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To Saigon, All Dissenters Are Foes, All Foes Reds

The following article is the last in a series on Vietnam.

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SAIGON, South Vietnam — After two decades of fratricidal warfare the Government of South Vietnam has been left with a legacy of corrosive suspicions directed in large measure against its own citizens.

The chief instrument and repository of these suspicions is the police apparatus. In a war in which the enemy cannot always be seen, the police structure tends to see him everywhere, attributing to him immense, almost superhuman powers of deviousness and persuasion.

This attitude, which has fueled the system of arrest, torture and imprisonment in South Vietnam, was defined recently by a high-ranking officer of the Special Branch of

the National Police, which is responsible for coping with Vietcong infiltrators in the civilian population.

The Communists, he explained during a conversation, scheme to get one family member after another on their side. They woo them one by one, using those who have come over to send first a letter, then perhaps a little money to lure the rest of the family across the ideological line.

Students are very vulnerable, he observed, gesturing with his cigarette. We have caught students having secret meetings. They organize sports clubs and they hold weekend retreats "where they sing for-

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bidden songs — North Vietnamese songs!"

He portrayed the Communists as masters of infiltration who penetrate the ranks of dissidents and even of the police. Officers, he said, have to watch their own men very carefully.

Asked if he thought there were any opponents of President Nguyen Van Thieu who were not Communists, he replied with an emphatic no. They are all Communists, he said, and as for their assertions that they are merely neutralists opposed to this Government, "it's just a cover."

So there is not much room for other voices in South Vietnam now. President Thieu said as much April 14 when he declared in a speech that "the 19.5 million South Vietnamese people should be welded into a monolithic bloc, motivated by a single anti-Communist ideal."

'Only a Bunch of Traitors'

Contending that the supposedly neutralist "third force" was a creation of the National Liberation Front, he told his audience: "The so-called third force is only a bunch of traitors to the motherland and henchmen of the Communists and colonialists."

A group of 301 Roman Catholic priests replied to this in a statement planned for a June news conference that the police sealed off and prevented from taking place. "The anti-Communist cause has become a padlock to shut the mouth of the people," the priests declared, "because every helpless citizen may be accused of connivance with or assistance to Communists."

To many former prisoners who have undergone police interrogation, Mr. Thieu's view of dissent seems genuine, not manufactured to excuse arrest. The interrogators, they say appear to believe quite sincerely that the student or the writer in question wrote as he did or spoke as he did only to help the Communists.

For example, a journalist who was arrested after he wrote newspaper articles about the My Lai massacre, the use of defoliants and the antipersonnel bombs dropped by the United States in North Vietnam gave this account of his interrogation by the police:

"They asked me, 'What Communist organization are you working under?' I said that I'm not in any Communist organization, that I'm not acquainted with Communists, I only write these articles that oppose the war. They said that they did not believe me and started applying electrodes to the lobes of my ears."

"Certainly I must be in a Communist organization, they said, 'Why would you have written such articles if you were not in a Communist organization?'"

Opportunists, an Officer Says

A young officer who works in a provincial reconnaissance unit — part of the Special Branch—said that he was convinced that most dissidents sought Communist support not necessarily out of ideology but out of opportunism: "They want to elevate themselves in case some day there is a coalition government," he said.

He went on to talk fearfully of a recent North Vietnamese program to send civilians into the South to farm abandoned land in Vietcong-controlled areas. The danger, he explained, is intermarriage. The Communists would try to intermarry with pro-Communists and the pro-Communists with non-Communists, so Communism would spread relentlessly, he said, speaking as if it was a hereditary disease or a dreaded racial defect.

Families of Communists thus become targets of suspicion. They are arrested frequently, not just for their supposed pro-Communist sympathies but also for the intelligence information they are believed to have about Vietcong activities.

A middle-aged woman from Hue, the mother of seven, described being arrested three times, beaten, interrogated and held for three or four months each time in the years after her husband, a professor of literature at Hue University, left in 1968 to go with the Vietcong.

The last time, in April, 1972, she said, she was forced to sign a promise to gather intelligence. "I signed," she said. "I was afraid of being beaten, I was very fearful. They said, 'If you do not report with intelligence you can be arrested again.'" This haunted her, she explained because she had no intelligence to provide. She is required to report to the police monthly.

Unable to Get a Job

"The whole thing is such a preoccupation with me that I can't do anything," she said. "I can't work. Even private agencies are afraid to give me work—afraid they might be implicated, afraid they might be arrested."

For another family the trouble began when the father, Prof. Ton That Duong Ky, who had been arrested by the French colonial rulers and then again under the Government of Ngo Dinh Diem, signed an anti-war petition in 1965. He was imprisoned and then, with several other intellectuals who had signed the petition, was forced across the demilitarized zone into exile in the North. He now heads a Communist organization.

Since his exile, his wife said, five of his nine children—most

In the prisons themselves the obsession of defining South Vietnamese citizens as pro-Government or pro-Vietcong focuses on one symbol: the three thin red stripes on the yellow field that form the flag of the Republic of South Vietnam.

"Will you salute the flag?" The question is asked when the prisoner arrives in Chi Hoa Prison in Saigon. The answer is of great importance. To the prison officials it represents loyalty or disloyalty, patriotism or treason, although students say their refusal to salute is a protest against the injustice of their arrest and imprisonment.



Ky Ninh, once managing editor of a Saigon newspaper, fell into disfavor and now carries people on his bicycle for pay. His wife sells kerosene and fish sauce to help.

are in their twenties, and one is a 14-year-old girl — have been arrested, some more than once. A son, Nguyen Phuoc Quynh Tien, 18, was beaten to death in prison, his mother said. And, she added, Nguyen Thi Que Lang, 25, a daughter-in-law, was arrested, beaten, suspended by her arms from the ceiling and tortured with electric shock, then left in prison for five years.

In the 'Movie Room'

Every person interviewed who had served time in Chi Hoa told the same story: Upon refusing to salute the flag, he was placed for periods of a day or two to a week or two in the Movie Room, a cell about 18 by 24 feet, lit dimly by a single bulb.

"It was very dirty," Nguyen Viet Tuan, president of a student group called the Young Catholic Workers, said. "There were urine and excrement on the floor; you couldn't breathe. It was full of mosquitoes."

Most prisoners had one leg shackled to an iron bar that ran the length of the cell a few inches above the floor. Sometimes, former prisoners said, the Movie Room contained a dozen or more people, sometimes only three or four.

"If we were shackled by the legs and we protested," said Nguyen Xuan Ham, another student leader "then they would shackle our hands as well, or cross the legs and then shackle them or shackle you face down — that was the worst." The shackled prisoners passed around a wooden box used as a toilet. "If you were lucky it would be fairly clean," Mr. Ham said, "but if it was old, urine would leak out all over where you were lying."

For many the refusal to salute was a matter not of ideology but of principle that their captors could not comprehend. The journalist who was arrested for his anti-American articles recalled his conversation with a prison official several days after the signing of the Paris cease-fire agreement in 1973.

"You do not agree to salute the flag," the official declared. "You must be a Communist."

"No, I am not a Communist," was the reply. "I was a journalist and I engaged in no illegal activities. This Government arrested me, and that flag is a symbol of the Government that illegally arrested me, so how can I salute that flag? If they want me to salute the flag they must release me—then I will salute it."

Has he saluted it since his release last October? "From the time I was small," he answered slowly, "I lived in Saigon, and all that time I saluted the flag. All that time I was not a Communist. Now I do not know. Now no one asks me."

Some South Vietnamese see a self-fulfilling prophecy in the Government's compulsion to label opponents as Communists. A prominent civilian judge, for instance, declared in a recent interview that no matter what the national emergency, martial law "can reach too many innocents and transform these innocents into Communists because they are angry against the unjust measures taken against them."

Some student dissidents have gone over to the Communist side, friends say, usually out of fear of arrest or re-arrest. It is not an easy decision. It means leaving a family and accepting a political label with which few seem comfortable. Many stay behind, living in a kind of underground world, sleeping each night in the home of a different friend, hoping to keep one step ahead of the police.

"Yes, I may go to the other

side," said a young man recently released from prison who is living underground. "A friend, arrested at the same time, has gone. If I lose my morale, perhaps I will go. But I'm not a Communist. There are certain parts of Communist policy that I don't accept. We are pacifists. We are against the fighting."

A Confluence of Views

He is a militant Buddhist and a former student leader who helped organize campaigns in the late nineteen-sixties in which American vehicles were burned in Saigon as a protest against the American military presence. Now he wants to see President Thieu out of office. Only then, he says, can the Paris agreement's guarantee of democratic liberties and general elections be realized.

On these two issues — the Americans and the Paris agreement—he and many other opponents of Mr. Thieu share a coincidence of views with the Communists. But it was with some disgust that he recalled being locked in the same cell with a dozen Vietcong political cadresmen at Tan Hiep Prison.

"They were inferior cadres," he said with disdain. "I didn't discuss serious things with them. The Buddhists do not like foreigners. The Buddhists do not accept foreign ideas, Marxist or capitalist." Thus he, like many of his colleagues, is left suspended between two sides, practicing his politics clandestinely and with little success.

The Government does not seem perturbed to have such opponents going physically to the Communists. During the prisoner exchanges that ended in March the Government released to the Vietcong a number of prisoners who denied that they were Communists. Some refused to go. These included two prominent opponents of the Government—Tran Ngoc Chau, a former parliamentary deputy and a friend of many American advisers, and Huynh Tan Mam, former president of the South Vietnam Student Union.

They were offered freedom on the Saigon side if they would agree to go through the Open Arms program, which was designed for Communist defectors. But they refused on the ground that this would be tantamount to making the confessions that they had resisted for so long. Mr. Mam remains in jail; Mr. Chau was released on June 5 on the condition that he engage in no political activities. Another, Nguyen Long, an aging antiwar lawyer who has defended many fissidents, was forced to the Vietcong side despite his objections.

Isolation as a Tactic

Those who remain in Government areas find their political activities sharply curtailed and undermined by what they call skillful police action. Where a movement depends on a few leaders, they say, the leaders will be taken. But where the arrest of the leaders is likely to provoke deeper protest

an attempt is made to isolate them by threatening or arresting lesser figures around them.

That is the situation of Ho Ngoc Nhuan, a Roman Catholic opposition deputy in the National Assembly. He is free to denounce the Government, but he says he has great trouble holding meetings with political allies or constituents.

With regularity the police surround his office and refuse to let anyone in for a scheduled meeting, he complained; on other occasions, the police have used the intimidating tactic of photographing those who visit his office.

"Every Tet," Mr. Nhuan said, referring to the Lunar New Year, "I make a calendar. I send them to my constituents in Saigon, and when I go to visit them they invite me into their bedrooms to show me that they do hang my calendar on the wall, but in the bedroom."

After his visits, he said, his constituents are in turn visited by the police, who ask about their tax payments, their jobs and the like. "They invite them to the police station several times," he says, "making it difficult for them to carry on their daily lives."

The police also have the power to keep any candidate off the ballot by filing a negative report on him with the Election Commission.

According to documents obtained by The New York Times, two incumbents on the Bac Lieu Province Council were denied permission to run for reelection in July on the basis of a police report that accused them of belonging "to a group opposed to the administration."

The two—one is named Ta Van Bo, the other requested anonymity—were also reported to have "contacted the An Quang Buddhist bloc to participate in a secret meeting." Also from the police report:

"They both contacted the office of former Lieut. Gen. Duong Van Minh and received documents criticizing the course of the Government. The general is an opponent of President Thieu."

There are other effective police tactics short of arrest. For example, writers in disfavor rarely find publishers willing to take risks. Ky Ninh, once the managing editor of a Saigon newspaper now out of business, did find a willing publisher, one of the few who have hired him in the four years Mr. Ninh has been out of prison.

"He asked me to help him organize the editorial staff," Mr. Ninh said. "I warned him that the Government doesn't want me to direct any editorial staff, but the publisher insisted on hiring me. I worked 13 days. On 10 of those 13 days the paper was confiscated by the Government."

Now, to earn money, his wife sells kerosene and fish sauce in the market place and as for Mr. Ninh—"I'm ashamed to say this but it's true—I carry passengers on my bike."

Police Techniques Described

Students also describe sophisticated police methods, by which antiwar and anti-Thieu movements have been driven underground, fragmented, intimidated and—the most candid concede—rendered virtually impotent.

"The police take off their uniforms and register as students, and who can tell the difference?" said Nguyen Van Ngoc, a lanky young student leader on the run from the police.

He and others said that the police routinely influenced student elections by arresting anti-Government candidates and making sure that pro-Government students filled faculty councils and university-wide executive councils, bodies that can take positions on national issues and command wide audiences.

Before the election this spring at the University of Can Tho, the police jailed some of the candidates and the rest, about 25, went into hiding, according to Nguyen Duc Dung, student chairman of the university's Committee of Representatives.

One apparent reason for the police interest, Mr. Dung said, was that the students had begun discussing two dangerous

topics — the country's severe economic difficulties and the amendment to the Constitution that allows President Thieu to run for a third term.

However, Mr. Nhuan, the Catholic opposition Deputy observed that the Government had also been conciliatory on occasion, especially when a student demand enjoys broad public support. Such was the case some months ago when a new nationwide organization of private university students made an appeal for a change in the law covering student draft deferments. This came shortly after student uprisings had taken place in Thailand and South Korea. Mr. Nhuan said, and the Government agreed to the change within a week.

The Unending War

Many opponents of the Government who have been arrested like to think that without the police President Thieu would fall from power. But there are factors beside the police that stabilize the present Government. One is the war itself, which still polarizes the population, feeding the tension in the country and giving those who hate and fear the Communists only one place to go.

Some politicians who count themselves among the opposition but are nevertheless strongly anti-Communist say they have tempered their criticism of Mr. Thieu because they do not want to weaken the non-Communist side further at a time when the American withdrawal has made it more vulnerable to the Vietcong and North Vietnamese.

In addition, the dissidents do not have access to the electoral process. The control of the press; the absence of any strong public figure to pose a neutralist alternative; the difficulty of assembling a political party with enough members, chapters and votes to meet the Government's strict requirements — all of these frustrate the dissidents' desire for change, as surely as the threat of arrest, torture and imprisonment does.

Many of those who oppose President Thieu lapse into embarrassed silence when asked to name an alternative. Then they insist that another man would emerge if the country had a truly free political life. Perhaps, but there is no Gallup Poll in South Vietnam, no way of scientifically testing the assumption of the dissidents that Mr. Thieu is unpopular.

Furthermore, there is no guarantee that a change in government would bring political freedom. The Communists — and even the dissidents who clamor for a fully open society — would not surprise many South Vietnamese if, after gaining power, they merely put different people in jail.