

Thieu Move To Eliminate Opposition

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Acting on the last day before the expiration of his special decree powers, President Nguyen Van Thieu has signed a law that South Vietnamese political leaders say will eliminate virtually all political parties except Thieu's New Democracy party.

The complex law requires, among other things, that each of South Vietnam's 24 parties immediately create a vast new village-based political organization and win at least 20 per cent of the vote in any national election or be "automatically dissolved."

Although Thieu had long been expected to seek some legislation regulating the country's fractious parties — which are often little more than conglomerates of personal interests — the toughness of the law caught both Saigon's politicians and the United States embassy by surprise.

There was no official announcement of the law; it was disclosed only in yesterday evening's issue of the newspaper Tin Song, which

See Back Page

From Page 1

often gives voice to the views of the presidential palace.

Deputy Tran Van Tuyen, a widely respected leader of the opposition party, Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang, said on hearing of the bill, "it will drive the people underground and into the Communist side. Only Thieu's Democracy party can meet the criteria."

The Democracy party, one of President Thieu's long-time pet projects, was announced to the public earlier this month after Thieu was said to have secretly pressed almost all of the country's province, district, village and hamlet chiefs into joining. The party's organizers say that it already has a membership of 100,000.

The new law, which is written as an amendment to the law governing political parties, lays down the following restrictions:

Within three months, every party must establish branches in at least a quarter of the villages of half of South Vietnam's 44 provinces and in every city. Each branch must enroll as members at least 5 per cent of the registered voters in each area.

To avoid elimination, a political party must run candidates in all national assembly elections and must win at least 20 per cent of the 136 seats in the lower house. A party must also win 20 per cent of the total national vote cast for the 60-seat Senate. Senators are elected at large.

While a party has the option of not running candidates for president, if it does it must get at least 25 per cent of the total vote.

On learning of the new law last night, several political leaders questioned whether Thieu had the power to enact it under his six-month emergency powers. These powers, which expired Wednesday night shortly after he signed the decree, were to be limited to the fields of national security, defense, economics and finance.