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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
15 March 1967

No. 0799/67

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Current Political Dynamics in South Vietnam

1. Saigon's present military leaders exercise more effective control of the government than has any group since President Diem's overthrow in late 1963. Virtually all evidence indicates that the current military leaders strongly desire to retain, and to use, the power they have accumulated during the past 20 months. However, they are committed to the establishment of a constitutional, popularly elected government later this year. From the military's point of view, then, the most important political task at present and in the months ahead is a dual one of carrying out the promised transition in an acceptable manner while preserving both the unity and political supremacy of the military establishment.

The Military Leaders

2. Most of today's military leaders were below flag rank when the Diem government fell. Some, like Premier Ky and III Corps commander Lt. General Khang, were still lieutenant colonels. Thus, the current military leadership includes both officers with relative longevity, who have survived the numerous military purges since 1963, and those--the "Young Turks"--who have risen rapidly through the various political upheavals. Members of the latter group are primarily

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of northern origin, and their rapid advancement within the past few years attests in part to the characteristic initiative and energy of the northerner.

3. The consolidation of power by the current military leaders during the past 20 months is due to several factors, not the least of which is the vast expansion of the US military presence during the period. However, the US presence and the improved military situation could have not exerted such a strong stabilizing effect on the Saigon government had it not been for the general unity and cooperation which has prevailed between the military leadership's younger activists and its relatively "older" members. Although the initiative of the younger leaders has provided the impetus for most of the major changes in command during this period--the dismissals of General Thi, Quang, and Co--the ultimate success of such actions has depended upon continuing cohesion of the military leadership.

4. An important factor in the cooperation between these broad military factions has been the balancing of commands and assignments among their supporters. The promotion of officers to fill the positions vacated by Generals Thi, Quang, and Co, as well as advancements resulting from more normal rotation in command, appears to reflect such a balance, or the selection of officers acceptable to both factions. This distribution of power, however, could well become a major problem in the formulation of a new government, which will undoubtedly bring some major command changes.

5. The first and most obvious problem to be resolved if military unity is to continue under a new government is the power relationship which has existed between Premier Ky and Chief of State Thieu, who head the "Young Turk" and "older" military factions, respectively. All evidence currently points to the likelihood that the military will run one or the other as a presidential candidate. The associated problem of where the noncandidate will fit in the future government may prove to be a thorny one.

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Political Maneuvering Within the Military

6. Present reporting suggests that Chief of State Thieu would become the military's presidential candidate if the choice were left strictly up to the Directorate, and political considerations were omitted. This is perhaps because of his background in army command positions as opposed to Ky's air force experience, and Thieu's consequently greater appeal among army officers who form the majority in the Directorate. General Thieu apparently has not yet made a firm decision to push hard for the nomination, but he is certainly trying to keep the door open.

7. As in the past, however, Thieu's over-all range of activities, his relationships with many key individuals, and his specific sources of strength remain somewhat obscure. One [redacted] source has reported that General Thieu is attempting to set up a national political front consisting of the leaders of various power groups such as the Catholics, Buddhists, Hoa Hao, and the Cao Dai. The southern and central factions of the Dai Viet Party, and Hoa Hao leaders, reportedly have been contacted. Thieu is said to believe that such a front should be established for the purpose of making a pro forma endorsement of the military's predetermined presidential candidate. Thieu is naturally using his own supporters to do the preliminary spadework, and some of these men, according to the source, are actively soliciting support for Thieu. Thieu's younger brother, back in Saigon from a diplomatic assignment in Korea and himself a Dai Viet member, has also reportedly discussed the presidency in general terms with Tran Van Huong, an influential southerner and former premier who is a potential presidential candidate. What horse-trading is actually transpiring is not yet clear.

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8. General Thieu himself has publicly been more active of late. He has made two recent trips to the delta, the first coinciding with Premier Ky's well-publicized visit to Australia and New Zealand. Thieu's initial swing through this heavily populated area apparently was quite successful; Van Phu, secretary

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general of the Hoa Hao Central Executive Committee, remarked later to a US Embassy official that Thieu saw many people on his trip and was generally more popular than Ky in the delta.

9. In addition, Thieu has been entertaining groups of deputies from the Constituent Assembly, as has Ky. The degree of personal support for Thieu within the assembly remains difficult to determine. For example, a Dai Viet source claimed that Le Quang Liem, a prominent Hoa Hao member of the Assembly's Democratic Bloc generally believed sympathetic to Ky, actually favors Thieu. On the other hand, many deputies insist that the adoption of a constitutional minimum age requirement of 35 rather than 40 for the presidency represented an assembly preference for Ky, who is 37. Thieu, however, may not have exerted pressure for a 40-year age minimum, and this issue as a clear-cut test of strength between Ky and Thieu appears to have been diffused by crosscurrents in the assembly.

10. General Thieu has in the past shown a preference for operating behind the scenes and for avoiding the political exposure likely to accompany the future presidency. At the same time, he apparently desires to retain the political power he now holds. It is thus possible that Thieu will not press strongly to be a presidential candidate unless it seems to be the only way he can ensure his present power.

11. Thieu has been toying with the idea of an armed forces council in the future government which would have considerably more than an advisory function, and which might offer him a "behind-the-scenes" position of substantial authority should he not run for president. There is little information on the extent of support for this idea within the Directorate and some indication of civilian opposition. Moreover, in line with consistent advice from US officials in Saigon that the future president must "control" the military, the idea of a "special" armed forces council as such was not ratified by the Constituent Assembly. However, the assembly did agree to create a military advisory council, and the delineation of its

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organization in future legislation may allow enough latitude in fixing its responsibilities to satisfy Thieu.

12. Two other important factors which will influence Thieu in deciding whether to run for the presidency are the degree of civilian support which he can attract--particularly in terms of vice-presidential and prime-ministerial running mates--and his potential civilian competition. These two variables will largely determine the relative ease or difficulty of a military victory in the presidential election, and it is quite possible that Thieu would prefer to avoid a campaign in which extra-legal pressures became a necessity.

13. Thieu is, of course, also concerned with the issue of continuing military unity. In this respect, the question of a future position for Premier Ky should Thieu become the military's presidential candidate also probably weighs on the present chief of state. Ky, unlike Thieu, could not very well become chief of the armed forces with behind-the-scenes influence. Ky lacks seniority and also lacks an army background. Moreover, Ky does not appear inclined to serve as the future prime minister, a position which apparently will have little real power under the constitution. A Thieu-Ky president - prime minister combination in the future government seems highly unlikely.

Ky's Position

14. From Ky's point of view, the ideal solution would be for him to run for president and for Thieu to head the armed forces. All evidence suggests that Ky has committed himself to seeking the military nomination and, in the process, perhaps is willing to risk strains on military unity. According to several sources, Ky said in January that he would await Thieu's decision on this question, perhaps until after the constitution is promulgated. However, in a meeting with Thieu on 26 February, Ky reportedly took the position that the ruling Directorate should decide between them. Then, shortly after this meeting, Ky apparently agreed with General Khang, his

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close associate, that the Armed Forces Congress-- comprising 40 or 45 of the ranking military officers-- should vote to decide the military's presidential nominee. Both Ky and Thieu are reportedly trying to line up support among senior officers. There is little information available on the political loyalties of the individual members of the congress.

15. Ky's changing position on how the military should choose its candidate probably stems from his own increasing determination to run, his awareness of Thieu's maneuvering in this regard, and finally from the conclusion that the congress--even though it also contains a majority of army officers--affords him the best opportunity of emerging victorious in a confrontation with Thieu. It also points up the potentially sticky problem that Ky and Thieu may well not even be able to agree on which military body should choose between them.

16. In the meantime, Ky has been extremely active as an undeclared candidate, despite his public comments to the contrary. There is considerable evidence that he has done an especially good job with Constituent Assembly groups, as illustrated by the assembly vote on the presidential age minimum which, of course, was vital to his candidacy. There are also some indications that Ky may be dealing with civilian members of his cabinet regarding his candidacy, but specifics are not available. Finally, Ky has also reportedly appointed a civilian "campaign manager" to help line up civilian support. In a recent conversation with this adviser, Ky is said to have downgraded the candidacies of other presidential hopefuls, including General Thieu whom he referred to as an opportunist without the necessary military support to gain the nomination.

17. Among Ky's close military supporters, Police Director General Loan has been the most active in various projects associated with future elections. Loan's election spadework reportedly has been approved by the Directorate but, as in the case of Thieu's supporters and the lining up of a civilian front for the military candidate, some of the work

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may well be exclusively intended to benefit Ky. One [redacted] report referred to a survey of province chiefs to determine their willingness to support Ky for president. Another source reported that the duties of Ky's "campaign" chairman included identification of persons who could be appointed province chiefs in order to help Ky get elected.

18. Loan is also reported to have ordered a survey discreetly conducted by police officials in December to ascertain national support for a military man contesting the presidency against a civilian. The results of the survey--which are not available in detail but which must have been very general in nature--indicated that a military candidate would run about even in I, II, and III Corps, and slightly behind a civilian in IV Corps. Loan and his associates on this project, who included Mai Den--one of his more shadowy assistants--as well as the mayor of Saigon and the deputy information minister, concluded that the large population in the Saigon area would be the determining factor in the presidential elections. As a result, Loan and Saigon mayor Cua reportedly began in January to reorganize Saigon's administrative units by increasing the number of wards from 54 to 176, and by carefully selecting the new ward chiefs. Loan and his associates expect these ward chiefs to use their authority to organize a large vote for the military candidate.

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19. [redacted], more extreme measures to ensure the election of a military candidate have also been discussed by Loan and his same supporters, should it appear that more subtle tactics are ineffective. Such measures range from obvious election-day pressures on the voters to outright harassment of civilian candidates and the switching of ballot boxes. According to another source, Loan has ordered the establishment of political "situation rooms" in each province, and has warned that it might become necessary to use force to ensure a military election victory. Loan is also said to be compiling dossiers on potential presidential candidates.

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Other Directorate Members

20. Besides Loan, there are other members of the military ruling group who are in key positions to influence the election. These include the four corps commanders and Generals Thang, Tri, and Chieu, who are in charge, respectively, of revolutionary development cadres, information cadres, and veterans, all reaching extensively into the grass-roots level. The corps commanders exercise considerable authority within their respective areas, and will undoubtedly be called upon to implement election programs. The Ministries of Revolutionary Development, and Information and Chieu Hoi, under Thang and Tri played important roles in organizing the Constituent Assembly election in September 1966 and are certain to do so again, with opportunities to influence the outcome. General Chieu's position as head of the veterans' organization opens up the prospect of an unofficial military party; indeed, it was so envisioned at one time. Thus far, however, there is little evidence that these officers have begun to work actively to influence the elections. Moreover, there have been no recent reports on consultations between the GVN and South Korean officials who were conferring on such subjects last summer.

21. In most cases, the loyalties of these generals to either Thieu or Ky are not entirely clear, and, indeed, may not be firm. General Khang, III Corps commander, has lined up with Ky consistently, while generals Chieu and Thang generally appear to favor General Thieu. General Tri appears to be caught in the middle; a recent Station assessment puts him in Ky's camp, although he has in the past been considered a protege of General Thieu. General Vinh Loc, II Corps commander, is chiefly concerned with maintaining his own position, but the Station believes that he would probably prefer to deal with Thieu rather than Ky. Generals Lam and Manh, I and IV Corps commanders, respectively, probably lean toward Thieu. Few of them have been known to express a personal choice or an opinion on the relative strength of Ky or Thieu as a candidate.

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Civilian Groups

The Constituent Assembly

22. This body, which includes most of the traditional civilian factions, is the current focus of civilian politics. As such, its relations with the government reflect the over-all degree of civilian-military cooperation. Thus far these relations have been fairly good, and there are reasonable prospects that they will continue to be good. In attempting to guarantee civilian interests in the future government, the assembly by and large has favored a strong legislature, which many delegates may think would be less subject to military control than would the executive. This notion has been reinforced by the fact that many assemblymen picture themselves as future legislators. At the same time, the military leaders have generally been concerned with ensuring that the future president has sufficient power to operate effectively, with the implication that the military identify themselves with the future executive branch. Thus assembly-GVN relations may be described as revolving around the issue of the sharing of power between civilians and the military in the future.

23. This bargaining process between the assembly and the government has also included the issue of extending the life of the assembly beyond the drafting of the constitution. Various reports indicate that the Directorate is willing to have the assembly act as an interim legislature if the assembly acts favorably on constitutional modifications suggested by the Directorate. Thus far, reports generally indicate that the assembly is so acting. Information Minister Tri appears to play a prominent role for the Directorate in its relations with the assembly, but little information is available on the actual give-and-take behind the scenes.

24. At present, the largest grouping within the assembly is the Democratic-Alliance Bloc, which is composed of Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Nationalist (VNQDD), and Catholic delegates--the latter mostly northerners. This bloc is generally conservative in outlook, but

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also contains many delegates who are favorably disposed toward Premier Ky. Le Phuoc Sang, a Hoa Hao spokesman and a former adviser to Ky, is the main go-between in this respect.

25. The Greater Peoples Bloc, at one time the assembly's largest, now retains little more than its original core of Revolutionary Dai Viet delegates. Various reports have indicated that the Directorate (through General Tri) ordered military delegates and other assemblymen sympathetic to the Directorate to withdraw from the Greater Peoples Bloc. The major reason for this withdrawal apparently was that Dai Viet delegates who controlled the bloc did not prove to be as responsive to government influence as government leaders had originally hoped. A [redacted] [redacted] claims that the government originally helped to form the Greater Peoples Bloc under the screen of Dai Viet leadership, but that Premier Ky later objected to some of the stands taken by Dai Viet members on various issues and ordered the dissolution of the bloc.

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26. Other current groups in the assembly include the Movement for Renaissance of the South, a bloc of about 12 delegates with strong southern regionalist sympathies who are cohesive but who have not been able to exert much influence on other southern delegates. About 40 members of the assembly are currently independent of any organized bloc. The independents include such prominent figures as assembly president Phan Khac Suu and former Gia Dinh Province councilman Phan Quang Dan. Suu and Dan are among the civilians mentioned as presidential candidates or as possible running mates for a military nominee.

27. It is not yet clear whether groupings in the assembly have much potential as the basis for significant political associations in the future. Tugging at the large Democratic-Alliance bloc is the issue of regionalism. Hoa Hao and Cao Dai delegates are attracted by southern sentiments, while VNQDD delegates tend to represent the interests of central Vietnam. Many of the Catholic members of the bloc are refugees from North Vietnam. The cohesiveness

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of the bloc in assembly voting is not clear, since voting records have not been systematically reported. Former Dai Viet leader Dang Van Sung, who is a member of the Democratic-Alliance bloc, has shown interest in the development of meaningful political parties through the future legislature. He has most recently been reported as working on the development of a convention of civilian groups which would draft General Ky as a presidential candidate.

Other Civilian Groups

28. Denied a voice in the assembly because of their own boycott, the Buddhists as an entity are outside the current political evolution process. The political power of Buddhist religious groups remains fragmented along regional lines, following last year's ill-fated "struggle" movement. Thich Tam Chau, whose major source of strength lies among northern refugees in and near Saigon, has been cooperating with the military government, or more particularly with General Loan as Ky's principal executive officer. Chau has been active in attempting to create a new--and thus far unsuccessful--national Buddhist organization, but apparently is not involved in other political activities at present. Chau and his Buddhists probably would tend to support a northerner for president, perhaps including Premier Ky. The government's strategy toward the Buddhists, however, has generally been one of "divide and rule," and it is possible that Chau may react negatively in the future.

29. Tri Quang, whose power base is in central Vietnam, remains in Saigon presumably under close police scrutiny. Some recent reports have suggested that Quang might be trying to make a political "come-back" by seizing on the issue of peace. Should Quang attempt to play a major role in the coming elections, he would undoubtedly try to join forces with an anti-military political grouping. In this respect, Quang has been linked with retired General Tran Van Don, although Don's presidential candidacy is now much in doubt. Quang would also have to return to central Vietnam in order to reorganize his forces there; at present, he and other militants from this area have

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little strength in Saigon. Should Quang return to Hue and decide to support a presidential candidate actively, he could probably exert considerable influence, and the political positions of the Dai Viet and VNQDD parties in central Vietnam would be undercut somewhat.

30. Southern or delta Buddhists, traditionally less well organized or politically active, have exhibited no signs of coming to life in the near future. They probably will remain susceptible to the blandishments of other southern political organizations.

31. The Catholic community is also split somewhat along regional lines, with the large, highly organized northern refugee group enjoying considerable influence in the Saigon area. Catholic leaders have gotten along fairly well with the military government, and would probably not offer objections to the candidacy of either Premier Ky or Chief of State Thieu. Many northern Catholic leaders appear to favor Ky over Thieu despite the fact that Thieu is at least a nominal Catholic. Should former premier Tran Van Huong be a presidential candidate, he would undoubtedly receive the support of most southern Catholics, and would probably cut heavily into the northern Catholic vote as well. Otherwise Catholic leaders do not appear inclined to form any meaningful political associations with other large groupings for the present.

32. In the I Corps, the Dai Viet and VNQDD parties are engaged in an apparently bitter contest for political control. General Lam, I Corps commander, was reported earlier to have been working with selected Dai Viet delegates in the Constituent Assembly, but it is not clear if this relationship still persists. Within I Corps, General Lam apparently has been trying to remain above the dispute.

33. Ha Thuc Ky, Dai Viet party leader in I Corps, has made no secret of his presidential candidacy, although he reportedly has admitted privately that his chances are rather slim. It is possible that he may be biding his time, and will decide later to trade his support for a vice-presidential nomination or some

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other secondary position. Although there is still some hesitancy among older party members, the Dai Viets also have apparently decided to engage openly in political activity in accordance with future legislation reorganizing the rights of political parties.

34. Our current knowledge on the other Dai Viet factions--the northern refugee group and southern splinter factions outside the control of Ha Thuc Ky--is fragmentary at best. Various individuals with past or present Dai Viet labels are active within and outside the government, but relationships between them or the current existence of viable organizations is not clear. In this connection, reported Dai Viet ties of General Thieu and certain other ranking military leaders remain obscure. General Loan is apparently harboring certain once-discredited southern Dai Viet officers in his intelligence apparatus.

35. There have been indications that VNQDD leaders established some kind of working relationship with the government during the "struggle" movement last year. The status of current relations between the various VNQDD factions and the government is unknown. Nguyen Huu Chi, former Quang Nam Province chief and a VNQDD member, reportedly is working for Premier Ky as a "civilian" campaign manager.

36. In the delta, the Hoa Hao leaders are also factionalized at present. Some, such as Le Phuoc Sang, are solidly behind Premier Ky, but their ability to deliver the Hoa Hao vote for Ky is at least open to question. Others, such as Van Phu, apparently lean toward General Thieu. Both Van Phu and Le Phuoc Sang are connected with the Hoa Hao church organization, which, judging from the constituent assembly elections last fall, apparently wields more influences than the sect's provincial officials or small political parties. The Hoa Hao, however, are also southerners at heart, and a strong southern civilian candidate such as Tran Van Huong would undoubtedly attract a good deal of Hoa Hao sympathy.

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37. The strongest civilian candidate is Tran Van Huong. Although he has not openly declared his candidacy, US officials believe that he will run. Huong generally can be characterized as forceful and determined, and the chances of his working under a military president as premier (or vice versa, for that matter) appear doubtful. If Huong runs, he would undoubtedly do well in the delta; in fact some southern-born military officers including the present Ranger commander have indicated interest in Huong's candidacy. He might also receive considerable Catholic support because of his previous strong stand against the Buddhist Institute. Vo Long Trieu, former youth minister who resigned during the cabinet crisis last fall, has been attempting to line up support for Huong. Trieu does not expect any support from Ha Thuc Ky's Dai Viet organization in central Vietnam, but hopes to draw some support from VNQDD factions there. In fact, Huong told an embassy officer that he is considering asking Phan Khoan, an influential civilian who is a member of the VNQDD and of the Directorate, to be his vice presidential candidate. Trieu also told the embassy that Tri Quang's central Vietnamese Buddhists would not oppose Huong's candidacy, but he did not indicate that they would offer positive support. Tam Chau's northern Buddhists would probably work against Huong, as they did when he was premier.

38. There have also been various indications of a potential political front being formed by former premier Phan Huy Quat, former deputy premier Tran Van Tuyen, labor leader Tran Quoc Buu, publisher Dang Van Sung, and other prominent civilian politicians. Quat and Tuyen have thus far been noncommittal on the question of whom they might support as a presidential candidate. Tran Quoc Buu, on the other hand, originally indicated support for Huong, but recently has reportedly switched to Premier Ky. Buu's change of heart may have been predicated on the conclusion that a civilian candidate cannot hope to win. Regardless of whom the front supports for president, they do plan to sponsor candidates for the legislature, as well.

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Conclusions

39. The primacy of the military establishment in South Vietnamese politics today is perhaps best illustrated by the increasing number of prominent civilian political figures who have stated that the military's candidate for president will be elected. These prognoses vary somewhat in their estimates of how the military will win, whether through use of the government's machinery and financial resources or by the construction of a political base with civilian support.

40. There is evidence that the military is working on both approaches, with General Loan making some preparations to exert extra-legal pressures ranging from subtle methods to outright rigging, if necessary. Efforts to create political associations with civilians are also under way, but so far, these appear to be independent efforts by supporters of Ky and Thieu rather than a coordinated attempt to gain backing for a military candidate in general. All in all, it does not appear at present that the military establishment as a whole is planning to do any more than is necessary in order to win the election. Until the military's candidate has been chosen, and until the extent of both civilian competition and civilian support for the military becomes clearer, it may not be possible to gauge the amount of extra-legal pressures the government will employ during the campaign.

41. Within the military establishment, the unity of the military leaders remains a key issue. If General Thieu does not step aside and let Ky run for president, the energies and activism of Ky and his northern supporters could build up serious pressures in the military. At any rate, the kind of settlement to be reached between Ky and Thieu regarding the presidency--and how it affects military unity--will be a crucial issue.

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