

RP Paper
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STRENGTHENING SOUTH VIET-NAM POLITICALLY

1. Summary of the Present Situation

Regardless of the new phase in the Paris negotiations, the key to attaining a lasting solution in Viet-Nam remains the development of a cohesive Nationalist political force in the South, which is capable of competing politically as well as militarily with the Viet Cong. While the need for this development has been primary, the U. S. has not always recognized it as being primary, nor have we yet structured our own Mission and its efforts in a way which has been truly helpful.

Despite a lack of focus in American support, a framework for political development has nevertheless been established. It consists of the new Vietnamese Constitution and its institutions - the Presidency, the National Assembly, the Courts and the Village and City Councils. On the other hand, other ingredients needed to make the Constitution work, such as viable political organizations, a sense of political unity and inspiring leadership, are still missing.

The Tet offensive by the Communists, the looming possibility of eventual American withdrawal and the bombing halt have stimulated a new sense of realism among South Vietnamese politicians, however, a greater sense of urgency must be developed.

Essentially, the present system of Government in Viet-Nam is still too corrupt, too distant from its people and too unresponsive to represent a positive cause worth fighting for. Survival and protection of family, village, religious or ethnic group remains the primary motive for fighting.

At the same time, there are able patriotic Vietnamese in the Army, in the Government, in the National Assembly, in the various religious and ethnic groups, and in some of the political parties and the labor unions who could help pull the country together. To encourage the emergence of this leadership in harmony with a cautious and suspicious, but essentially well motivated, President will be difficult. Political assets also exist in the form of real grass roots organizations among the religious and ethnic groups and among a few of the political parties. With encouragement from the top, these organizations could work together, and with the Vietnamese Government, in better harmony.

While the Americans could play a constructive role in encouraging political development, they have not done this well in the past. Unless the U. S. Mission is reorganized and staffed with individuals with rare sensitivity, the best that can probably be expected, in terms of American help for this process, would be broad support to shore up the constitutional framework and to encourage a coalition of nationalist political forces in preparation for the coming political confrontation with the Communists. While we have no right to impose our ideas, we do have the right to insist that the Vietnamese leadership lives up, in its actions, to the principles and ideals expressed in the Vietnamese Constitution. At the same time, the U. S. should encourage President Thieu to develop and implement a general political plan in preparation for this confrontation.

There is also a significant role of assistance to be played in South Vietnamese political development by Americans from organizations other than the U. S. Administration. Specifically, the U. S. Congress and our

major political parties could effectively assist their Vietnamese counterparts through a series of exchange visits, as could American labor unions, legal societies, journalistic societies and other groups. The enabling legislation for this exists under Title IX to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1967 and previous legislation. What is needed from the U. S. Government is the concept and leadership to mobilize such an effort and to meld it effectively with the Vietnamese.

It would also be helpful to Vietnamese political development if the U. S. were to cut down on the multiplicity of agencies and advisors in AID, CIA, JUSPAO, the Embassy and MAC V which impinge on Vietnamese political sovereignty. In some areas, particularly that of economic aid, they could be replaced by a less top-heavy and more efficient joint commission concept, similar to the JCRR on Taiwan.

2. The Objectives

The main objective of political development in South Viet-Nam, and American support for this development, must be to prepare the Vietnamese Nationalists for their coming political confrontation with the Communists. The effort to attain this objective may be divided into two major lines of endeavor, to make the present constitution work so that it becomes a viable framework within which a political confrontation can be carried out; and to develop a truly grass roots, nationalist political organization.

Particular stress should be placed on the preservation and strengthening of the present Constitution because it represents the genesis of a

common cause for the Vietnamese nationalists. The more its principles can be put into action, the more it will embody what the Vietnamese want, which is essentially democracy. Moreover, without the Constitution, South Viet-Nam would again slip back into political chaos. For this reason the Constitution must be preserved in any future political confrontation with the Communists, as difficult as it will be to get them to accept, for example, participating in Lower House elections as a first step in a political accommodation.

We should also keep in mind that political development in South Viet-Nam must be tied in with our negotiating position with the North Vietnamese, and the Viet Cong, in any peace negotiations. This bargaining position must be based on a realistic assessment of what can and cannot be conceded in any political settlement, if the eventual political confrontation is to be at least an even contest.

3. Actions to Strengthen South Viet-Nam Politically

The key to success in strengthening the Vietnamese Nationalists for a political confrontation with the Communists lies in getting them to take actions based essentially on their ideas and plans, not on American ideas. We can encourage them and in some cases pressure them, and we can help create the right climate for positive changes and reform; but we cannot take these actions ourselves.

One of the things we can do, however, is to help create a greater sense of urgency in the Vietnamese leadership. They recognize that the

"honeymoon with the Americans is over", but they are still complacent and tend to move too cautiously, without taking even the limited risks required to make significant political gains. We should exert pressure to stimulate, but not to panic them to act more decisively to create a more responsive and popular government; and to broaden its base. Some actions the U. S. could take to help create a greater sense of urgency would be:

- a. To prepare an analysis for President Thieu of the U. S. political situation, focusing on our limited perimeter for future actions and the need to cut American war costs.
- b. To begin a selective, but systematic reduction of American civilian and military advisory personnel. (This would also increase the effectiveness and efficiency of U. S. operations).
- c. To establish a joint Vietnamese-American Commission which could begin to take over the administration of certain aspects of American assistance, and which could form the basis for an eventual multi-national commission through which all economic and cultural assistance could be channeled.

There are a number of actions which are within the capabilities of the leaders of South Viet-Nam which would measurably strengthen their government and help to coalesce nationalist political forces into a more unified and determined whole. We cannot depend on President Thieu alone for these actions, because he does not enjoy a sufficiently wide base

of support. These actions may be, and in most cases should be, lead by him but their success will depend on the participation of many others in what is essentially a diffused and confused power structure.

Among those actions which should receive consideration in the formulation of a plan for political development in Viet-Nam are the following:

a. Developing National Leadership

Viet-Nam needs more dynamic and open leadership from President Thieu. His cautiousness and lack of frankness have made it difficult for him to obtain support and cooperation from other nationalist leaders. He has yet to establish the widespread trust in himself which would help cement the nationalists together. He should broaden his own personal staff to include Vietnamese of recognized integrity who are not Dai Viet or Catholics. He should also broaden the political base of his Government by either inviting some of the respected liberals or moderates, such as Tran Van Tuyen, Phan Quang Dan and perhaps Au Truong Thanh into the Government or get them to participate in the Nationalist front, the Lien Minh. Of particular importance would be to obtain the active participation of General Duong Van Minh in some meaningful role.

In any case, Thieu's tendencies to narrow the circle of people upon whom he depends, and to utilize semi-clandestine political methods reminiscent of the Can Lao, must be counteracted by encouraging him, and pressuring him where necessary to reach out to other nationalist

leaders to get them involved in constructive political actions towards common goals.

One particular troublesome problem which undermines Thieu's attempts at leadership is corruption within his own power base, particularly among the Corps and Division Commanders in the Army and the Province Chiefs, and also among some members of his own immediate entourage. Thieu must be both encouraged and pressured into the systematic elimination of senior corrupt officials and their replacement by honest men who may not necessarily be old friends or fellow companions during his military school days.

b. Establishing National Goals

At present, the only well defined and agreed upon goal of the nationalists is to defeat the Communists. This is not a sufficient cause on which to build a nation. In order to encourage team work and unity among the Vietnamese it will be necessary to develop positive national political goals, based upon the principles stated in the constitution, and common bonds which have popular appeal to all political/religious groups, civil service and military personnel. The Vietnamese must know what they are fighting for before a real sense of unity develops.

We should encourage President Thieu in cooperation with other nationalist leaders to establish a Vietnamese Commission on National Goals. This Commission would draft in plain language those goals for which people would be willing to fight and to publicize these goals both

domestically and internationally. We should also encourage the Prime Minister and the cabinet to revise (and rigorously enforce) the codes of conduct for both civil service and military personnel, in accordance with these goals. The Commission would also provide a positive channel for a number of Nationalists who are not currently usefully employed.

c. De-Americanizing our Assistance

So far most proposals for the de-Americanization of our effort in Viet-Nam have been couched in terms of U.S. troop withdrawal. There is an equally important and positive part of this endeavor, which is the restoration of Vietnamese political sovereignty in the eyes of their own people by cutting down on the size of the American advisory effort, both civilian and military. As previously pointed out, if handled tactfully, this can act as a spur to create a sense of political urgency in the Vietnamese.

If there is to be an effective cut-back, not only should the numbers of advisors be reduced but the vast bureaucratic staffs in Saigon and the Regions should be cut, and in some cases, eliminated.

Experience has shown on Taiwan that for the kind of grass-roots action and agricultural revolution needed in Viet-Nam to give an economic underpinning to democratic political development, the Joint Commission approach is much more effective because it would be largely untrammeled by both the U.S. and Vietnamese Government bureaucracies.

Establishment of the Commission might best be handled through

enabling legislation passed by the National Assembly. If enabling legislation is not required then approval of the concept should be the subject of a joint upper and lower House resolution, if possible, in order to give its launching a concensus of Vietnamese support.

This Commission would have a majority of Vietnamese Commissioners, thus preserving and enhancing Vietnamese sovreignty. Funds and commodities would be turned over to the Commission for use, without being restricted by the time consuming and often self-defeating rules and regulations of AID.

The Commission could also begin to plan for future civilian development of such massive U. S. installations as Cam Ranh Bay. And it could better serve to coordinate private U. S. assistance in the cultural and educational fields, than the present AID Mission.

It is estimated that by utilizing such an approach the present AID Mission could be cut in size by as much as 80%. At the same time the Vietnamese Government would still receive the assistance it needed to function, but would be given room in which to do its job free of the political liability of an overwhelming American presence.

Conversion of the Joint Commission into a multi-national body would provide a sensible means of further scaling down the U. S. presence; and it could serve as the ideal focus for the phasing in of participation in Vietnamese development by such international institutions as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank.

d. Strengthening Local Government and Local Elections

The Constitution provides for a system of local elections in the provinces, without spelling out details. Local government is still the government which is the most understandable to the Vietnamese, and they tend to judge the national government and the whole question of a cause worth fighting for by the actions and the quality of the local government which they experience first hand. Village elections have taken place, but the powers of the villages are still too limited and the system beyond the village remains too arbitrary and unresponsive the the full effect of local elections to be felt.

President Thieu and the National Assembly should be encouraged to develop and pass legislation for an improved system of local government in the provinces and in the cities and city neighborhoods, which provides for real decentralization of power and which also provides for a progressive system of elections from the village on up through the province level. There are provinces in Viet-Nam, such as An Giang, which are sufficiently pacified to permit elections for district chief and for province chief. Such elections now, even on a limited scale, would help generate real popular support for the Government by making the aspirations of the Constitution ring true.

Along with the local government bill, a progressive plan for Neighborhood and Village Advancement could also be established. The plan would describe several categories of villages and urban neighborhoods, based

upon evidence of the people's will and ability to help themselves for their own advancement. Neighborhoods and villages judged most able to help themselves would be given preferential treatment - in executive powers for their elected councils, in use of tax monies, and in direct aid and credit for public works and cooperative ventures - as a reward for demonstrating their self-reliance. This reward would thus become a prize sought after by other neighborhoods and villages in lower categories. The direct aid or credit portion of this reward could be immediately channeled to the recipient neighborhood or village by the Joint Vietnamese American Commission thus increasing the psychological and political impact of the plan.

The government would be authorized to create a National Board for Neighborhood and Village Advancement to determine the rating of each urban neighborhood and village. Board membership, along with government officials, would include a proportioned number of representatives of major nationalist parties. The system would permit President Thieu to stimulate the unification of political groupings who would have majority representation on such a board - with its visits and ties to elected village and neighborhood councils. Or alternatively, if such a Board could not be authorized, a joint Senate and Lower House Committee could be established to monitor the plan's implementation.

e. Improving the System of Justice

The present system of justice is arbitrary and out of reach of the

average Vietnamese. The lack of justice in the social and political system is a serious deterrent to the development of belief in the country's Constitution and present form of government. This is a long neglected area of concern. Tremendous numbers of people are detained over long periods without trial and there is an enormous back-log of untried cases. A start has been made to reform and strengthen the system by the recent election by the National Assembly of a Supreme Court. What is needed now is an effective reinvigoration and decentralization of the system down to levels which touch the people. Specifically some type of circuit court system and the investiture of local "justices of the peace" are needed in the provinces. At the same time special councils could be created in the villages, with limited legal powers, to settle land disputes through the traditional Vietnamese method of arbitration and compromise.

Strengthening the legal system and thereby justice in the South Vietnam would also provide an opportunity for meaningful participation by and assistance from private American groups such as the American Bar Association and the Legal Aid Societies.

In addition, the Inspectorate, which is a kind of ombudsman "fourth power" under the Constitution, and which has just been established should be encouraged to begin functioning as rapidly as possible. President Thieu should support its operations and see that it is provided with adequate transportation and access to the provinces. Government officials

should be directed to cooperate with the Inspectorate's investigations. If vigorously and fairly run, the Inspectorate would provide a channel for citizen complaints, which does not now exist, thus further strengthening the system of justice.

f. Achieving Nationalist Unity

This is probably the most difficult task of all, but is probably also one of the most essential. Providing more dynamic and open leadership, jointly establishing national goals and participating in putting local government on its feet will all contribute to unification. However, perhaps the most persuasive force of all, will be the coming realization that the National Liberation Front will have to be eventually faced at the polls; and that the presentation of a series of splinter candidates on the Nationalist side will result in certain defeat. In any case, achieving unity will be difficult. We should continue to encourage the development of a common political front, such as the Lien Minh, by encouraging Thieu to give it genuine support and by encouraging other leaders with followings, such as General Minh, to join in.

The U. S. could better assist in this effort if it had better knowledge of the strengths of existing nationalist leaders, cadre forces and followings in each area in Viet-Nam. We should proceed to systematically develop such knowledge.

g. Nationalist Party Development

Action to develop Nationalist parties is intimately related to the question of the unity of nationalist leaders and groups. This is a difficult, tricky and complicated area. Every creation of a new party in Viet-Nam seems to generate a further splintering of National forces, rather than a coalescing of these forces. Most parties have a personal rather than ideological base. For President Thieu to try to create his own personal party at present would result in a narrowly based organization, depending primarily on government functionaries and probably possessing a built-in clandestine control apparatus similar to the Can Lao of the Diem era. Above all, the mistakes of the Diem era must not be repeated.

In view of the coming political confrontation with the Communists, which may occur within perhaps a year's time the best line of endeavor would seem to be to encourage most of the nationalist groups to coalesce behind the longest existing political front, the Lien Minh. To make this work, new blood would have to be pumped into the Lien Minh. Its future role would have to be better understood by its members and better explained to the general public than in the past. The Lien Minh would also have to come up with a series of programs which would get the various nationalist leaders working together on non-partisan causes and activities.

h. Depoliticizing Religious Organizations

President Thieu could make significant political gains if he announced that henceforth there would be religious freedom for all people in Viet-Nam and that religious organizations would no longer be required to register with the government. This would also serve to depoliticize the role of religious organizations whose factions are continuously competing for recognition and support of the government. The value of this would substantially outweigh the loss of control through registration which has never been effectively implemented. We should encourage President Thieu to ask the National Assembly to pass a Charter of Religious Freedom.

i. Appealing to Youth

The Vietnamese Government has attempted to suppress and control youth and student organizations rather than to encourage their participation in constructive activities. The new requirement of the Ministry of Culture, Education, and Youth for all student organizations to register with the government will further alienate relations. We should encourage the Prime Minister and Minister of Culture, Education, and Youth to repeal the directive ordering the registration of student organizations. We should also encourage the President, Prime Minister, Cabinet Members, and National Assembly Members to meet with youth and student leaders to discuss national problems and develop programs for their participation. A quasi-government/private council should be established to coordinate

and support private youth and student activities, replacing the Directorate for Youth under the Ministry of Culture, Education and Youth. This would provide an effective channel for private U.S. assistance.

j. Improving the National Assembly

Except in a few cases, effective communication lines do not exist between the National Assembly members and their constituencies. Given the system by which the Upper House was elected, there is little hope in developing meaningful relationships between Senators and the people. However, Lower House Deputies have constituencies with whom they could work directly, thus giving real meaning to the concept of representative government.

We should encourage the Lower House deputies to establish grievance boards at the provincial level, consisting of well-known political and religious leaders from their constituencies, where complaints can be brought by the people and used by the deputies as a means for improving legislation and the government administrative apparatus. (This effort should be put in the context of developing a national conscience.) We should encourage President Thieu to ask the Lower House deputies to act as representatives of the people in provincial planning and development exercises. We should also encourage the Lower House deputies to establish provincial offices to inform their constituencies about what is happening nationally and to solicit the cooperation and support of local

political and religious leaders. And the U. S. should recruit highly skilled U. S. legislative assistance to work directly with the members of the National Assembly, giving them advice on how to organize committees, formulate and pass legislation, improve relationships between the Upper and Lower Houses and develop relationships with their constituencies.

k. Minimize the Negative Political Impact of Military Operations.

The Vietnamese Government has lost considerable popular support as a result of what the people consider to be the indiscriminate use of fire power and the deaths and destruction resulting from accidents. In contrast, the enemy is admired for their fire discipline. Improved guidelines have been issued by MACV and the Vietnamese JGS for use of fire power in populated areas. Perhaps one way we can minimize further the negative political impact of military operations is to better sensitize the American and Vietnamese soldiers to the Vietnamese people. (Reports say that Chinese soldiers receive four months of training, including an orientation to Vietnamese customs and language, before being assigned to North Vietnam for an eight month tour.) We should submit our own troops to more intensive indoctrination to orient and sensitize our soldiers to the Vietnamese, hopefully developing some identification with them as fellow human beings. We should also insist that the Vietnamese carry out a systematic indoctrination of their own troops in their

primary role as "protectors and defenders of the people".

1. Promote Political Organizational Efforts in Urban Areas.

A nationalist political organizational vacuum currently existed in the urban as well as rural areas. Although urban dwellers are an easily-reached audience, the enemy, rather than the GVN has been making significant gains in these areas. We should encourage the use of the self-defense program as a basis for organizational efforts at the neighborhood (Lien Gia) level. (Popular associations with elected leaders could be established at this level for defense, intelligence collection, and social welfare activities.) We should also encourage the Lien Minh to initially focus their political organizational efforts in the urban areas, using the concepts and techniques developed by the leaders of the District Eight project. The Lien Minh should in turn establish close ties with youth groups and use their energy and enthusiasm .