

~~SECRET~~

(65)

19 April 1967

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Nation in Ferment: National Elections  
and Political Permutations in South  
Vietnam

Summary

The development of a much-needed political base for the Vietnamese government is slowly gaining momentum. The movement toward representative and effective governmental institutions has been complicated by divisive political and social influences and an absence of unifying traditions or institutions, as well as by intensified Communist political and military efforts. Having stabilized the situation, Vietnam's military leadership remains largely unified in its reluctance to relinquish its dominant position, but recognizes the need to share power with civilian elements in order to gain the popular support needed to counter the disciplined Communist political threat.

Since its inception the Ky government has been consciously moving toward a transition to at least ostensible civilian rule along the Korean pattern. Because of their dominant position, the leaders of the military establishment have considerable assets to assist in accomplishing their aims, including funds, patronage, and the only non-Communist organization reaching down to the grass roots. To bolster their prospects, the military are attempting to form a loose political front composed of representatives of various religious and political groups which will sponsor GVN-endorsed candidates in the forthcoming elections.

State Dept. review completed

SECRET

SECRET

If the military establishment can agree on a single slate and a single presidential candidate to support, none of the potential civilian candidates appears likely to develop the organization and broad spectrum of support necessary to seriously contest the military establishment's choice. This is particularly true if, as seems certain to be the case, the opposition to the military's choice is divided among two or more slates. Both the Suu and Huong tickets seem destined to split the important southern vote. None of the other candidates seems likely to muster more than nominal regional support.

Major issues in the elections are likely to stem largely from opposition to the concept of continued military control of the government. The opposition probably will focus on the related issues of corruption, inflation, and inefficiency of the military establishment, and may label Ky a U.S. puppet. The themes of peace and neutrality may also be espoused by the opposition, whose position would thus take on significant anti-American undertones. Despite this, it seems unlikely that the campaign will get too far off the track, although the possibility of flashes of violence cannot be ruled out completely. Other potential pitfalls include the danger that the military, unduly concerned over their prospects for victory, may attempt to repress the opposition or to rig the results. These also seem unlikely, and we expect the military, under Ky's leadership, to make a realistic endeavor to put the best possible face on its efforts to forge a genuine coalition with civilian elements.

SECRET

SECRET

On balance, the odds favor the election coming out reasonably well for both the GVN and the U.S., particularly if the U.S. provides active, discreet advice and counsel within the context of Vietnamese political realities. The military establishment appears almost certain to score a smashing electoral victory. The best hope is that, in doing so, it will facilitate the development of a broad political coalition comprising something approaching a majority of the electorate. Such a coalition could provide the basis for ultimate development of a genuine, cohesive, national party which would foster stability and provide a strong popular base for the GVN.

## I. INTRODUCTION

1. Since its independence in 1954, South Vietnam has been in the throes of political evolution, the course of which has been erratic and often convulsive. In particular, the pace of political activity quickened following the overthrow of the Diem regime, although such activity occurred in extra-legal channels more than in legal ones. Under the present military regime, however, politics have tended to shift from the streets and backrooms toward more conventional political modes and forums. To have come this far is no mean achievement, given the country's political history, and represents more progress than anyone expected when the military assumed control in June 1965.

2. But the crucial question is what happens next? South Vietnam has poor clay with which to build a national political structure. Endemic political fragmentation is still the rule, and politics tend to be dominated by narrow-based, usually contentious, factions reflecting regional, religious, or, simply personal loyalties with little consideration for broader national interests. Not only is there nothing resembling a national party, but even the political fragments are badly splintered. Thus, the upcoming presidential and legislative elections will test the

SECRET

SECRET

ability of the Vietnamese to form a government that is both reasonably effective and relatively representative; that is, a government that reflects, and is cognizant of, the necessity for balancing personal liberty and national order. There can be no assurance that this goal will be realized; the attempt itself might once again plunge the country into political paroxysms.

3. In any event, the divisive nature of Vietnamese politics will have to be attenuated, and eventually subsumed, by a broader political framework if continued political progress is to be realized. Encouragingly, there are indications that broader political groupings are in the process of developing. The outcome is of great significance for Vietnam and for the US because, if handled well, politics in South Vietnam could begin to normalize and stability should increase. The following paragraphs will assess these developments in greater detail.

## II. THE MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT\*

### A. General

4. Since assuming control, the military establishment has displayed a remarkable degree of cohesion. This cohesion derives in large measure from similar backgrounds--regional, religious, military, education and experience--and an acute awareness and understanding of the political realities in Vietnam. As a result, there is a willingness to

\* The term "military establishment" includes Ky and Thieu and their immediate military colleagues and advisors. The key political figures in the military establishment are Generals Ky (Premier), Thieu (Chief of State), Loan (National Police Director and Chief of the Military Security Services), Chieu (Secretary-General of the Directorate), Tri (Information and Chieu Hoi Minister and Head of the Armed Forces Political Directorate), Thang (Revolutionary Development Minister), Khang (III Corps and Capital Military District Commander), and, to a lesser extent, Vien (Minister of Defense).

SECRET

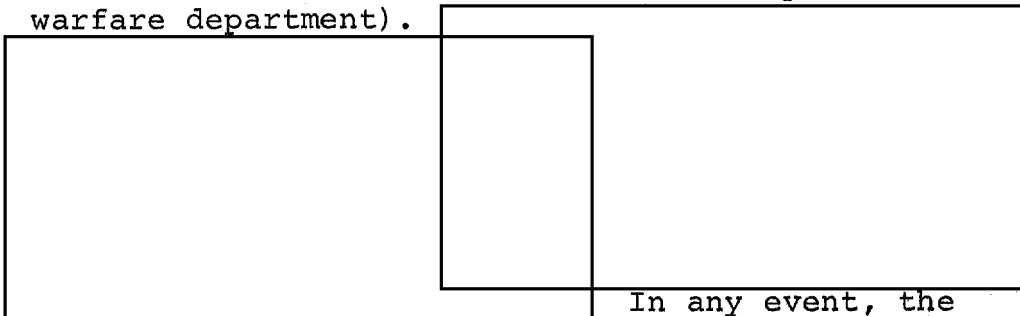
SECRET

subordinate personal ambitions to the collective interests of the military and an apparent consensus among the military hierarchy concerning the major policy issues facing Vietnam. Considering the dismal performance of the civilians in the past, the military has no confidence in the ability of the civilian politicians to administer effectively, to maintain national cohesion, to pursue the war vigorously, or to refrain from interference in professional military matters. Specifically, the military leaders share a common aspiration for political stability, which they interpret as requiring military dominance in any government in the near future.

5. At the same time, however, the military leaders appear willing to accept a wider civilian role in the government. This is in part because of US urging and in part because of the military's own desire to obtain a popular and legal mandate for its continued exercise of authority. While not willing to surrender its control of the levers of real political power, the military establishment has made concessions and adjustments to accommodate the civilian elements. And it has responded to popular aspirations for an elected government.

#### B. Political Strategy and Assets

6. For over a year, the military establishment has been quietly exploring means to create a political apparatus with which to insure continued military domination within a constitutional and representative system. To this end, the GVN has sought and received advice from the South Koreans, and, to a lesser extent from the Chinese Nationalists (who have advisers in the GVN's political warfare department).



In any event, the manner in which the Korean military has succeeded in legitimizing its control of political power is an obvious model for the Vietnamese military.

SECRET

25X1

25X1

SECRET

7. The military establishment has substantial political assets at its disposal. It controls the financial coffers of the country; it is the dispenser of governmental favors, jobs and sinecures; it has the organization, manpower, and trucks to see that the voters get to the polls. In short, the military is the only (non-Communist) body whose power and sway extends throughout the country, and this gives it tremendous advantages in organizing grass roots support. In particular, the revolutionary development program and cadre provide the regime with a formidable political instrument with which to get to the people. The RD teams were used for political purposes to get out the vote for the Constituent Assembly elections last September, and they will undoubtedly be even more active for the presidential and legislative contests this fall.

8. In addition to the RD cadre, the military hierarchy can count on the support of most of the armed forces, the civil administrative apparatus, and provincial and district officials (most of whom are military). These groups not only have a vested interest in the present system, but they are susceptible to persuasion and pressure from the government. Thus as election day approaches, it can be assumed that considerable emphasis will be placed on these groups delivering the vote; officials whose response appears less than enthusiastic will run the risk of being replaced.\* It is probable that the hamlet and village elections will constitute a dry run for testing the ability of the regime's political organization. Loan is apparently taking steps to keep close tabs on the local candidates as well as the actions of provincial and district officials during the elections. The election of hamlet and village officials who are sympathetic or beholden to the GVN would further enhance the position of the military's candidate; in many instances, the local villagers rather docilely vote the way the village headman instructs them.

\* In the very important Saigon area, for example, Loan and the Mayor of Saigon, Loan's brother-in-law, are increasing the number of wards and selecting new ward chiefs who would be expected to get out a large vote for the military's candidate.

SECRET

SECRET

C. Civilian Support

9. In addition to the substantial assets the military has from its own resources, the establishment leaders will probably be at least moderately successful in garnering support for its presidential candidate from a number of the traditional civilian political factions. This development will probably take the form of a political front. It is generally accepted in Vietnam that military support is essential for the survival of any government, and many believe that at this time the only way to insure military support is to have a military man in the top executive post. Moreover, the military's support of a faction's legislative ticket could be decisive. Such considerations, plus the fact that most Vietnamese observers believe that the military will win anyway, tend to provide considerable incentive to cooperate with the military and thereby get on the bandwagon and share the rewards and spoils of victory.

10. The military's efforts to forge a political base with civilian support have been handled primarily by Generals Loan, Chieu, and Tri, although others, including Ky and Thieu, have also been active. For example, over a year ago Chieu was given the responsibility for developing a political base for the Directorate. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Loan, Chieu and Tri have also been active in the GVN's dealings with the Constituent Assembly. Loan, who has increasingly assumed a major role in the GVN's political activities, financed the election campaigns of an unknown (but presumably substantial) number of candidates for the Assembly and will probably play a similar role in the legislative contests later this year. Tri, a protegee of General Thieu, was instrumental in the formation of the Greater People's Bloc in the Assembly, and when the Revolutionary Dai Viet leadership of the bloc proved recalcitrant, Tri brought about the bloc's disintegration. Chieu's role is less clear, but he has been the GVN's spokesman in several confrontations with the Assembly.

25X1

25X1

SECRET

SECRET

11. The general outline of a possible GVN front can be described. It would probably include the following groups.

- a. The Hoa Hao Sect. In the delta, the Hoa Hao religious organization, which carries more political weight than the sect's small political parties, appears to favor backing the military's candidate. Such clerical leaders as Van Phu and Le Phuoc Sang, once a special assistant to Ky and now the leader of the Democratic-Alliance Bloc in the CA, probably see more to gain in aligning the sect with the military than in following southern regionalist sentiments and backing a candidate such as Tran Van Huong or Phan Khac Suu. In fact, the sect's strength as a southern faction gives it particular appeal to the GVN, which is weakest in this area.
- b. The Cao Dai Sect. No longer much of a political force outside of certain enclaves such as Tay Ninh Province, the Cao Dai Sect has been amenable to GVN persuasion in the past. The presidential candidacy of Phan Khac Suu (a Cao Dai member) notwithstanding, we believe the odds are slightly better than even that most of the Cao Dai leaders will follow the GVN's lead.
- c. The VNQDD Party. Truly a many splintered thing, some of the VNQDD factions, whose strength is primarily in I Corps area of central Vietnam, will back the military; to do otherwise would risk having the military opt to work exclusively with the Dai Viets, the VNQDD's arch rivals in I Corps. During the "struggle" movement last year, the VNQDD leaders apparently cooperated with the GVN. Ky, has been in frequent contact with VNQDD leaders and other military leaders have probably had similar contacts.

SECRET



SECRET

d. Northern Catholics. Plunged into disarray following Diem's ouster, the large (almost one million) northern Catholic element has steadily re-asserted itself as a strong and cohesive political force that must be reckoned with in the nation's political future. Sharing very similar goals with the military, many of whom are northern Catholics, the northern Catholics have had cordial relations with the military regime. In particular, the northern Catholics favor the military's policy of a vigorous prosecution of the war. The candidacy of Tran Van Huong, however, might draw some support from the northern Catholics because of his anti-Buddhist background, but the southern regionalism that Huong also personifies would work against him. Moreover, the northern Catholics were undoubtedly more impressed by the military's forthright squashing of the militant Buddhists last year than they were by Huong's overthrow by the Buddhists. In any event, we believe that the bulk of northern Catholic support will go to the military establishment's candidate, and the odds are about even that their political organization, the Greater Solidarity Forces, will formally endorse the military's ticket.

e. Northern Buddhists. The northern refugee Buddhists are led by Thich Tam Chau and are strongest in and near Saigon. Following the open break between Chau and militant Buddhist Thich Tri Quang in the wake of the "struggle movement" last year, Chau has been cooperating with the military government, with General Loan serving as the regime's principal contact. The regime has been aiding Chau in his efforts, as yet unsuccessful, to create a national Buddhist organization free from the influence of Tri Quang. In return, Chau will probably be expected to back the military's presidential candidate, and although he might not formally endorse the candidate, we believe that he will deliver the vote. Indeed, if Tran Van

SECRET

SECRET

Huong is the main civilian candidate, or if Tri Quang takes an active role in the election, we believe the odds are fairly good that Chau will openly back the military's choice.

f. Labor. Tran Quoc Buu, prominent leader of Vietnam's major labor organization, appears to have switched his allegiance from Tran Van Huong to Premier Ky. The labor vote in Vietnam is not large but in the Saigon area it is of some consequence. Buu, who aspires to be a political force, has apparently concluded that no civilian candidate can hope to win and that it is smart politics to back a winner. Buu claims to be working with Dang Van Sung, an old-line Dai Viet, and Hoa Hao leader Le Phuoc Sang in forming a front to back Ky.\*

g. The Veterans' League. Under the leadership of General Chieu, the Veterans' League, which has limited political potential, should be solidly in the military's camp. The League plans to run about 30 candidates for the legislature and will probably receive governmental support for this endeavor. Apart from the general value of organized support, the League gives the military establishment some organized support in the south--the weakest link in the military's chain of

---

\* Although we have only the sketchiest of information on the subject, it may also be that former premier Phan Huy Quat and former deputy premier Tran Van Tuyen are involved in this effort. There had been earlier indications that Quat, Tuyen, and Buu were planning to create a political front, and Tuyen has intimated that it would be quite possible that the front would favor a military candidate.

SECRET

SECRET

support, and the area from which the major opposition to the GVN will come.

12. It should be stressed that endorsement of a candidate by a political faction does not mean that the candidate will receive full support from the faction's adherents. There is such a mishmash of conflicting interests within the many political groups that some seepage is inevitable. Indeed, some groups will attempt to be involved to some extent in each of the contending camps so as to insure their interests no matter how the election comes out. Furthermore, the political give and take over the next few months and the specific civilian candidates and their vice-presidential choices who finally contest the election will affect the final composition of a pro-establishment front. For example, there is a fair chance that the Revolutionary Dai Viet Party\* may eventually align itself with the GVN's candidate.

### III. THE CIVILIAN OPPOSITION

13. Phan Khac Suu. Chairman of the Constituent Assembly and former chief of state (October 1964 - June 1965), Phan Khac Suu apparently has decided to stand for the presidency with Phan Quang Dan, CA member and president of the Gia Dinh Provincial Council, as his vice-presidential running mate. Suu has had a long, if not particularly distinguished, political career in South Vietnam. And although his age (62) and lack of dynamism are considered liabilities by some, he is known nationally and may even be something of a "father image" in a country where veneration of the elderly is a common and strong emotion. In any event, Suu, who is a southerner, would run strongest in the delta area and might also get some support from VNQDD elements in central Vietnam. The presence of Dan on the slate would draw votes in the populous Saigon area. The Suu-Dan ticket makes some attempt at a regional balance, but unless a centrist is added as the prime ministerial choice, it does not seem likely to obtain significant support outside

---

\* See paragraph 19.

SECRET

SECRET

of southern region. Unless it does obtain such support, its chances of seriously challenging the military's candidate are very small.

14. Dan, and perhaps Suu as well, recognize the odds against their ticket. Indeed, Dan has indicated that he believes the military will win the election, and there were indications that he was trying to persuade Suu not to run for the presidency but to head up a legislative slate. We do not know what lies behind Suu's decision. He may feel that his time is running out to play an important role in Vietnamese politics, and he would prefer to play it in the main arena not in a legislative sideshow. Or he may feel that, whatever his chances are, he has something to contribute to a presidential campaign and the country's political future. In any event, Suu's presence in the race will have the effect of splitting southern strength, and there is a possibility that the GVN had a surreptitious hand in persuading Suu to run.

15. Tran Van Huong. The strongest civilian candidate is Tran Van Huong, who, despite not having yet openly declared his candidacy, is almost certain to run. Huong, unlike Suu, is both forceful and determined. He has not forgotten his past difficulties with the military and the Buddhists who were instrumental in his ouster as premier in January 1965. As a result, he harbors much distrust for both. Thus while Huong gives lip service to the need for military-civilian cooperation, compromise with the military would tend to be difficult for him. Huong believes in a strong executive and is frankly of the belief that the majority of the Vietnamese people are not ready for democracy and do not necessarily need or want it. US officials have stated that Huong, who has expressed admiration for Diem's "good qualities," appears to have some of the late dictator's characteristics, namely honesty, courage, a sense of mission, a capacity for stubbornness, and a basically confucian-mandarinale view of government and society.

16. Huong, a southerner, is a staunch champion of southern regionalist sentiments and would draw heavy support from this area. Even some southern-born military officers (e.g., Ranger commander Tran

SECRET

SECRET

Van Hai) have expressed interest in Huong's candidacy. Former youth minister Vo Long Trieu, who was one of the dissident southern ministers that resigned in last October's "cabinet crisis," is currently acting as Huong's campaign manager and is a member of a "brain trust" that is plotting Huong's political strategy. Trieu is the acknowledged leader of the Movement for the Renaissance of the South, a militantly southern separatist group, which is solidly in Huong's camp, although its strength outside the CA is questionable. More important, Trieu, leader of the younger progressive wing of the 1500-member Southern Alumni Association, is attempting to wrest control away from the Association's founder, retired General Tran Van Don.\* If Trieu is successful, the Association would undoubtedly become more active and militant in political affairs and would back Huong. (If Don retains control, the Association would be less likely to play a meaningful political role since Don and his more "conservative" wing appear to be sympathetic to Ky.) Finally, Huong would probably obtain the bulk of southern Catholic and Buddhist support since these politically inchoate groups generally follow the lead of the southern political organizations; he would also pull some votes in the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai areas.

17. Huong realizes that if he is to have a real chance of challenging the military's candidate he must broaden his political base outside the southern region. Initially, Huong appeared to favor an alignment with the VNQDD. But since the military (or more specifically, Ky) seems to have gained a rather secure lock on VNQDD support, Huong is now exploring the possibility of an alliance with Revolutionary Dai Viet Party (RDVP) leader Ha Thuc Ky, who at the moment claims to be running for the presidency himself.

---

\* Don's hopes of running for the presidency have been dashed by the constitution's disqualifying anyone holding French citizenship from the presidency.

SECRET

SECRET

18. Huong would probably garner some northern Catholic votes because of his previous strong stand against the Buddhist Institute. Trieu is one of the key leaders of the Catholic Liaison Office in Saigon, which has played an important role in promoting Catholic cohesion, and can be expected to lobby for Huong in this group. Trieu has also said that Tri Quang's militant Buddhist following in central Vietnam would not oppose Huong's candidacy. Indeed, it is not at all out of the question that Tri Quang might enter into an open alliance with the southern regionalists in support of Huong, especially if Huong should take a strong stand against the military and a somewhat anti-US tack.

19. Ha Thuc Ky. Although RDVP\* leader Ky has made no secret of his presidential candidacy, we believe that he is really fishing for a deal in which he "withdraws" and throws his support to another candidate in return for the vice-presidential slot or some other prestigious position in the new government for himself and his party. It remains to be seen whether Ky will forge an alliance with Huong. Indeed, we are inclined to believe that the odds are as good or slightly better that the military establishment can win the RDVP over to its side. We note that many of the military leaders have a Dai Viet background, e.g., Thieu, Tri, and Vien, and that Thieu's brother, Kieu, was an influential Dai Viet leader, and that two of Ky's closest advisors, Dinh Trinh Chinh, and Bui Diem, were connected with the party. Finally, of course, Ha Thuc Ky may not be able to make a deal with anyone; if so, he would almost certainly remain in the race despite his negligible chances.

\* The plans of the other smaller Dai Viet offshoots such as the New Dai Viet Party are unknown. Generals Thieu and Loan apparently have some contact with them, and the French may also be involved with some segments.

SECRET

SECRET

20. Others. There will probably be some other presidential aspirants. They may run for the sheer fun of it or, more seriously, they may calculate that even an unsuccessful race will gain them national prominence and publicity which may be useful in the future and which could help their group's legislative ticket. In any event, we do not expect many minor candidates to run, and the major effect of those that do run will probably be to fuzz slightly the factional line-ups behind the major contestants.

#### IV. THE ELECTIONS: ISSUES, PITFALLS, AND PROSPECTS

21. Issues. As electioneering picks up steam, we anticipate a rising chorus of criticism against the military establishment and its performance in office. This could become particularly bitter if the civilian candidates decide that their only hope of rallying the people is to pull out all the stops in attacking the military. The military establishment will be charged with attempting to perpetuate itself in power and thereby flaunting the people's "desire" for a civilian government. General Loan, long a target of southern civilian ire, will almost certainly be bitterly assailed and accused of intimidating and suppressing civilian opposition to the military regime. And as is usually the case in politically underdeveloped states, the "outs" will be predisposed to charge that the "ins" have rigged the elections.

22. The civilian oppositon will undoubtedly hammer away consistently at the themes of inefficiency and corruption within the military establishment. The GVN is vulnerable on the score of corruption and is itself embarked on anti-corruption crusade; nonetheless, the opposition will get some mileage from this issue. The military (and the US) will also be blamed for the increased cost of living, inflation, and other deprivations occasioned by the war. Finally, the military will almost certainly not escape being labelled as a "US-puppet."

23. Beyond these issues, such potentially explosive questions as peace and the US role in Vietnam are likely to be broached during the election campaign. We believe that the positions on these

SECRET

SECRET

subjects will not be overly extreme. Nonetheless, we are somewhat apprehensive that the opposition groups, feeling themselves in dire need of some emotionally dramatic issues to offset the military's advantageous position, may come out for peace and neutrality and will attack the US presence in Vietnam. It is worth noting that the southern groups, reflecting in part their closer affinity and contact with the French, have generally taken a more compromising attitude toward ending the war and have tended to be more vocal about the allegedly deleterious effects of the US presence on the country's economic, social, and moral fibre. Moreover, should Tri Quang align himself with the southern opposition elements and actively participate in the election, he would certainly attempt to exploit anti-US and peace sentiment.\* In any event, we expect that there will at least be significant undertones if not blatant overtones, of anti-US and neutralist sentiments in the campaigning.

24. The military establishment's candidate will more or less run on the regime's record and accomplishments. We would expect a generally moderate position on most issues with the exception of the question of negotiations. Here, the military is on record as being opposed to any talk of a coalition government and any direct discussions with the NLF or Viet Cong, though the GVN's military leaders have indicated some willingness to talk with their Hanoi counterparts. The military candidate may also engage in some anti-US baiting, in part to undercut the opposition and in part to assert his independence

---

\* The recent militant Buddhist request, later seconded by Tam Chau, for a cease-fire on Buddha's birthday may mark the opening round of an attempt by the militant faction to make political capital by exploiting the peace theme. Tri Quang still has the remnants of the "struggle movement" at his disposal, and it is now becoming clear that the militant Buddhists are attempting to revive the movement. If the opportunity arose or could be manufactured, it is likely that Tri Quang would be quite willing to take to the streets again.

SECRET



SECRET

from the US. Although the military establishment is aware of the need to avoid exacerbating regional differences and civilian-military animosities, pressure from the hard-line "Baby Turk" wing of the military could lead to some unfortunate developments in these areas.

25. Potential Pitfalls. The most obvious pitfall, of course, is that the electoral process will somehow set off forces which destroy the substantial, but as yet fragile, progress made thus far. This could come about in a number of ways, e.g., a serious split in the military establishment that resulted in a military coup, or a situation in which the campaign became so bitter that the security of the country was so threatened by demonstration, riots, and the like that the military felt compelled to suspend the elections and resort to suppressive measures. We consider both of these possibilities unlikely at the present time, though this estimate will obviously have to be kept under continuing review.

26. Somewhat more likely, but still considerably less than even, is the possibility that the military will rig the elections or at least engage in such flagrant activities as to destroy their usefulness and integrity. Unlike the CA election where the main task was merely to get out the vote, this time the military must get out votes for the right man, and this calls for more sophisticated tactics. We know, for example, that the military has considered the possibility of having to resort to illegal tactics. [redacted]

25X6

[redacted] We do not believe that the military will think it necessary to resort to blatant political chicanery, but there is a possibility [redacted] others will act unilaterally or else bend their instructions in such a way as to lend credence to charges of fraud.\*

25X6

25X6

SECRET

SECRET

27. Yet another potential pitfall lies in the danger that the military, confident of its ability to win and govern in any case, will not be particularly concerned to make an effort to include a significant civilian element in the new government. Some in the military may not sufficiently realize the need for the new government to look like something new, or at least to avoid having it look as if the political process now in train has been designed only to give a constitutional and electoral veneer to the same old political arrangements. This is important for both the domestic and international image of the new government. On balance, however, we believe that the top leadership in the military is aware of the importance of the coupling of the military and civilian elements in the government, and that they will be receptive to US advice in this direction. Thus, we estimate that the odds are better than even that the new government will contain enough of a civilian aura to give credibility to its being a real step forward.

28. Summary and Prospects. Considering the assets that the military establishment already possesses and the potential support that it may gain through political deals, it is almost certain that if the military remains unified, whomever it supports for the presidency will win handily. This is not because the elections will necessarily be rigged, but because no opposition group can rival the nationwide apparatus and potential Tammany-like influence that can be utilized by the military establishment.

29. This fact of Vietnamese political life will affect the campaigns of the opposition candidates and could, perhaps, lead to a particularly bitter contest in which a number of issues may be raised which will be particularly abrasive and which will involve the US. Furthermore, there is a danger that the military in the heat of the campaign will resort to illegal means, even if unnecessary, to guarantee the victory of the GVN's candidate and thereby destroy the value of the election. This is not to say that these potentially disastrous events will occur or that the country will be torn apart by the elections, but to point out the dangers that could arise and to underline the critical importance

SECRET

SECRET

of the election and the pre-election period. Our estimate is that the odds favor the election coming out reasonably well for both Vietnam and the US, particularly if the US assists by providing active, but discreet, advice and counsel within the context of Vietnamese political realities.

#### V. BEYOND THE ELECTIONS

30. Time is too short, the divisive forces too strong, for true national political parties to emerge before the elections this year. About the most that can be realistically expected is loose coalitions of disparate groups. Nevertheless, if such coalitions are formed, there is likely to be a substantial carryover effect in the new government. Assuming the military's candidate wins, we believe there is a slightly better than even chance that the legislature will be organized around a "government bloc" and one or two "opposition blocs." Initially at least, such blocs would not be particularly cohesive, and some re-alignment of individuals and groups would be likely to occur sooner or later.

31. Politics in the new government would generally resemble the present situation. Most of the same problems would still exist, and the government would still be faced with the same vulnerabilities. The civilian-military relationship in general, and regionalism in particular would continue to be the major stumbling blocks. Regardless of the extent of civilian participation in the new administration, there are certain to be strains and stresses in executive-legislative relations. Compromise and political give and take are not firmly rooted in Vietnamese political life, and the disparity of power between the civilians and military tends to result in the civilians being over-sensitive to real or imagined faults of the military while some of the military leaders tend to take a rather cavalier attitude toward the civilians and the need to cooperate with them. Because of the fragile nature of the system, judgments concerning longer range developments must be highly tentative. There will be crises, any of which could prove to be the ultimate undoing of the whole system.

SECRET

SECRET

32. Thus, although the successful holding of national elections would be an important and essential political achievement, it would not automatically insure that continued progress was in store for Vietnam. The formation of a large political coalition that comprised something approaching a majority of the electorate would be a promising development and one that should be encouraged, though such a coalition would not be a panacea. Initially, a coalition of this type would not be very cohesive, but it would promote political stability, particularly by forcing the special interest groups to find some common ground through which they could win a national election. Furthermore, such a coalition would help to lay the groundwork for the eventual creation of a real, cohesive national party.

33. Actually, South Vietnam is slowly, often agonizingly so in US eyes, moving in this very direction. And although there will by many a slip between cup and lip, we are cautiously hopeful that the trend line will remain on the plus side. The military establishment is aware of the need to create a national political base, and within limits it is receptive to advice on how to go about it. On its own, it has sought advice from the Koreans, whose rulers have faced problems similar to those now faced by the Vietnamese. One obstacle to the military's effort to create a stable base is its lack of solid support in the southern region. Ultimately, if it is to succeed, it must incorporate some sizable southern element not now included among its assets. In any event, it must at all costs refrain from aggravating the potential for regional strife.

34. Over the longer run, the government must of necessity also adopt a revolutionary stance. Without this, it will probably be unable to motivate and sustain a viable national base. This means that insofar as possible, the government must strive to maintain a maximum of independence from the vested commercial and landed interests, so that it can justify the support of the people by satisfying their needs for social and economic change. To be free of its ties to the vested interests requires financial

SECRET

SECRET

support from other sources, which in this case means the US in one way or another.

#### VI. THE US ROLE

35. The US is inextricably embroiled in the political life of South Vietnam and wields considerable political power there. Most Vietnamese tend to believe that the US calls most of the shots in South Vietnam, and they identify the US with the military regime. Indeed, a US policy of non-interference is not realistic; even if the US attempted to stay out of the political picture, the Vietnamese would see such restraint only as a clever strategem to get what the US really wanted. There are, however, limits to US power. The US, for example, can probably influence the GVN in putting a more civilian cast on the government, its institutions, and its day-to-day operations. But the military leaders are not going to turn real and full power over to the civilians, and it is quite clear that whatever the government may be, the influences of the military will be controlling for some time to come. This is a fact of Vietnamese political life that no US desire or action is likely to change.

SECRET