

M E M O

August 8, 1960

TO: Executive Committee Members

FROM: Joseph Buttinger, Chairman

In order that the Executive Committee be kept fully informed of developments in Vietnam, and most particularly of criticisms made by knowledgeable Americans regarding these developments, I am taking the liberty of enclosing a copy of an article by Prof. Robert Scigliano of Michigan State university on "The Electoral Process in Vietnam". The article, which appeared in the spring issue of the Midwest Journal of Political Science, is, as you will observe, critical of some of the features of Vietnam's evolving democratic system. Nevertheless, it contains fresh information of considerable importance and the critique is made in a constructive spirit. While we may disagree with Prof. Scigliano on his interpretation of the facts contained in the article, I think it will be of use to all of us to understand the basis of such criticism.

For your information, Prof. Scigliano is a professor of political science recently returned from several years of service with MSU's Vietnam Project in Saigon, which assisted the Vietnamese Government in matters relating to public and police administration.

Enclosure

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The Electoral Process in South Vietnam: Politics in an Underdeveloped State

SOUTH VIETNAM has been a republic since October, 1955, when its people voted to cashier their hereditary chief of state, His Majesty Bao-Dai, and to install as the first president of the Republic of Vietnam Ngo-Dinh-Diem, the man who had been Bao-Dai's prime minister since July, 1954. Diem's appointment as prime minister had coincided with the division of Vietnam into rival Communist and non-Communist states and with the end of eighty years of French imperialism in Indochina. The two Vietnams, along with Cambodia and Laos, the other states comprising the Indochinese Peninsula, assumed, in mid-1954, the roles of sovereign representative governments. Actually, the end of French power in Southeast Asia was sounded in August, 1945, when, in the ashes of Japanese defeat in World War II, the Viet-Minh, a broad nationalist movement controlled by the Communists and headed by Ho-Chi-Minh, the founder of Indochinese Communism, declared Vietnam's independence from France. It took France nine years, however, to become convinced that it could not effectively reestablish its power in that part of the world.

This article examines South Vietnam's brief experience in representative government, focusing upon the National Assembly elections of March, 1956, and August, 1959. A certain amount of historical material has been considered relevant and therefore necessary to the purpose of the study, which is to attempt to understand how the electoral process functions in Vietnam and, by this means, the functions which elections serve in an underdeveloped state.

THE PRE-REPUBLICAN EXPERIENCE

The election of public officials in Vietnam has had a long history at the village level, and, according to one source, village chiefs were

elected by the adult male populations as early as 1461.¹ The French extended the elective principle during their period as overlords, subjecting local councils to the mandate of limited electorates, and they also established elective councils for each of their three main divisions of Vietnam: the protectorates of Tonkin and Annam and the colony of Cochinchina. These latter bodies were controlled by a very narrow suffrage, largely in the hands of French civil servants and colonists, and possessed but meager influence in the making of public policy. The Colonial Council of Cochinchina, for example, was composed of ten French citizens and six Vietnamese who were French subjects, and was chosen by an electorate of about 12,000.²

When the Viet-Minh assumed power in Vietnam in August, 1945, they introduced democratic trappings to the areas under their control which no subsequent nationalist regime has been able to ignore. At the village level they replaced the French-created councils with "people's councils," comprising from fifteen to twenty-five members and elected by universal suffrage.³ These bodies remained substantially unchanged until the advent of Ngo Dinh-Diem to power, although intermediate regimes reduced their size and subjected them to some provincial and regional control.⁴ At the national level, one of Ho-Chi-Minh's first acts was to announce elections for a parliamentary assembly. It is likely that the Viet-Minh, confident of their ability to obtain or manipulate favorable results, sought by means of a general election to head off opposition demands for high-level entry into the Government.⁵ The main opposition groups were the Vietnamese People's Party (Viet-Nam Quoc-Dan-Dang) and the Vietnamese Revolutionary Allied League (Viet-Nam Cach-Menh Dong-Ming-Hoi), both pro-

¹ Nguyen-Xuan-Dao, *Village Government in Vietnam* (Saigon: Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group, 1958), pp. 24-25 (mimeographed). See also Lam-Le-Trinh, "Village Councils," *Viet-My* (Journal of the Vietnamese-American Association, Saigon), III (June, 1958), Part I, pp. 36, 38.

² Le-Thanh-Khoi, *Le Vietnam, Histoire et Civilisation* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1955), pp. 390-406.

³ Trinh, "Village Councils," *loc. cit.*, III (September, 1958), Part II, p. 60.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

⁵ Cf., Philippe Devillers, *Histoire du Vietnam de 1940 à 1952* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), pp. 195-97.

Chinese and consequently backed by the Chinese military forces which had moved into the northern half of Vietnam. An agreement between the Viet-Minh and the nationalist opposition guaranteed the People's Party fifty seats and the Allied League twenty seats of a total of 350 seats in the National Assembly election held on January 6, 1946. Voting occurred not only in northern and central Vietnam, under Viet-Minh authority, but also in parts of the French-occupied south where colonial authority was ineffective.⁶

There were many shortcomings in the election. The Viet-Minh almost completely controlled the results. Nearly all candidates had their approval, often only one candidate ran in a district, and voting was not secret.⁷ However, the Viet-Minh obtained a democratic façade for their short-lived regime, ended by French occupation of Hanoi in December, 1946, for their subsequent resistance movement, and for the government they reestablished in North Vietnam in mid-1954, following the French disaster at Dien-Bien-Phu.⁸

Like Ho-Chi-Minh, Bao-Dai promised the Vietnamese people a national assembly upon assuming formal power from the French in 1949.⁹ This was to be effected in three stages, with the voters electing municipal and village councils, the latter selecting members of provincial councils, and the last selecting the national assembly itself. This gesture at representative government was never completed. The local elections took place in January and June, 1953, in areas under the control of the Bao-Dai government—that is, under the control of the French army. This included about 25 per cent of the territory of Vietnam and about 50 per cent of its population, though only around 1,000,000 persons were eligible

⁶ Ellen V. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954), pp. 142-43.

⁷ Cf., *ibid.*, p. 143; Devillers, *op. cit.*, p. 201. In Hanoi, however, there were 77 candidates for six seats (Len Fox, *Friendly Vietnam* [Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1958], p. 102).

⁸ The Communist government of North Vietnam traces its unbroken mandate to the 1946 election and, indeed, a rump version of the National Assembly elected in that year still exists.

⁹ Bernard B. Fall, "Representative Government in the State of Vietnam," *Far Eastern Survey*, XXIII (August, 1954), 125.

to vote under the restricted franchise.¹⁰ The Government was generally successful against its opposition in a voting turnout of from 60 to 70 per cent. Subsequent developments were disappointing. The election of the provincial councils, held in October, 1953, attracted very little interest, and the provincial bodies never did proceed to the election of a national legislature.¹¹

The transition of Vietnam from an Associated State within the French Union to an independent republic occurred as a result of mounting political conflict between Emperor Bao-Dai and his Prime Minister, Ngo-Dinh-Diem. The conflict was resolved in late 1955, when the people were asked to choose between Bao-Dai and monarchy, on the one hand, and Diem and a republic, on the other. The issue was hardly in doubt, for, in addition to his identification with the French and his reputation as a playboy, Bao-Dai was in France at the time of the campaign and no activity was carried out on his behalf, while the entire governmental machinery was arrayed on behalf of Diem. It is not surprising under the circumstances that Bao-Dai received but a scant 5 per cent of the ballots cast.¹² In winning the referendum, Diem was chosen President of South Vietnam and charged with the establishment of republican institutions, including a National Assembly based upon universal and free elections.

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS OF 1956 AND 1959

The legislative elections of 1956 and 1959 followed a fairly similar pattern and, where they differed, offer interesting comparisons. Thus they will be treated together. The first election, held March 4, 1956, actually established a qualified Constituent Assembly (Quoc-Hoi Lap-Hien), whose function it was to prepare and submit to the President a Constitution based on principles laid down by him.¹³ The President had promised democracy and a National Assembly by the end of 1955 during the referendum

¹⁰ Hammer, *op. cit.*, pp. 289-90.

¹¹ Fall, *loc. cit.*, p. 125.

¹² J. A. C. Grant, "The Vietnam Constitution of 1956," *American Political Science Review*, LII (June, 1958), 440.

¹³ See *ibid.*, pp. 440-44.

campaign,¹⁴ but the election was postponed to March, 1956, at the request of "many main parties."¹⁵ The Constitution which was created transformed the Constituent Assembly into a National Assembly (Quoc-Hoi Lap-Phap), invested with a three-year term of office from October 26, 1956, the date that the Constitution took effect.¹⁶

During its first three years, the National Assembly did not have a high output of legislation in comparison with the decree-making of the executive branch. It enacted a few dozen laws, the most important of which regulated family relationships, established special military tribunals for offenses against national security, provided penalties for financial misbehavior on the part of public officials, appropriated money for the national government, and laid down the procedures to be followed in the election of a new National Assembly, set for August 30, 1959.

The Electoral Framework

With minor qualifications, all Vietnamese citizens over eighteen years of age are eligible to select the 123 members of the National Assembly. Election is by plurality vote in single-member constituencies of roughly equal population, with the major exception of the capital city of Saigon, which, with about 14 per cent of the population of South Vietnam, was allotted only seven legislative seats in 1956 and nine in 1959.¹⁷ Candidates need not be, and frequently are not, residents of the districts in which they run. The election laws proclaim as their central feature full democratic expression on the part of the voters and absolute equality in campaigning among the candidates.¹⁸ However, although candidates

¹⁴ U. S. Operations Mission to Vietnam, *Saigon Daily News Round-Up*, October 15, 1955.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, January 18, 1956.

¹⁶ Republic of Vietnam, *Constitution*, Art. 95.

¹⁷ Saigon also had a few of the special refugee constituencies which were established in 1956 to ensure representation to the approximately 800,000 persons who had fled south after the Geneva Accords.

¹⁸ Republic of Vietnam, *Official Journal* (Viet-Nam Cong-Hoa, *Cong-Bao*), Ordinances Nos. 8 and 9 of January 23, 1956, and Laws Nos. 19 and 20 of June 30, 1959. These regulations are found in *Vietnam Presse* (French edition), January 24, 1956; and *ibid.*, August 9 and 10, 1959 (evening issue).

may run either as independents or under party labels, political parties require authorization from the Department of Interior in order to function in South Vietnam.

Upon presentation of identity cards and, in 1959, special election cards, voters were given ballots each of which contained the name and, for the illiterate especially, the symbol of a candidate. The voter placed one ballot in an envelope provided him, throwing away the other ballots in a secluded booth, and he placed his concealed ballot in a locked box. Candidates' representatives were permitted to watch the balloting and the counting of votes.

The procedures for putting candidates on an equal competitive footing are highly interesting. An electoral propaganda committee was formed in each district charged with "all electoral preparations for the candidates on a basis of absolute equality among all candidates."¹⁹ The committee included a representative of each party-nominated candidate and one representative for all independent candidates,²⁰ and it undertook all arrangements for public meetings, radio talks, the use of radio trucks and loudspeakers, and space in the press.²¹ The committee's powers extended to deciding on the number, size, color, and kind of paper to be used for handbills and posters, and the dates and places for their posting or distribution. It approved the texts of these various campaign materials.

All campaign expenses were defrayed by the Government.²² Candidates and their supporters were not permitted to spend money on their own nor to engage in activities, such as public meetings, outside of this planned framework. To discourage frivolous candidates, those failing to obtain five per cent of the votes cast in their

¹⁹ *Vietnam Presse* (French edition), January 24, 1956.

²⁰ The intent of the law apparently was not to discriminate against the independents but to hold down the size of the committee. If there were only two candidates, each could designate one committee member; if there were no party nominees, the independent candidates could designate three members. (Law No. 19 of June 30, 1959, Chapter IV, Article 15 [2]).

²¹ The newspapers also came under the "equality-for-all" rules. Cf. the warning of the Secretary of State for Information that the press was neither to criticize nor support any candidates, but only to publish their opinions. USOM, *Saigon Daily News Round-Up*, February 8, 1956.

²² An allocation of about two and one-half cents per elector was made from the national budget for electoral propaganda expenses.

districts were required to reimburse the Government for their share of the printing expenses. The financial deposit required in the 1956 election was dropped in the 1959 regulations on the ground that it discouraged worthy but non-wealthy candidates.

The campaign period in each election was about two weeks. Violation of any of the electoral prescriptions could result in a fine or the invalidation of an election, either by tribunals established for this purpose or by the National Assembly itself.

The Candidates

Electoral competition was strikingly the same in the two elections. In 1956 there were 431 candidates and in 1959, 441.²³ The original number of candidates in 1959 was 660, and the reduction has been explained as due to voluntary withdrawals and failure to meet electoral qualifications.²⁴ The mean number of candidates to a district was about 3.5 in both elections; Saigon was the scene of the greatest amount of competition and central Vietnam the least.²⁵

The participation of political parties in the two elections underwent interesting changes. In 1956 three main parties offered candidates; by 1959 two of these parties had disappeared from electoral view and the remaining one had changed leadership. The original parties were the National Revolutionary Movement (Phong-Trao Cach-Mang Quoc-Gia), the official government party; the Citizens Assembly (Tap-Doan Cong-Dan), a largely Catholic group; and the Movement to Win and Preserve Freedom (Phong-Trao Tran-Thu Tu-Do), a group of intellectuals, mostly refugees from the north. By 1959 only one of these parties, the National Revolutionary Movement, was still in the field, and

²³ USOM, *Saigon Daily News Round-Up*, March 9, 1956, p. 1; *Times of Vietnam Magazine*, September 5, 1959, p. 4. *The Vietnam Press* (English edition), August 29, 1959 (special issue), p. I, and other issues of the same agency, place the number of candidates at 460, but the *Times of Vietnam* source appears to be based on later information.

²⁴ *Journal d'Extrême-Orient*, August 21, 1959, p. 3.

²⁵ Saigon averaged seven candidates to a district in 1956 and nine candidates in 1959, while central Vietnam averaged about two candidates in both elections. Cf., USOM, *Saigon Daily News Round-Up*, March 9, 1956, p. 1; Republic of Vietnam, Secretary of State for Interior, "Election of the National Assembly in 1959—Vote Returns" (mimeographed).

formal leadership of that group had passed from Tran-Chanh-Thanh, the Secretary of State for Information, to Pham-Van-Nhu, President of the National Assembly. The Citizens Assembly and the Movement to Win and Preserve Freedom had disappeared, the first by amalgamation with the NRM and the second by sheer evaporation. Other parties running candidates in the two elections were insignificant in size and in number of candidacies,²⁶ and the key political organization in Vietnam, the Personalist Labor Party (Can-Lao Nhan-Vi), headed by the President's brother and Special Political Advisor, Ngo-Dinh-Nhu, ran no candidates at all, at least under its own name.

The dominant position of the National Revolutionary Movement in relation to its electoral competitors is indicated by the number of candidates it put into the field. In 1956, 80 of the 140 party nominees were NRM, and in 1959 the number was 94 of 101 nominees.²⁷ The significance of party labels should not, however, be overdrawn, for the policies of all parties were practically identical. Indeed, nearly all candidates, party and independent alike, espoused the same general views.²⁸ There was, in fact, little to distinguish an independent in most cases from a candidate of a pro-government party, and a number of government-backed candidates ran as independents. For example, about ten Personalist Labor-affiliated deputies, including Ngo-Dinh Nhu, showed up in the National Assembly after the 1956 election.

Where was the opposition? The most formidable opposition to the Government were the Communists, and they stood outside the legal pale. According to the Government, they sought to intro-

²⁶ In all, eight groups ran candidates in 1956 and four in 1959. *Vietnam Presse* (French edition), March 7, 1956 (evening issue), p. 2; *ibid.* (English edition), August 26, 1959, p. VIII.

²⁷ See *Vietnam Presse* (French edition), March 3, 1956 (morning issue), pp. 3-4, and *Times of Vietnam Magazine*, September 5, 1959, pp. 4-5.

²⁸ See, for example, *Vietnam Presse* (French edition), February 29, 1956 (noon issue), pp. 1-2, and USOM, *Saigon Daily News Round-Up*, September 1, 1959, p. 7. The latter source, citing one of the Vietnamese-language newspapers, lists the following as common themes of the campaign: lower taxes, protecting land tenants from expulsion by landlords, adequate standard of living and job security for the working class, improvement of slum conditions, implementation of constitutional freedoms, and social justice, including free education and public health services.

duce pro-Communists into the National Assembly in 1959—presumably by running or supporting sympathizers as independent candidates; but this tactic reportedly failed.²⁹

The situation of the anti-communist nationalist opposition was quite different. They boycotted the 1956 election when their demand that non-government groups should participate in drawing up the election decrees was not heeded. Forming a National Revolutionary Council of Vietnam, five opposition groups charged the President with "dictatorship" and the electoral regulations with failing to provide for freedom of opinion, press, meeting, and organization.³⁰ The Revolutionary Council's proposals were intended to restrain what were considered to be opportunities for Government manipulation of the coming election. It also suggested one basic change in the electoral system, the substitution of the list system of proportional representation for the single-member district, plurality vote method.³¹

In 1959 a number, though not all, of the nationalist critics of the regime expressed a willingness to participate in the election, and there was talk of the different factions collaborating to enter candidates in all Saigon and neighboring districts.³² Two things were requested of the Government as tests of its sincerity. First were changes in the electoral system to provide proportional representation and what were considered to be necessary procedural

²⁹ *Journal d'Extrême-Orient*, September 3, 1959, p. 4.

³⁰ *Vietnam Presse* (French edition), March 5, 1956; letter addressed to the President by twenty-eight members of the National Revolutionary Council, dated January 27, 1956 (typewritten). The five parties were the League for National Restoration (Phuc-Quoc-Hoi) and the Social Democratic Party (Dang-Xa-Hoi), connected, respectively, with the Cao-Dai and Hoa-Hao politico-religious sects; the Vietnamese People's Party (Viet-Nam Quoc-Dan-Dang), which had close ideological links with the Chinese Kuomintang; the Greater Vietnam Party (Dai-Viet), originally a pro-Japanese party; and the Republican Party (Dang Cong-Hoa), headed by a medical doctor, Phan-Quang-Dan, the leader of the Council and the best known of the opposition.

³¹ Conseil Révolutionnaire National du Vietnam, "Sur l'importante question des lois électorales. Nous proposons," dated January 15, 1956 (typewritten). The opposition desired proportional representation because they thought it would ensure them some seats in an election in which they saw the Government holding a preponderant advantage.

³² This is based on conversations with various opposition spokesmen during the months of May, June, and July, 1959.

safeguards for non-government candidates.⁸³ The second request was for the free organization of political parties and their right to offer candidates in the election.⁸⁴ Neither condition was met, and most of the opposition contemplating running did not seek election.

The Campaigns

The most noticeable evidence of the campaigns was the great number of posters, banners, and similar pieces of electoral propaganda. It is interesting that, including the slogans placed on homes and shops, posters publicizing and exhorting participation in the election outnumbered those for the candidates by a margin of about fifteen to one. All electoral posters were put up by the Department of Information, and there was hardly a tree in the beautifully tree-lined city of Saigon, hardly a house or business place, hardly an unused wall which did not bear witness to the electoral campaign in progress. Outside the capital, the amount of electoral propaganda was somewhat less, though still substantial.

Beneath the veneer of government bustle, there was not a great deal of visible activity. In the cities and countryside, meetings were held and candidates set forth their programs, but it was difficult to discern much spontaneous voter activity or excitement. The greatest relief to this electoral calm was furnished in 1959 in one of the Saigon districts, where the appearance of representatives for two opposition candidates caused minor rioting.⁸⁵ In 1956, there was not this much stir.

The Communists in their own way attempted to provide some excitement. Heavy precautions on the Government's part, however, reduced their activity to a relatively few scattered acts of violence. They had, according to the Government, promised sixty assassinations during the two months preceding the 1959 election.⁸⁶

⁸³ These were contained in a "Communiqué on the Amendment to the Bill Fixing Procedures for the National Assembly Election" (no date), signed by thirteen persons and presented to the Government and given wide circulation among intellectuals and other groups in Saigon.

⁸⁴ Phan-Quang-Dan, for example, issued a number of mimeographed statements on this question. The clearest expression of the opposition point of view is contained in his circular dated July 1, 1959, "What Parties Will Run for Election?"

⁸⁵ See, for example, *Times of Vietnam*, August 21, 1959, p. 2.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, September 2, 1959, p. 2.

They launched thirty armed attacks in the southern region of the Republic and managed to kill an unspecified number of government officials and private citizens, as well as to distribute tracts and harass and threaten the population, but their campaign was apparently a failure. In contrast to 1956, when the Communists interfered with the balloting in some localities, the Government was able to report in 1959 that "the elections took place in perfect order without any security incidents."³⁷

If the Communists could not sabotage the elections of 1956 and 1959, they evidently hoped to keep many voters from the polls. The greater loyalty, or strength, which the Government was able to muster is reflected in the size of the vote. In both elections, about 85 per cent of the adult population cast their ballots.³⁸

The Results

The government parties won in both 1956 and 1959 by clear majorities. They took 83 of the 123 seats in the first year and 89 two years later.³⁹ The government majorities were, in fact, even greater than the figures indicate. A number of elected independents subsequently affiliated with the government parties within the National Assembly or, to put it more accurately, showed their party colors.⁴⁰ And obviously party deputies, like Ngo-Dinh-Nhu,

³⁷ *Vietnam Press* (English edition), September 1, 1959 (evening issue), p. 1. See also USOM, *Saigon Daily News Round-Up*, March 5, 1956, pp. 1-2, March 7, 1956, p. 1, and June 4, 1959, p. 2a.

³⁸ Though the data are not too accurate and, in fact, conflict, probably over 80 per cent of the voters in Saigon and over 85 per cent of the voters in the provinces participated in each of the two elections. See USOM, *Saigon Daily News Round-Up*, March 5, 1956, p. 1; *Vietnam Presse* (French edition), March 7, 1956 (evening issue), p. 2; *ibid.* (English edition), August 31, 1959 (evening issue), p. I.

³⁹ USOM, *Saigon Daily News Round-Up*, March 9, 1956, p. 1; *Vietnam Press* (English edition), September 1, 1959 (morning issue), p. III-a.

⁴⁰ Thus, in the first National Assembly, there turned out to be only twelve non-government party deputies. (*Times of Vietnam*, July 7, 1956, Sect. A.) The full figures for the second National Assembly are not yet available, though the *Vietnam Press's* reports of the election results indicate that a number of elected independents are members of government parties. See the district-by-district election results reported in *Vietnam Presse* (French edition) for the period August 31–September 3, 1959; also *ibid.* (English edition), September 1, 1959 (morning issue), p. III-a.

who probably wishes to remain aloof from ordinary partisanship, have continued even after election to classify themselves as independents. The relatively few non-party independents elected were nearly all supporters of government policy.

The extent of the Government's victory in the elections is clearer still when one considers the nature of the pro-government parties. The official party, the National Revolutionary Movement, is a mass party honorarily headed by the President and actually run by one brother, Ngo-Dinh-Nhu, in the high plateau and southern regions of the country, and by another brother, Ngo-Dinh-Can, in the central delta. The minor parties, except for the Personalist Labor Party, are variations on the same theme, designed to appeal to special groups in the electorate, and for the most part they are former opposition groups which have been cleansed and taken over by the Government. The single exception, the Personalist Labor Party, is a small, semi-secret organization directed by Ngo-Dinh-Nhu, which functions mainly in the southern region of Vietnam and which has its members in a number of key, though not necessarily high, positions in the Government. While the government parties in 1959 lost 22 of the 105 contests in which they entered candidates,⁴¹ this figure is misleading because some government candidates lost to other government candidates and some lost to independents who were really government-preferred. In fact, it is probable that very few government-supported candidates lost in either 1956 or 1959, and that most, if not all, of these were beaten in the city of Saigon. The reasons for the Government's success will be discussed later.

How did the open nationalist opposition fare in the elections? The opposition parties boycotted the 1956 election, though some of their members may have run as independents,⁴² and in 1959 the Government refused to grant to any opposition group the legal status necessary to formally organized participation in the election campaign. It is difficult to say just how many of the nationalist opposition ran as independents in 1959; the writer knows of six persons, five of whom ran in Saigon or its suburbs. Two won election, both in Saigon.

⁴¹ See *Times of Vietnam Magazine*, September 5, 1959, p. 4.

⁴² *Vietnam Presse* (French edition), March 1, 1956 (noon issue), pp. 3-6.

The winning candidates gained large majorities. In 1959, the only election for which relatively complete data are available, they obtained 79 per cent of the vote in the country as a whole.⁴³ Competition was greater in the southern region, where the winning average was 67 per cent, than in the central region, where it was 88 per cent. Competition was also higher in the urban districts, in which the winning candidate averaged 57 per cent (66 per cent, excluding Saigon), than the rural districts, in which the average was 84 per cent.⁴⁴ Saigon itself was the locus of the greatest amount of competition, as it was of the greatest opposition to the Government, and there the winners obtained only 44 per cent of the vote.⁴⁵

EVALUATION

How fair were the elections of 1956 and 1959? What meaning do they have for a society in which the symbols of democracy have high value and the practices but shallow roots? Consideration of the first question leads to the second; in fact, electoral probity cannot be properly understood without understanding also the pressures—of democratic ideals, of the given conditions of Vietnamese society, of the perceived needs of the regime in maintaining itself—which come into play in the exercise of the franchise on a mass scale in a new and underdeveloped state like Vietnam.

Probity of the Elections

The Government's tactics in the two campaigns ranged from scrupulous fairness in observing the letter of the election laws to behind-the-scenes manipulations to violate their spirit. In general, it

⁴³ This and subsequent percentages were derived from the voting results reported in the *Vietnam Presse* (French edition) during the period August 31-September 3, 1959. This source does not present the votes received by minor candidates.

⁴⁴ For the information of the interested reader, the twenty-two districts classified as urban were: the nine Saigon districts; the three urban districts in the adjacent province of Gia-Dinh (Districts 1, 2, and 3); the cities of Dalat, Hue, and Da-Nang; and the cities, including surrounding areas, of Bien-Hoa, An-Giang, Can-Tho, My-Tho, Phu-Vinh, Vinh-Long, and Tuy-Hoa.

⁴⁵ If the votes of all the candidates had been given, the average would have been still smaller, since Saigon had a large number of candidates seeking election in most districts.

appears that the voting was carried on in fairness and secrecy and that the ballots generally were honestly counted, although improprieties could have been carried out in the provinces.⁴⁶ The man whom the Government wanted most to beat, Phan-Quang-Dan, not only won in his Saigon district but, in beating an incumbent deputy and member of the National Revolutionary Movement, collected more votes than any other candidate in the city.

The Government did interfere at every other stage in the electoral process. First, it controlled the participation of political parties in the election, and it used this power to prevent its nationalist opposition from organizing itself aboveground or running candidates under party labels. Second, it screened the candidates and, outside of Saigon, pressured a number to withdraw from the campaigns. As one province chief put it to a foreign visitor, the Government was concerned that candidates be "sincere" and not run simply to cause trouble. Third, certain candidates were given special help during the campaign. The majority leader of the National Assembly, for example, sent out a mailing to his constituents, an illegal action under the "equality" regulations, based on name and address records furnished him by the police. Though all candidates appeared to receive roughly equal treatment in the placement of posters, special posters were put up around a number of the polling places in Saigon for certain government candidates on the eve of the 1959 election. Further, small bombs were set off outside some Saigon printing houses in this same election to discourage them from printing posters and handbills for opposition candidates.⁴⁷ And it is not improbable that the persons who shouted down the opposition candidates or their representatives at

⁴⁶ There was one newspaper report of a person arrested in a rural district because she protested against an election official's demand that she vote for a certain candidate (*Times of Vietnam*, September 4, 1959, p. 2); eyewitnesses told the writer of the removal of some ballot boxes by the province chief in one very closely contested election in 1959; and there was a rash of unverified stories in 1956 about allegedly improper counts.

⁴⁷ The newspaper of the National Revolutionary Movement imputed this behavior to the "colonialists and Communists" (see USOM, *Saigon Daily News Round-Up*, August 28, 1959, pp. 7-8); however, there were strong indications that the Government itself was responsible.

some of the meetings held in the Saigon area in 1959 were operating under instructions from the government parties.

The Government in both elections passed the word to its civil servants on whom to vote for, and it appears that government preferences were made clear to rural voters by local officials. The Government also made free use of the army in certain districts in the Saigon area. Soldiers were given the names of government candidates, transported in trucks to polling places, sometimes in uniform and sometimes in civilian clothes, and went into the polls in groups. The actual voting, however, was secret, and even though many troops were rushed into the district in which Phan-Quang-Dan was a candidate, Dan won handily. It should be restated that little is known about what took place in the countryside. One reliable account is that given the writer by an observer of a campaign meeting which occurred in a village about thirty miles from Saigon, at which the various candidates appeared. Each family in the village was instructed to have at least one adult representative at the affair; the audience was passive except when prompted to applause by non-village "strangers" in their midst; and all questions, which did not exceed two to a candidate, were asked by the hamlet chiefs. In place of a question to the government candidate, one of the hamlet chiefs simply shouted, "Long live the National Revolutionary Movement," to the accompaniment of dutiful applause.

Only a few undesigned candidates emerged through this maze of governmental caution. The three important upsets all occurred in Saigon, but two of the three unprovided-for winners were themselves upset in legal proceedings charging them with violation of the election law. One of these was Phan-Quang-Dan and the other was Nguyen-Tran, a maverick member of the Personalist Labor Party who had run as an independent against a government candidate.⁴⁸ The charges had dubious foundation and appear to have been devised as means of eliminating the two winners from their National Assembly seats.⁴⁹ Charges of election violations

⁴⁸ See *Vietnam Press* (English edition), September 13, 1959 (weekly issue), p. 9, and September 20, 1959, p. 8.

⁴⁹ Dan, for example, was charged with promising free medical care to anyone

were leveled at a number of other candidates, including oppositionists, during the 1959 election. The third opposition winner, considered a moderate and unconnected with Dan or other persons *non grata* with the regime, was permitted to enter the National Assembly.

The percentages by which winning candidates gained victory in different parts of Vietnam in 1959 reflect the amount of campaign freedom which existed in those areas. The greatest amount of freedom was in Saigon and its suburbs; here governmental interference was light, the average winning plurality was less than 50 per cent, and the opportunity to contest against government-backed candidates was highest. Saigon, incidentally, was in both elections allotted only about one-half the number of seats to which its population would entitle it. In general, the cities provided more freedom than the rural areas, and the districts in the southern area of the country more freedom than those in the central area. This last is explained by the greater influence of tradition in central Vietnam and by the stringency with which Ngo-Dinh-Can, one of the President's brothers, imposes his rule in the area.

The Meaning of Elections

The elections of 1956 and 1959 were avenues to the National Assembly. But what lay at the end of the road? The National Assembly is still an institution largely of form, hardly of power. In its original guise as a constituent body, the legislature was called on to do little more than ratify a constitution prepared in the main by other hands. It has enacted but a small number of bills, only a handful of which were of any importance; and these were drawn up by the executive. No bill has been modified to any important extent in the National Assembly,⁵⁰ and little serious debate has issued from it. Although the National Assembly has been divided into majority and minority blocs, these blocs constitute verbal,

who voted for him. Dan argued in his court defense that, if this were true, he would have sought election where his medical practice was conducted and not in a district located on the other side of the city. (*Times of Vietnam*, September 9, 1959, pp. 1-2.) See his story of alleged oppression by a "certain group of persons" (*ibid.*, August 29, 1959, p. 2).

⁵⁰ See USOM, *Saigon Daily News Round-Up*, June 27, 1959, p. 6.

not factual, distinctions of legislative viewpoint. The President of the Republic not only dominates the legislative process but exercises broad policy-making on his own. The deputies do not have roots in their constituencies and, as one newspaper has pointed out and the average Vietnamese is well aware, a good many deputies had not, on the eve of the 1959 election campaign, returned to their districts since they were elected to the National Assembly in March, 1956.⁵¹

It is likely that these conditions will not change appreciably during the next three years, the lifetime of the new National Assembly. President Diem has on at least one recent occasion, at which the writer was present, compared the National Assembly to a small child which has first to learn to crawl, then to walk, before it can freely run. And a high government official, close to the source of political power, has estimated that the National Assembly will not come into its maturity for about another ten years.⁵²

If this is the prize which was sought, what was all the concern about? Why the elaborate and expensive campaign by the Government? Why the careful preparations to ensure that the "wrong" sort of people, even though non-Communists, did not get elected? In addition to the National Assembly's secondary role in policy-making, there was little risk that free elections would have placed it in hostile hands. The inclinations of most rural voters and the unorganized state and small size of the nationalist opposition would have seen to that. Why did so many candidates seek the small prize and so many voters participate in selecting those who would gain it? The answer to these questions lies in the meaning which elections in Vietnam have, not to Americans but to the Vietnamese themselves: to the Government, the candidates, and the population at large.

Elections, along with such other accoutrements of democracy as a written constitution, universal suffrage, and a national legislature, are part of the requirement of modernity. They are what the advanced nations, including the Soviet Union, have, and hardly any

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, June 16, 1959, p. 7, citing the Saigon newspaper, *Dan Chung*.

⁵² This statement was made to the writer in a personal interview.

new state seems to feel that it can do without them or the promise of them. This holds true even though democratic procedures sharply contrast with tradition and present threats to stability. In Vietnam, international prestige is reinforced by the expectations and demands of the westernized elite, including members of the Government itself. Furthermore, in a society which has gone through revolutionary turmoil, the expectations in a more diffuse way extend still more broadly through the population. The absence of democracy is associated by many Vietnamese with foreign domination, and national independence implies elections and a national assembly. Ho-Chi-Minh, Bao-Dai and Ngo-Dinh-Diem all recognized and responded to the appeal of an elected representative body, though Bao-Dai failed where the other two succeeded in providing institutional fulfillment.

The Government. Within this context, the elections of 1956 and 1959 have meant several things to the present regime. Among the less important considerations has been the election of a policy-making body. The significance attached to the National Assembly itself is seen in the aftermath of the 1956 election. The Constitution promulgated that year prohibited any cabinet minister from serving also as deputy.⁵³ Of the four ministers then serving in the National Assembly, three, at the invitation of the President, retained their cabinet positions and one, lacking this invitation, stayed in the National Assembly.⁵⁴ Further, the brother and political advisor to the President, Ngo-Dinh-Nhu, did not, to this writer's knowledge, attend a single session of the national legislature between 1956 and 1959. Also, one could not help but be struck by the great predominance of nonpartisan election propaganda over that for the candidates during the 1959 campaign.

The Vietnamese Government sought to make a good showing before the outside world in the two legislative elections. Its audience was not only the West and the underdeveloped countries, but also the Communist-bloc nations—in particular, North Vietnam. The Government took particular pride in the fact that in contrast to the North, where elections had not been held since

⁵³ Republic of Vietnam, *Constitution*, Art. 53.

⁵⁴ See USOM, *Saigon Daily News Round-Up*, November 16, 1956, p. 2.

1946, elections could be held in the South, and it made the most of this difference for propaganda purposes. Hence, it was necessary that the elections should be successful, free from disruption by the Communists, with a high level of popular participation, and with at least the manifestations of fairness.⁵⁵

At the same time, elections meant another opportunity to mobilize the consent of the masses, to rouse the population in affirmative action for the Government and in opposition to the Communists. The ubiquitous propaganda posters and banners in the 1959 campaign left little doubt that participation was equated with loyalty to the republican regime against its enemies. "Every ballot," read one of the posters, "is a shell through the Vietnamese Communist flag"; "The whole people," another announced, "have a duty to participate in the national Assembly election of 1959"; and so on nearly ad infinitum. During the month of July, 1959, alone, the Department of Information printed more than 100,000 illustrated posters and more than one million handbills for the propaganda campaign.⁵⁶ To support this campaign, the Government sent out waves of civil servants to conduct an educational campaign among the people. Their job, according to one source, was to explain the elections and "to assist the population, to understand its aspirations, and to realize the rural policies of President Ngo."⁵⁷ Throughout the 1959 campaign, these propaganda teams were fanned out into the countryside, concentrating their efforts in the security-sensitive areas. In addition, Communist-denunciation meetings were organized, especially in 1956, as were parades and other demonstrations.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ The *Vietnam Press* took care to note at the beginning of the 1959 campaign that the election atmosphere in Saigon was "truly democratic" and that "the handbills were characteristic of [those in] advanced democratic countries" ([English edition], August 17, 1959 [evening issue], p. III). The election laws themselves, with their emphasis upon "absolute equality among all candidates," were self-conscious attempts to assure fairness in electoral procedures, and practically every election official who showed this writer around his polling station emphasized the fair and democratic character of the voting taking place.

⁵⁶ *Vietnam Press* (English edition), August 14, 1959 (evening issue), p. VII.

⁵⁷ *Journal d'Extrême-Orient*, July 4, 1959, in a translation of an article appearing in the Saigon newspaper, *Tu-Do*.

⁵⁸ In one rather unorthodox tactic, 5,000 bicyclists, mostly soldiers, rode through the streets of Saigon wearing large posters on their backs which proclaimed "absolute participation in the general election" and "down with the Communist

Elections also pose a threat to the regime. If the concern of the Government is out of proportion to the weight of the threat, this is because elections are a new experience in Vietnam, the Government itself is new and not sure of its popularity, and the still rather precarious situation of the country makes the Diem regime extremely sensitive to possible divisive influences. Thus, the Government, having, in the best democratic fashion, bequeathed freedom to its people, seeks to maintain for itself a wide margin of safety by controlling the exercise of this freedom. Elections, then, must not only conform to norms of fairness, but must produce the desired results even if this requires screening out candidates, use of governmental machinery to promote favored candidates, and elimination by legal devices of successful opposition candidates after victory.

The Candidates. It is difficult to evaluate the meaning of elections for those who ran in them. A fairly large number were selected and designated or asked to run by the inner leadership of the government party; others were approached by province chiefs and other officials, sometimes with the assurance of government support and sometimes only to provide safe grist for the electoral mill. Some candidates might have been attracted by the high salary and low work demands of membership in the National Assembly,⁵⁹ or for whatever prestige was thought to accrue from being a deputy. Some persons possibly thought that the life of a deputy was or might become challenging.

For the nationalist opposition, which is small and located largely in Saigon, the elections had a different meaning. Some disdained participating in what they considered to be a rigged performance for entry into an impotent organism. Some considered running but decided against it because they viewed the Government as holding too many trumps. The united front which the opposition presented in 1956 broke down in 1959, and a small number of opposition candidates entered the second contest. What of these latter?

traitors and sabotage agents" (USOM, *Saigon Daily News Round-Up*, February 5, 1956, p. 6).

⁵⁹ A deputy earns about 26,000 piasters or, at the official free-market exchange rate, \$360 a month, very good pay in relation to other government positions.

Some members in opposition felt that it was time to enter into the political life of the country if they were not to be left behind by events, and that the Government might permit the development of a moderate opposition group. They had no illusions about the role of the National Assembly, though they were hopeful that the legislature might be converted over the years into an agency independent of executive domination. Most important of all, perhaps, was the fact that membership in the National Assembly would provide access to the population. These people have not forgotten the popular strength which a few anti-colonialist Vietnamese had built from within the Colonial Council of Cochinchina in the 1930's, and they viewed the National Assembly, with its parliamentary immunities and the coverage of its activities by the press, as a forum opening to similar opportunities.

The People. The meaning attached to the elections by the population at large is the most difficult of all to evaluate. Certainly, the high turn-out on election day is not of itself an index of popular enthusiasm, for it was widely believed in Saigon, and probably even more widely held in the provinces, that failure to vote could subject a person to difficulties with the authorities. In 1956, a person's identity card was stamped at the polling place; in 1959, his identity card was stamped when he obtained his voting card, and his voting card was stamped at the polls. However unfounded the concern, many Vietnamese thought it important to have their cards in proper order.

There was scarcely any manifestation of popular enthusiasm in the campaign, if a few crowd scuffles are excepted. Practically all campaign activity—poster placing, the slogans on private dwellings, the occasional street parades, even the band concert on election night (which was poorly attended)—was executed by the Government. Saigon and other cities in the southern region had the unreal appearance of being dressed for an election but without the lifelike movements of an election campaign.⁶⁰ It was even difficult to discover where and when political meetings were to be held.

⁶⁰ While most of the comments based on personal observations are restricted to the 1959 campaign in Saigon and its suburbs, the writer also visited about ten provinces in the southern region of Vietnam during this campaign.

It is probable that many of the electorate considered voting another obligation imposed by the Government, an obligation which in the countryside was not clearly understood except that one was expected to support the indicated candidates. Some resentment would not be surprising when obligatory voting is accompanied by directed voting or the choice among often meaningless alternatives and where, in addition, the citizens are called upon to register affirmative attitudes by attaching slogans to their homes and, in much of the countryside, participating in campaign meetings.

Such appears to have been the case. At least some of the government employees sent out to evangelize in the countryside encountered resentment; there was some tearing of election posters;⁶¹ and the more independent and sophisticated voters of Saigon availed themselves in large numbers of the chance of voting for opposition candidates.

The voting for Phan-Quang-Dan is especially illuminating, since Dan has fashioned for himself the role of leading critic of the Ngo-Dinh-Diem regime. Dan's case is interesting because of the absence of any substantial record of accomplishment for his country. Except for a brief period in one of the Bao-Dai cabinets, he has been a politician out of power. But the same is true of Diem's career from 1933 to 1954, in the twenty years between his resignation as Bao-Dai's Minister of Interior to his ascension as Bao-Dai's Prime Minister. Both Dan and Diem gained their strength not for what they were, but for what they symbolized: in one case, unyielding opposition to French colonialism; in the other, dissatisfaction with the policies of the present regime.

This parallel should not be drawn too far, nor should attitudes of the Saigon electorate be generalized to the rural areas of the country. At the same time, it should be remembered that nearly ten years of Viet-Minh domination in certain parts of south Vietnam, and influence in still other parts of that area, have shaken the

⁶¹ This again is based on personal observations during the 1959 campaign. See USOM, *Saigon Daily News Round-Up*, February 20, 1956, p. 2, for the arrest of poster-tearing "saboteurs" during the 1956 campaign. A Communist source claims that 80 per cent of the posters were torn down in 1956 (*Facts and Dates on the Problem of the Reunification of Vietnam* [Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956], p. 54).

old relationships between the ruled and their governors and have generated new expectations among the population. Whether the population, particularly that of rural Vietnam, is satisfied with the sharp limits placed on its participation in the forms of democracy, and whether the social and economic programs of the Government will succeed in satisfying new aspirations, are large and crucial questions.

CONCLUSION

Vietnam has no strong tradition of elective self-government. Although its experience with elections goes far back in history, these were restricted to the village level, had but limited importance in the overall political system, and probably involved very limited choice or even cooptation by village elders. Likewise, the limited deliberative assemblies established during the colonial period had little impact upon the great mass of the Vietnamese. The political tradition of Vietnam has been that of autocratic government, first of the emperor assisted by a class of scholar-administrators, the mandarinates, and more recently of the French governor-general assisted by his fellow-colonials and a controlled native bureaucracy.

The recent experimentation with elections has been largely assimilated to this autocratic tradition. It is unfortunate that full-scale elections should have been introduced in Vietnam during a period of great transition, in which the lack of self-confidence on the part of the rulers, ideological tensions within Vietnamese society, and the importance of the issues at stake have all militated against the development of this fragile democratic institution. Both dominating forces in present-day Vietnam, the communists and the nationalists, have been willing to permit elections only to the extent that they have been able to control the results, and both have used elections to mobilize mass consent for their respective regimes. This was as true of the referendum staged between Bao-Dai and Ngo-Dinh-Diem in 1955 and of the National Assembly elections of 1956 and 1959 as it was of the legislative election held in the Viet-Minh zone in 1946. Insofar as the conduct of elections is concerned, the difference between the regimes lies in the greater intolerance of opposition in North Vietnam and the greater willingness to employ drastic methods to eliminate it. Further, the

doctrinal ideas of the two regimes allow for greater optimism with respect to future developments in South Vietnam.

The Ngo-Dinh-Diem Government has repeatedly expressed its commitment to democratic principles, though not necessarily as they are put into practice in the West. It has demonstrated a certain desire to comply with the forms, if not always the substance, of democratic behavior. Moreover, elections have a strong appeal among the small western-educated, urban middle class and probably in a rather vague way among other sections of the population; and they have an appeal also to a regime which seeks the respect of older members of the international community.

The instruments of democratic practice already exist in South Vietnam in the government-dominated political parties. With time and under favorable conditions, these groups may be permitted to become independent entities espousing competing programs, for many members of the government groups, and a number of pro-government deputies as well, are critical of various aspects of government policy. Finally, it is not beyond possibility that the Government may, as it feels more sure of itself, grant some rights to its nationalist opposition, though this will require greater evidence than presently exists that some elements of the opposition are willing to accept the responsibilities which accompany peaceful political competition.

Such developments should not be expected to occur quickly. In fact, there is no certainty that they will take place at all. To the extent that they do, it should not be expected that representative institutions and practices will develop in Vietnam as they have in the United States or in the West generally. In particular, the electoral process will continue to serve at least somewhat different functions in Vietnam, and it will be shaped and directed by restraints generated by the structure of Vietnamese society and the political needs of an underdeveloped, territorially divided, and militarily menaced country.