

Vietnam Election

Failure to replace promptly the resigning chief negotiator in Paris with his designated successor, Ambassador Porter, suggests that Washington may be deliberately delaying a serious reply to the new peace proposals submitted by the Communists one month ago. One apparent reason would be an Administration hope that the forthcoming presidential election in South Vietnam, scheduled for Oct. 3, will somehow strengthen the allied position for a negotiated settlement, or even for a satisfactory resolution of the conflict without negotiations. The way the election campaign is shaping up today, there is little evidence to sustain that hope.

Unless there are drastic changes in the policies of Saigon and Washington, the prospects are that President Thieu will win easily in October in an election that will be widely regarded in Vietnam and elsewhere as fundamentally fraudulent.

The Thieu regime is stacking the deck against its opposition in many ways. The government-controlled radio and television have given extensive coverage to the President's activities but little or none to those of his challengers. Newspapers opposed to the regime have been harassed and censored. Thousands of political prisoners languish in jails, including the peace candidate who ran a strong second to Mr. Thieu in the last election.

More than 100 anti-Thieu candidates were initially blocked from running in the forthcoming election for the lower house under a restrictive electoral law. Although the Central Election Council has reinstated 65 of these candidates, the law remains to discredit the claim that the South Vietnamese people will really be given a wholly free choice in the coming elections.

Last June, President Thieu forced through a compliant National Assembly a new law that required presidential candidates to secure the endorsement of either 100 of 550 members of provincial and city councils or 40 of the 193 legislators. This insidious measure so far has blocked the candidacy of Vice President Ky, who would be expected to draw votes from Thieu supporters and thus strengthen the prospects of the peace candidate, General Duong Van "Big" Minh.

The United States Embassy has declared a "hands off" policy in the election campaign and has sent out word to its advisers in the field to observe strict neutrality. But as General Minh has repeatedly pointed out, such negative neutrality is not neutral at all in its ultimate consequences. If Americans stand idly by while the regime uses the vast resources the United States has placed in its hands to intimidate and overwhelm its non-Communist opposition, the United States in effect becomes a silent partner to fraud. As long as this country remains the chief supporter of the South Vietnamese Government, it has a right and duty to insist on fair play.