

# SAIGON DECREES END OF ELECTIONS ON HAMLET LEVEL

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Will Be Appointed  
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By **CRAIG R. WHITNEY**  
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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Sept. 6—The South Vietnamese Government, by executive decree, has abolished popular democratic election of officials at the most basic level—in the country's 10,775 hamlets.

Under the new system, which is going into effect now and will be complete within two months, nearly all the country's administrative officials—from the province chiefs down to the hamlet level—will be appointed.

The decree ends six years of popular election at the grass-roots level of the hamlets. It was issued, without publicity, on Aug. 22 by Premier Tran Thien Khiem. It orders the 44 province chiefs, who are military men appointed by President Nguyen Van Thieu, to reorganize local government and appoint all hamlet officials and finish the job in two months.

## Aides to Be Appointed

The new system calls for either two or three officials in each hamlet, depending on its population. They are the average Vietnamese citizens' closest contact with his government—the men he complains to, goes to when he needs help, or hears from when the Government wants to enforce its laws.

At the next highest level, the village—villages in Vietnam are administrative groupings of hamlets, not villages in the American or European sense of the word—village chiefs and their staffs have been elected by provision of the South Vietnamese Constitution. But now, according to the Premier's decree, their deputies and staffs will no longer be elected. They, too, will be appointed by the province chiefs.

In the space of a few months—since President Thieu began

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ruling by decree in June—he has centralized power in his hands and through men appointed by him to a degree unknown in Vietnam since the Americans came here in strength in the nineteen-sixties and gave South Vietnam the forms of democratic government and popular elections.

Since 1967, the country has been governed by an elected President and a two-chamber legislature. President Thieu, who ran alone last Oct. 3 and won 94.3 per cent of the vote for his second term, controls a majority of the legislators in both houses but has been ruling by decree since June 27. On that night he wrested from the Senate authority to govern by fiat for six months in the fields of security, defense, economy and finance.

But it is clear, from this latest decree as well as from earlier ones by President Thieu that placed restrictions on the South Vietnamese press and stiffened the penalties for common crimes and for dereliction of duty, that the forms of democratic government are being weakened at a time when the United States is pulling troops out and, correspondingly, losing influence here.

## Speeches Not Translated

President Thieu has been saying as much in recent speeches, which his Government has not been translating into English or disseminating to the foreign press.

For example, on Aug. 11, in a speech in Quinhon, capital of Binh Dinh Province, which the United States Government monitored and then translated into English, he said:

"I have never denied independence and democracy. As President of South Vietnam I have always observed democracy. However, if I [may speak as] a citizen, I must complain that our Government has allowed us to enjoy too much democracy too soon. This is like—if you will excuse me for my comparison—a small baby that is given an overdose of medicine or like a weak person who takes up physical exercise so that his health cannot endure.

"I have always respected the people's democratic rights and freedoms as basically outlined in our Constitution. However, these rights and freedoms must be properly practiced, such as simultaneously respecting the Constitution and responding to the demands of our nation."

## 'We Are Too Complacent'

"The Communists try to infiltrate our anti-Communist political parties, which are strong and which they cannot topple," Mr. Thieu said. "The Communists try to infiltrate our anti-Communist religions and our political parties. The Communists are now spending money buying newsmen, publishing newspapers and taking advantage of the disorderly and broad democracy and freedom in the south. When an election



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Nguyen Van Thieu

is held, the Communists try to benefit from it."

In a key passage he told his audience "Our political parties are still in small number and are not united; second, we are too complacent and are often disunited, and third, the most important is our disorderly democracy. Our democracy presents many gaps."

Mr. Thieu has often cited the extraordinary situation created by the Communist offensive, which began at the end of last March, as justification for restrictive measures. But the move to abolish election of hamlet officials and centralize local administration under the appointed province chiefs was in preparation even before the offensive.

An American Government interpretation of the Premier's decree says, for example, "These changes have been in the wind for the past several months" and were noted by the Americans in reports of Feb. 28 and March 7.

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It says, of the effect of the decree on the only local officials who will continue to be elected, "The village chief, though still elected, will be in a much less commanding position since the officials who work under him will now be appointed by the province chief."

The province chiefs appointed by the President are military men — usually colonels — who owe their jobs to Mr. Thieu's patronage and are personally loyal to him. Often they do not even come from the provinces they serve. Last year Mr. Thieu said he intended to gradually put into effect the popular election of province chiefs beginning in 1972 but this has not happened.

#### 'Guidelines' Also Issued

Along with the decree, Premier Khiem also issued to the country's province chiefs "general guidelines for the explanation and implementation" of it. It says, in the American Government's translation, "In sum, the administration in villages and hamlets is advanced but not quite adequate, and it doesn't satisfy the needs of the nation in the present phase of the struggle against the Communists."

"You must use your authority as fixed in Articles 3 and 6 of the new decree to screen the ranks of village and hamlet officials including hamlet chiefs because now they will be appointed by you. You must release those who are unqualified, negative, or who have bad behavior.

"In choosing which village officials and hamlet chiefs to keep," the Premier's explanation says, "you have to consider his anti-Communist achievements, services and training courses in national or local training centers."

"Especially to cope with the present situation, if localities don't have enough personnel and there are no civilian candidates after the screening, I will approve the use of popular forces, regional forces [militia] including lieutenant officers, in the village and hamlet administration."

The changes in the village administrations — there are 2,130 villages in South Vietnam — limit the number of officials per village to a maximum of

eight, including the elected village chief.

The decree also provides that, where there is a police station in a village, the police chief will assume the function of the formerly elected deputy village chief for security, an important post because it includes such powers as determining who in the village may be a Communist sympathizer or a member of the Vietcong.

The Premier drew on Article 70 of the Constitution for his authority to issue the new decree. It provides that "the organization and regulation of local administration shall be prescribed by law."

Premier Khiem's explanation to his province chiefs says that, since the promulgation of such

a law was still pending, a draft having been sent to the National Assembly, he was now issuing a decree superseding the one in 1966, which established the election of hamlet and village officers.

The Premier's measure goes beyond instructions that President Thieu issued to the province chiefs a few weeks ago. Then he told them that they could replace elected village and hamlet chiefs at their discretion.

The reason, according to American officials, was the discovery during the offensive this year that many locally elected hamlet chiefs were in fact Communists, who voluntarily provided valuable assistance to enemy forces.