

Government by Force

By WESLEY R. FISHEL

EAST LANSING, Mich. — For more than a generation the major U.S. political thrust in Vietnam has been to develop stability. Despite our professions of faith in representative government and democratic processes, we rarely have been at ease with vigorous and independent leaders among our junior allies or with legislative bodies such as the Vietnamese National Assembly when they show vitality and independence of judgment. The events that culminated in the South Vietnamese election Oct. 3 underscore that conclusion.

Politically alert Vietnamese understand that President Thieu's blandly arrogant handling of the election would not have been possible without American support and approval. Vietnamese generals, whose political antennae are attuned to wounds and signals from Washington, had to be publicly cautioned not to overthrow Thieu, so great was the risk that they would take such measures in their unhappiness with his conduct.

Oppositionists, who had always doubted the sincerity of U.S. protestations of support for free elections in which such popular and respected leaders as ex-General Duong Van Minh would have a real chance to run for President, came out of the experience with their cynicism strengthened. To them, the "election" was actually a contrived endorsement which recalled to them the suspiciously impressive majorities that the late President Ngo Dinh Diem was accustomed to receive during nine and a half years in office. And Ambassador Bunker lost face and respect among Vietnamese and among other foreign diplomats in Vietnam as well, through his miscalculation of the internal political dynamics of South Vietnam and his misjudgment of the character and probable behavior of its political leaders and personalities.

Marshal Ky's repeated threats that serious trouble lay ahead for the Thieu regime were discounted by some because of Mr. Ky's reputation for compulsive and unfounded utterances. However, the statements made twice by General Minh that the demonstrated fraud of the electoral process now forced him to seek "other means" of changing the government, had an ominous sound. The warnings by Pres-

ident Nixon) late last spring when he insisted that this month's election was a wholly Vietnamese affair in which no American would intervene. The instructions which were ostentatiously distributed to all official American offices and organizations in Vietnam ordering a hands-off policy were taken to be window dressing. For these Vietnamese, oppositionists as well as members of the Government, saw evidence to the contrary wherever they turned. Privately, our officials made no secret of their preference for Thieu and their contempt for Ky and Minh. In a society where privately expressed ideas count for more than what is proclaimed publicly, and where American official approval or disapproval can be crucial in helping waverers to make up their minds, this contributed to the development of the present unhappy situation. Furthermore, the hasty, last-minute moves by Ambassador Bunker to persuade Minh and Ky to cooperate in what both men had already publicly labeled a transparent fraud simply convinced any Vietnamese who had taken our asserted noninvolvement at face value that they had been played for fools by the Americans.

Perhaps the root of U.S. problems lies in the unwillingness or inability of U.S. policymakers to decide exactly what they would like to leave behind when the last American soldiers have been withdrawn. We want allies independent enough to stand up to the Vietcong and North Vietnamese, but we want them to move in the direction and in the manner the U.S. sets for them. The election demonstrates that we can't have it both ways.

For a generation Americans have spoken hopefully and optimistically of helping into being in South Vietnam a "broadly based government of national unity." Now, after 17 years of total involvement in Vietnamese internal affairs, the U.S. has sanctified in power a polished and ruthless military Machiavellian, heading a one-party military regime, authoritarian, institutionalized in its corruption, and lacking support among the people. In addition, we leave an undermined and American-weakened National Assembly and a discredited Supreme Court. As both Minh and Ky have warned, henceforth Thieu can govern only by force. Scarce resources are going to have to be diverted from social, economic, and military necessities in order to maintain Thieu in power. And the cause for which Vietnamese nationalists have struggled and died for three decades has been gravely weakened.

ident Nixon and Ambassador Bunker that only the Communists could benefit from the instability and turmoil that might follow Thieu's overthrow were discounted by Vietnamese nationalists, who consider American statesmen and diplomats poor judges of Vietnamese thought and behavior, and even poorer prophets.

Few Vietnamese in political life believed Ambassador Bunker (or even

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