave autocratically, demanding that their decisions be obeyed without questions. An alliance of democratically minded elements is likely to work out well but the inclusion of just a few despotically-oriented chieftains would certainly result in the disbandment or immobility of the organization.

The reasons for this sorry state of affairs are thus numerous, complex and deep-rooted. The following remark, which was made by a much respected political figure with some mass following in refusing to join the National Salvation Front (NSF) when it was created, serves to prove the many basic difficulties encountered in any attempt at unifying South Vietnam's many political parties: "Here are two bottles" the man said, "one filled with cooking oil and the other drinking water, kept apart, these liquids may be used for frying and drinking purposes. We would not produce a new substance by mixing them together, for however energetically we may shake their container, the oil and the water will keep apart. The experiment may only result in spoiling both oil and water for the oil is no longer good for frying and the water no longer drinkable."

THE FUTURE: The picture I have just sketched is not a rosy one. Still, it can be said to belong to the past. But what will the future reserve for us?

As mentioned a moment ago, political developments in Vietnam are dependent on many unknown factors, one of these being the outcome of the Paris talks, which groups on one side the representatives of the United States and the Republic of Vietnam and on the other side those of the international Communist movement. Whether the Communists will be agreeable to negotiate an end to the conflict, this will have a great impact on

the turn of political events here. As things are now in Paris, two hypotheses can be made.

If the Communist should continue to be disagreeable to a negotiated end of the struggle, the war may go on for sometime before fading away. In this case, the present political institutions will develop normally with electoral contests growing more and more honest and reflection the people's will more and more accurately. In these circumstances, small political parties with little mass appeal will be phased out of existence as the people usually turns away from political organizations with no representation in national or local assemblies. Parties with mass following will have to merge, especially for electoral purposes.

This trend is to be noted on the occasion of Presidential and senatorial contests, which are organized nationally according to the provisions of the 1967 Constitution. On the basis of past electoral results, it can be said that no political parties can stand on their own and win in these contests. The only winning way is to present a common front.

Let us have a closer look at the senatorial contest, which every three years will send three winning tickets to the Upper House. If the electoral law should be amended in the future, giving the citizen the right to vote for one ticket only, it is natural that any group of political parties can only afford one running slate. It can be assumed then, that there will be three groups of political parties or three political alliances. But even if the electoral law should be left as it is now, i.e. if each citizen is allowed to cast three ballots each political alliance theoretically may present up to three lists of candidates. The experience of past senatorial races, however, show that it is practically impossible to convince the voters of giving their ballots to three associated slates. Therefore, to secure a degree of success at the elections, any group of political parties will probably seek representation with the one or two lists at the most. The number of such alliances or fronts probably will be reduced to two with the more important winning 20 seats and the other the remaining ten seats.

ALLIANCES: The formation of large political alliances possibly will be made easier by Presidential contests. If there should be a run-off election between the two top candidates, political parties will have a good opportunity to coalesce into two major blocs, each of them supporting one slate, there would be more such alliances if the electoral law should remain unchanged.

At any rate, the coming presidential and senatorial elections will prompt political parties to merge. This may at first be only temporary but the long run political parties with similar views and platforms will necessarily coalesce into semi-permanent alliances or merge into major political parties worth that name.

The uniting of political parties into a league of political parties or into a big political party would be more easily worked out if once elected the President of the Republic would sincerely cooperate with those parties which supported him for the presidency to carry out a common political programme.

In short, the presidential and senatorial elections will, sooner or later, lead to the formation of greater blocs of political parties. And as a result two outcomes

may be expected: either there will be two opposing blocs, one pro-governmental and the other anti-governmental; or there will be three blocs, beside the two opposing blocs that are for or against the government the third one stands in-between and leans back and forth.

The formation of greater blocs of political parties will help the Vietnamese political situation to be relatively more settled. However, whether the future government of the RVN would be efficient or not will depend on the organization and working methods of the blocs of political parties. If we had tightly organized political parties having well defined programs, the government would be more efficient than if we had a loose party structure made up of elements that do not accept a minimum of discipline and work according to their whims.

The solution to this organizational problem depends in part upon the existing political parties, and also upon the pressure groups, especially the religious groups. We all know that at present the masses are much more under the influence of religious groups than that of political parties. A few political parties are making great efforts to build their infrastructure to become disciplined popular forces having scientific working methods. Those efforts, however, are encountering many obstacles; lack of financial means and the necessary power to succeed quickly. On the other hand, those parties having enough funds and power are not able to penetrate the masses or they gather only libertine politicians who do not accept a minimum of discipline in their political activities. The role of religious groups therefore, is still of importance for some time.

These religious groups may support, or set up political parties. In these circumstances, religious leaders will remain influential with their followers. And leaders of political parties supported or set up by religious groups cannot have strict discipline among their members. The political parties, therefore, can hardly have tightly knit organization and well planned working procedures. Moreover, in any religious group we can find various elements: moderate or extremist, conservative or radical. A political party which relies upon a religious group and especially upon one religious group, will find it very difficult to direct its activities toward a set goal and therefore very difficult to become a well organized party clear programs of action.

POLITICAL STRUGGLE: In case the Communists accept to put an end to the present war through negotiations the NLF may take part in the political struggle against the nationalists, within the framework of a free democratic regime. Their appearance on the Vietnamese political scene will have a great influence on the attitudes of the existing political entities.

It goes without saying that the NLF will set up a political party with tight discipline and definite program of action. The militant leftists will join them. The NLF therefore, will occupy the left wing of the political stage.

The appearance of the NLF, on the other hand, will urge nationalist anti-Communist groups to unite. Thus the founding of political blocs will become easier. If not united into a unique political party or league, the nationalist political groups will get together in two blocs; the conservatives and ultra rightists will form the right wing, the radicals and moderates will occupy the center.

To beat the NLF in this political game, the nationalist political parties must have tight organizations and well defined plans. Moreover, even when divided into

two blocs, the nationalists should work together at least for the elections. After the elections, they may cooperate closely in the government or divide the work between them: one serving in the government and the other playing the role of a moderate opposition.

It should, however, be remembered that the Communists are shrewd and cunning enemies. Beside overt political struggles through free elections, they may resort to murder and sabotage and attempt to overthrow the government. These will harm the democratic institutions of the RVN, rendering the situation very difficult to handle. On the other hand, the Communists will try their best to sow dissension among the nationalists, so that the existing political groups cannot unite or the bigger political blocs will break up.

It is necessary to be conscious of the Communist threat and to be aware of the Communist working methods to avoid dissension. In order to counter this, most of the existing political parties must try and train their members to cope with the situation.

OPPORTUNITIES: Examining the past and the present, one cannot help criticizing severely the Vietnamese political parties for their weaknesses. But let us not forget that only recently did the Vietnamese political parties begin to have relatively favorable working conditions. In such a short period of time, the political parties have had opportunities to test their working methods as well as the capability of their cadres. The leaders have also had opportunities to test their prestiges and find out the sad truth. Certainly, several illusions have been lost, and the Communist threat has also soothed many prejudices and resentments. There remain several difficulties, but conditions for political parties to work together are numerous.

The national elections under the Second Republic have also contributed to the gathering of political parties into greater blocs. So even though the two-party system as conceived by 1967 Constitution cannot be achieved, the Vietnamese political parties will have a three-party system sooner or later.

The vital problem for those who are interested in the RVN is the organization and working methods of the big political parties in the future. The RVN may not develop quickly and smoothly unless the well-organized and well-disciplined political parties take turns in running the government.

The presence of the Communists is a stimulant for the nationalist elements in political parties to get ready for an appropriate organization but it is also a threat to the nationalists. On the other hand, if the Communists are expelled from the political arena, the nationalists will have less worries, but the establishment of big political blocs will be more difficult to achieve especially if the leaders of pressure groups will prevent their followers from joining well-organized political parties.

It is really a dilemma, but we believe that many are the cadres of political parties who are all conscious of the national situation and of the people's needs. Their efforts will make it possible for the RVN to have a party system appropriate to the national development through democratic means.

NEWS IN BRIEF

EXCHANGE OF PRISONERS OF WAR DEMANDED

Saigon, December 19. - In a note sent to the International Commission of Supervision and Control Secretariat General in Saigon on December 18, 1970, the Vietnamese mission in charge of relations with the ICSC appealed to the former for its intervention so that the Hanoi authorities might accept the proposals concerning the exchange of war prisoners.

According to the note, the Vietnamese mission charged that the North Vietnamese authorities have violated all of the most important principles of the 1949 Geneva Convention. Specially, the Hanoi rulers have never repatriated sick and wounded prisoners. As far as the Republic of Vietnam is concerned, its government has allowed a lot of North Vietnamese prisoners of war to return to North Vietnam for reunion with their families. A number of photos showing some prisoners of war with malformed arms and subjected to weight loss from malnutrition in the Communist prison camps, were forwarded to the ICSC as factual proofs of mistreatment of prisoners of war by the North Vietnamese authorities. The mission also sent to the ICSC some remarks made by the International Red Cross representatives who had attested to the humane treatment of prisoners of war by the government of the Republic of Vietnam after their visits to various prison camps.

The note said: "The government of the Republic of Vietnam considers that, even if both sides have not yet reached an overall solution to end the war, it is not a valid reason for the North Vietnamese authorities to delay further the task of solving the war prisoners problem which is but an entirely humanitarian issue".

The note went on: "On instruction from its government, the mission requests the commission to kindly intervene, for the sake of humanity, at its earliest convenience, so that the North Vietnamese authorities would:

- officially release a list of all prisoners of war,
- undertake to give kind treatment to the prisoners of war, presented by the delegation of the Republic of Vietnam to the Paris peace talks on December 10, 1970.

U.S. HELP TO RVN LAND REFORM PROGRAM

Saigon, December 22. - Mr. Cao Van Than, Land Reform and Agriculture Fishery Development Minister on behalf of the RVN government Monday morning received the first allocation amounting to \$5 million granted by the US government to support the "Land-to-the-tiller" program.

Mr. John R. Mossler, US Aid Director representing the US government handed over the cheque for \$ 5 million (equivalent to 1.275 billion Vietnamese piasters) to Min. Than at a ceremony held at the Land Reform and Agriculture Fishery Development Ministry.

The amount was reported being part of an overall allocation by the United States as reparation for expropriated landowners.

Addressing the attendance on this occasion, Min. Than said the allocation which made part of the agreement signed last June 27, 1969 between the US and RVN governments, would help implement the "Land-to-the-Tiller" program.

Min. Than also hoped that the US government will continue to actively support the Land Reform program of the Republic of Vietnam so that the RVN government will be able to speed up her land distribution program and the reparations for the expropriated landowners.

In his reply, Mr. John R. Mossler pledged for a continuous assistance of the US government to the implementation of the Land-to-the-Tiller program set forth by the RVN government.

The "Land-to-the-Tiller" law promulgated by President Nguyen Van Thieu last March 26 aims at making peasants owners of the land they till.

According to the law, those landowners who had their land expropriated will receive a cash reparation equivalent to 20 percent of the value of their land and the balance will be paid in treasury bonds with an annual interest of 10 per cent within an eight year period.

AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Saigon, December 22. - Land Reform Agriculture and Fishery Development Minister Cao Van Than, said Monday he believed that after the next crop by late 1971, the RVN will not import rice any more since the RVN rice production will meet local needs.

Minister Than said that the RVN government recently set up well organized and practical credit system as well as an improved supply system of agricultural tools and fertilizer to help peasants increase rice production.

He also disclosed that the Land Reform Ministry has envisaged the distribution of 400,000 hectares of land to peasants throughout the country next year besides 200,000 hectares which have been granted this year.

According to the Land Reform Minister, the remaining expropriated land totalling 300,000 to 400,000 hectares will be distributed to peasants in 1971, thus completing the carrying out of the "Land-to-the-Tiller" program.

On this occasion Minister Cao Van Than said that since the promulgation of the "Land-to-the-Tiller" law on March 26, 1970 the government has received applications for the distribution of land from 120,000 peasants and has thus far considered about 100,000 such dossiers.

INVEST IN RVN NOW, APU ADVISED

Saigon, December 31. - Wide-ranging investment in the South Vietnamese economy by other Asian governments and businessmen has been urged by a seven-nation committee's report to the Asian Parliamentarians' Union (APU).

"The Republic of Vietnam has overcome the Communists' military threat to such an extent," the committee said, "that now rapid economic development of the country has become the most crucial factor in its destiny."

But South Vietnam will require considerable assistance to move from a war-time situation to economic recovery, according to the committee's report to the nine nations represented at the APU's Sixth General Assembly, 8-12 December in Saigon.

"It is evident that under existing conditions," the report said, "the Vietnamese cannot reconstruct and develop their economy by themselves alone. They need outside assistance either in the form of outright grants, loans, or investments."

The report emphasized that "there is in Vietnam today relative peace that is sufficient to provide the Vietnamese the opportunity to rehabilitate and develop their economy. There is every indication that the Vietnamese have relatively peaceful life and security."

Nieh Wen-Ya, chairman of the APU-backed study committee and vice-president of the Legislative Yuan of the Republic of China, said he was impressed that the South Vietnamese "are facing the hardship of a war-torn economy with unparalleled valor and that they are fully determined to build a nation against all odds."

South Vietnam has made a good start toward economic reconstruction, despite inflation and a trade deficit, the committee's report said. It noted that, even in the year just after the Communists' 1968 Tet offensive, South Vietnam's transport facilities expanded by 80 percent, and manufactured goods increased by 25 percent. Other positive points the committee reported:

- The Vietnamese government is "purposefully endeavoring" to reduce inflation and trade deficits through cuts in non-development spending and increased industrial and agricultural production.
- Vietnam is seriously moving toward national economic planning.
- The government is seeking to encourage investments from friendly countries. President Nguyen Van Thieu has just sent a draft bill to the National Assembly which would further liberalize the country's investment law, a move calculated to attract foreign capital for industrial development.

Already, the committee pointed out, South Vietnam offers special incentives to investors who undertake projects in priority development fields -- such as manufacture of agricultural machinery and wood products.

"Many foreigners have invested in or are beginning to come to Vietnam to invest", the committee said, mentioning French, American, Chinese, Italian, Japanese, Korean and Filipino businessmen.

In addition to recommending multinational investment in Vietnam by APU member countries, the committee also urged friendly Asian countries to provide technical assistance to Vietnam. It recommended that the APU's research and advisory arm, the Asian Development Center, work closely with South Vietnam's economic-development agencies, such as the official Industrial Development Center.

The APU committee said also that the tourism industry in Vietnam should be promoted and visits by tourists from APU nations and other countries should be encouraged.

Authors of the committee report, besides Nieh Wen-Ya, were the following APU-country legislators: Tae Sung-Chung, Republic of Korea; Dominador Aytona, Carmelo Z. Barbero and Lorenzo S. Sarmiento of the Philippines; Tran Ngoc Oanh and Le Tai Hoa of the Republic of Vietnam; Asadao Iguchi of Japan; Pheng Sananikone of Laos; and Osot Kosin and Suchon Charmpoonod of Thailand. Also serving on the committee was Emmanuel Q. Yap of the Asian Development Center.

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