

Loser's Story of

By Peter Osnos
Washington Post Service

Saigon

Most days, in the late afternoon, deputy Ngo Cong Duc can be found gossiping cheerfully with other politicians and Vietnamese journalists in a coffee shop named "Givral" in downtown Saigon.

He was there yesterday, with a few of his cronies huddled around him, but he wasn't nearly as well-groomed as usual. His eyes were red-rimmed and swollen. "I must be tired," he said, "I was up all night."

It may have been mostly fatigue, but Duc was also sad and he was angry and maybe just a little frightened. It had been a long and difficult campaign and in the end, he was beaten, from all indications because the govern-

ment wanted it that way.

More than almost any other opposition candidate, Duc and his supporters in the Mekong delta province of Vinh Binh had been bullied by the government. At one point he was thrown in jail and later dropped temporarily from the ballot as a "pro-Communist."

The 35-year-old deputy has probably been President Nguyen Van Thieu's noisiest critic (although by no means the most respected) and his lively newspaper Tin Sang is South Vietnam's second largest.

All that made him very well-known in Vinh Binh and as nearly as such things can be judged by an outsider, genuinely popular. "If Duc loses," an American adviser there said in June, "it will be because the government

stole it from him."

And that, says Duc, is precisely what happened, not only to him, but also to the other two incumbents who were his allies.

From the start, opposition candidates all over the country have been accusing the government of rigging the election and Duc was among the most vociferous. Sometimes Duc exaggerates and after he was restored to the ballot by the Central Election Committee, his claims sounded a bit hollow.

They don't any more. From observers who spent election day there, both journalists and American diplomats, come the word that a systematic fix was laid on, notable for its flagrancy.

In one village near the province capital of Phu Vinh, said Duc, government agents

Election 'Fix'

were distributing used voting cards and telling the people to go home without casting their ballots, which had already been cast for them.

Elsewhere, he charged, village and hamlet officials in charge of the balloting were ordered to sign a pledge that if Duc got more than 10 per cent of the vote, they would resign. He said the officials were instructed to tell those voting for him they could be accused of being Communists.

Of the 102 people he brought from Saigon to act as observers at the polling places, he said, only 14 were able to take up their posts. He added that during the counting of the votes none of his supporters were allowed to watch.

Duc said he will appeal the results to a local court with

little chance of success, but he is afraid to go back to Vinh Binh in person because of fears of being arrested.

Duc may well have reason to fear. Last fall, after Duc made a peace proposal at a Paris press conference, aides to President Thieu noted how similar it was to that of the Communists and said that the National Assembly should consider bringing criminal charges against him.

In a way, Duc is proud of what has happened, "I could have run in Saigon and certainly I would be elected," he said, "but Vinh Binh is my home."

Then, recovering a little of his bravado he added, "if I and the others are not reinstated, they'll have to send a general to govern there. Watch, you'll see."