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*Village  
And  
Hamlet  
Elections*



# The Road to Democracy

## **THE ROAD TO DEMOCRACY: Village and Hamlet Elections**

The government of Vietnam is undertaking a significant program of local elections and administrative reform this year in hundreds of its villages and thousands of its hamlets. This program should be viewed as a major part of the process of building democratic institutions for the nation—a bold action toward national development and representative government in the midst of war.\* The importance of local government can be seen in the American political system, in which local self-government was the base from which state and federal institutions developed.

### **The Elections**

Village and hamlet elections will be conducted in 1967 throughout Vietnam on a continuing basis and as security permits. Phase I of the elections will cover a period from April 2 through June 11, during which elections will be carried out in villages and hamlets that already enjoy sufficient security to permit elections without too great a threat of disruption or harassment by the Viet Cong.

The voting in Phase I will span five Sundays for village elections, starting 2 April, and five Sundays for hamlet elections, beginning 14 May. The villages will elect councils and, as the councils take office, hamlets will elect hamlet chiefs (and in some cases deputy hamlet chiefs). This sequence is necessary because the elected village administration plays a role in the conduct of the elections in its constituent hamlets. In Phase II, elections will be held throughout the second half of 1967 as Revolutionary Development enables additional

villages and hamlets to attain the necessary degree of security.

It is estimated that during Phase I elections will be held in 961 villages and 4578 hamlets. During Phase II, an additional 300 villages and 1500 hamlets may be able to hold elections. If the 1967 goals are met, it will mean that 1261 of Vietnam's 2626 villages will be governed by elected councils and more than 6000 of the country's 13,000 hamlets by elected hamlet chiefs.

Approximately five million persons live in the villages where Phase I elections will be held, and among them are an estimated 2,200,000 voters. (The six autonomous cities of Vietnam, which have a combined population of about three million, are not included in the local election process in 1967.)

Available information indicates that village elections are attracting substantial numbers of candidates, many of whom have previously held elected or appointed positions in their villages. The number of offices to be filled by election is in excess of fifteen thousand—a very large number, indeed.

While there has been evidence of difficulty in finding sufficient candidates in a few locations, in general, it appears the ratio of candidates to offices will be more than 1.5 candidates for each position to be filled. For example, in a village which will have a ten-member elected council, at least 15 candidates probably will run, while at least two candidates probably will take part in each hamlet election. Women are being encouraged to become candidates.

### **Village and Hamlet Administration**

The village councils will vary in size; six, eight, ten or twelve members, depending on the population of the village. Each village council will elect one of its members to the

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\*For generations, the villages of Vietnam had enjoyed a considerable degree of local autonomy under the leadership of their own officials. The powers of the villages were reduced, although not eliminated, during the long period of French colonial rule that ended in 1954. Under the government of Ngo Dinh Diem, village autonomy was abrogated altogether, and village government was placed under the control of officials appointed by the central government. In 1964, after the overthrow of President Diem, village and hamlet administration was reorganized to provide for elected hamlet chiefs and elected village advisory councils, but control remained in the hands of appointed village administrative committees.

position of chairman of the village administrative committee (popularly known as "village chief").

The chairman of the village administrative committee will then select four villagers who will serve as his assistants for security, for agriculture, for social welfare, and for propaganda and civic action. Their appointments must be approved by the village council. The assistants for security and for propaganda were members of the old village administrative committee, but were actually employees of central Government ministries.

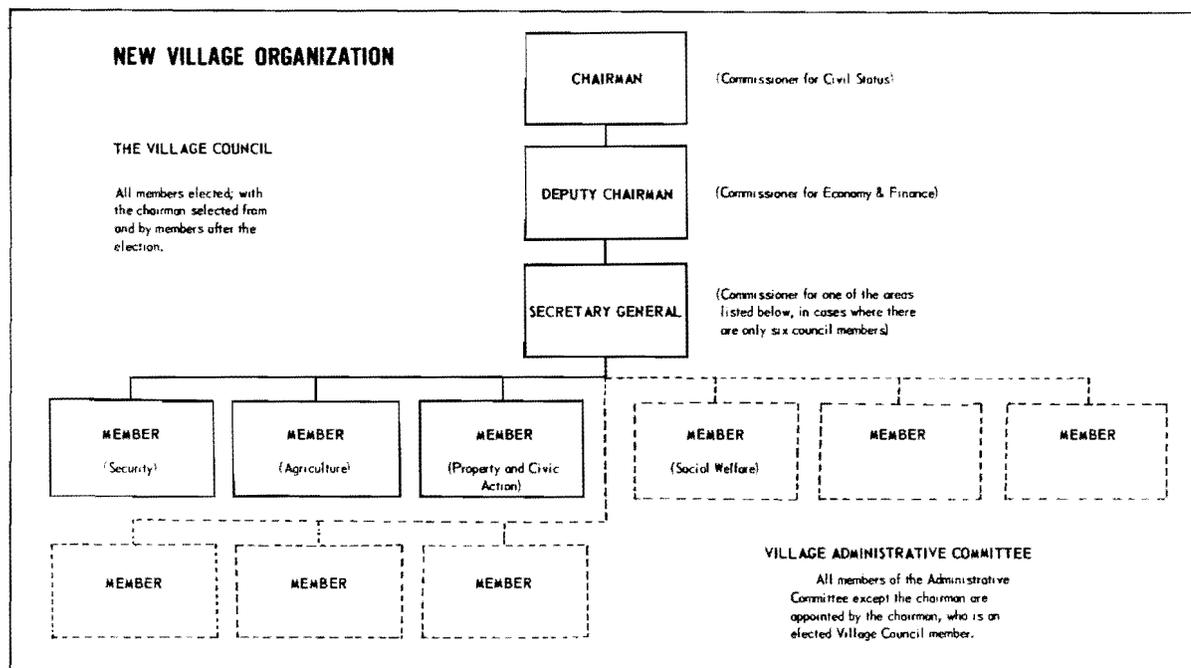
Now, there will be unity of command under the village chief. The social welfare and agriculture positions are new; these two assistants carry direct responsibility for the social and economic development of their village.

The division of village governments into a deliberative council and an executive administrative committee is quite logical in Vietnam. The village will thus be served by prominent citizens with full-time occupations of their own who will determine matters of policy for the salaried administrative officials, whom they have appointed, to carry out.

Village councils will have considerable potential power in dealing with the appointed district, provincial and ministerial officials. The councils will have increased power over village finances and a considerable degree of protection from arbitrary removal by higher authorities. Also, the councils will be able to complain or express their views on village problems to district and province chiefs, to provincial councils and to the Special Commissariat for Administration. This includes expressing council views on the conduct of government civil servants operating in the village.

The people of the village can seek redress from arbitrary action by a chairman of the village administrative committee by appealing to the village council, which has authority to censure the actions of this official.

The hamlet chief will have assistants for security and for propaganda and civic action. He will recommend persons for these positions and the chairman of the village administrative committee will appoint them. The hamlet is part of the village in the culture of Vietnam and is without legal personality. It has no budget. Politically and administratively it is a constituent part



of the village to which it belongs.

Thus the participation of the village council in the designation of the hamlet management committee assistants is customary and will be so regarded by hamlet residents.

### **Security**

Recognizing the importance of security, the GVN is taking extensive steps to insure that adequate security is provided in the pre-election phase, during the elections and to the elected officials on a continuing basis.

### **Training and Salaries**

The GVN has organized an extensive series of seminars and training programs at province level and below to help newly-elected and selected village and hamlet officials become familiar with the administrative aspects of their jobs.

This training program will begin soon after the first elections. It should also be noted that the salaries of executive village and hamlet officials who will operate under the supervision of elected village councils have been substantially raised.

### **The Framework of Representative Government**

The restoration of self-government at the village level is but one of the steps in the process of democratization that is now underway in Vietnam. Other steps are outlined in the Constitution recently completed by the Constituent Assembly (which itself was elected in September 1966). The Constitution was approved by the ruling Armed Forces Council and became effective 1 April.

These steps include the election by popular vote of a President and Vice-Presi-

dent and upper legislative chamber on 1 September and the election, also by popular vote, of the lower house of the National Assembly on 1 October; the continuation of elective provincial and municipal councils (which have been in existence since 1965), and in the future, the election of province chiefs. Thus there will be elected officials and representatives bodies at three levels—national, provincial and local—to whom the citizen may appeal in expressing his problems and aspirations.

### **The Military Role**

Strict guidelines govern the role of U. S. and other Free World forces in the Revolutionary Development Program. U. S. Military assistance during the election period will be limited to providing indirect support so that Vietnamese armed forces may concentrate on providing security in election areas.

U. S. support may be provided to fill in for Vietnamese resources diverted to support the elections, but no U. S. agency will provide support for any candidate, slate of candidates, or platform.

No transportation will be provided any individual candidate, but election officials may be provided transportation if it is requested and beyond the capability of the government of Vietnam. U. S. personnel will avoid polling places.

U. S. officials express the hope that because of the realistic approach to overall reform taken by the Vietnamese government, the coming elections will be a most important and effective step in the country's rebuilding.

Free World forces are doing all they can to help the Vietnamese, but it will be the Vietnamese themselves who create their own future. For the first time in many years these village and hamlet elections will be the voice of the rural Vietnamese.