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"TOUGH 'dove' MINH wary of Viet vote fix"

By Mark Gayn  
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SAIGON --Gen. Duong Van Minh, who is expected to challenge President Nguyen Van Thieu in the October election, favors coexistence with Hanoi but strongly opposes a coalition with the Communists.

"Gen. Thieu," Minh said, "insists he will bring peace through victory, peace by killing off the last Communist. This is impossible. I do not wish to attack the North to compel it to abandon Communism. But I do not want the North to attack me here."

"I can accept coexistence with them. We can have people on either side visit their families on the other side. We can help each other economically. They need our rice and we need their coal."

The declaration, extraordinary in its candor, was made in the course of a two hour exclusive interview at the general's closely watched house.

At no point did "Big Minh" definitely say he would run for the presidency. But he did say that his organization was busy all across the nation -- and he spoke like a candidate.

The general explained that if he finds the election rigged beyond control, he will not run. "It would be crazy to spend all this money if the result is known in advance."

The big tests, he said, will come in the crucial elections to the chamber of deputies in August. "We shall see then just how much rigging there will be."

Minh appeared to be concerned about stuffed ballot boxes only a little more than he was about the involvement of the U.S. Embassy here in Thieu's behalf. He would not criticize the embassy directly, but he said, "People tell me the U.S. Embassy is working busily to help Thieu."

He thought the idea of a U.S. congressional watchdog committee -- to keep an eye on the U.S. Embassy rather than on the Vietnamese --was "good but insufficient." He asked, How can a small group ~~of~~ watch all that is happening?"

The idea was advanced last week by senators Mike Mansfield (D.Mont) and Adlai Stevenson III (D.Ill).

If he opens his public campaign, Minh insisted, he will make no personal attacks on Thieu. Instead, he will seek to present himself as a man of virtue and integrity, a man who can bring peace to this ravaged land -- and a peace of mind.

But Minh did challenge Thieu's claim that the country is being pacified. "Why does he not spend a night in the countryside without a regiment of troops to guard him?" The people, he said, will not be deceived by the claims, for "they know the truth about pacification."

Much of the discussion was devoted to U.S. policies and actions in Vietnam.

He said he feared that the U.S. government would compel Saigon to accept a coalition with the Communists. "History shows", he said, "that the United States tried to force Chiang Kai-shek to accept such a coalition. The biggest fear is that the Americans will use their influence to make us accept a coalition because of their belief there is no other solution."

What are Minh's chances against Thieu?

Knowledgeable observers here agree with him that in a completely fair election, Minh would win. But a fair election is unlikely here.

The nation's four powerful corps commanders could easily switch thousands of votes to any candidate they liked. In the countryside, the peasants will vote largely as their hamlet chiefs will tell them.

Only in the cities will the elections be reasonably fair -- and they will support Minh. Unfortunately for him, this is not enough.

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