

# Thieu Is Facing Strongest Opposition Yet

By JAMES M. MARKHAM

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Oct. 22—Nguyen Van Thieu, who has led South Vietnam for nine years, has suddenly found himself embattled on the political front has never before.

An emerging opposition coalition—stimulated by dissatisfaction with the military situation and economic problems—has begun to call for President Thieu's resignation.

Although the opposition appears small and divided and Mr. Thieu appears quite powerful, many sober-minded Vietnamese have become convinced that he is nearing the end of his long leadership.

Few are willing to guess how much longer he will remain in office to find anyone who believes that he will be able to run for a third term next October.

## 'He May Go Fast'

"If he is smart, he can stay on until the end of his term," commented on Vietnamese, who is not given to hasty judgments. "If he is unlucky, he may go fast."

A prominent opposition leader, known for his caution and reticence, offered a similar appraisal: "It is only a question of time."

However, Mr. Thieu, a tenacious and supple man, is an adroit politician who has surmounted crises that would have overwhelmed a lesser personality. Some foreigners still class him among the best politicians in Asia.

One European diplomat argued that the President's situation is "still far from catastrophic."

"But," this man added, "the fact is that in this country it suffices for enough people to believe that a process is under way for it to happen. Once people believe he is tottering, he begins to totter."

In the view of many Vietnamese and foreign onlookers, the graying, 51-year-old President now faces a challenge of exacting subtlety. He must confront his opponents firmly enough to show that he is still in control, but gently enough not to furnish martyrs or stir mass hostility.

While maneuvering in the public sphere, he must also keep the loyalty of the armed forces, whose morale has lately been jarred by successful Communist military thrusts and by shrinking American assistance. For their part, the Communists, who have begun to demand Mr. Thieu's ouster as a condition for a political settlement, are expected to step up their attacks.

If Mr. Thieu's home-front unpopularity should become a grave liability to the conduct of the war, some observers believe, key generals might plead with the President to leave office for the sake of the nation.

## Police Do Good Job

Mr. Thieu's American-trained police have so far done a professional job in controlling the small demonstrations that have mushroomed in Saigon and in some provincial cities. Violence and arrests have been limited. When the police resorted to tear gas in Hue on Sept. 8, Mr. Thieu dismissed the police and province chiefs.

"We don't want to give [the opposition] a body to play around with," said a close Thieu adviser.

But the urge to crack down may become irresistible if, as seems possible, the demonstrations grow.

A crackdown would certainly have a negative effect on the American Congress, which by year's end will probably be considering a Ford Administration request for a supplementary military appropriation for South Vietnam. But such a crackdown could, conceivably, deliver a fatal blow to the opposition before it generates mass support.

Mr. Thieu's support has eroded sharply in recent months. With the assent of the Vatican, significant sections of South Vietnam's conservative Catholic community have mounted an anticorruption campaign. The President, a Catholic, is its chief target.

Though "corruption" is the nominal issue, the leadership of the Catholic front wants Mr. Thieu to go. Catholic

aides have quietly lobbied with him first to broaden the basis of his Government and then to resign.

In addition to the Catholics, the influential An Quang Buddhist faction, the largest veterans' organization, the outspoken Saigon press, the Saigon and Hue bar associations and a dozen minor fronts and committees — some against hunger, some in favor of the working class, some urging the return of the former Emperor, Bao Dai — have joined the attack.

While Mr. Thieu still holds the all-important police force and army, he has virtually no one speaking out in his defense, aside from the Government propaganda machinery. His Democracy party is in shambles, and in the onedocile legislature pro-Government deputies and senators are keeping their distance from Independence Palace.

By instinct, Vietnamese turn to what they jokingly call "the White House"—the white-latticed American Embassy—for some kind of a signal. The only one to date is a strident six-page polemic, issued yesterday by the embassy, which attacks

Communist allegations that the United States is supporting Mr. Thieu's opponents.

In fact, so far, the embassy appears to have stayed clear of the turmoil. Secretary of State Kissinger is known to have a strong distaste for embroilment in Vietnamese politics, and American policy-makers generally are haunted by the chaotic years that followed the toppling of President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963.

Vietnamese quickly point out that Mr. Thieu is not Mr. Diem. For one thing, while hardly popular, he is not hated the way the fanatical Mr. Diem was at the end of his reign.

For another, Mr. Thieu, an informal, soldierly sort, is not regarded as a man with a mission who would fight to the death to stay in power. He has told at least one military colleague that it would be better to "leave gracefully" than cling to off ice.

Indeed, Mr. Thieu, in a two-hour speech to the nation on Oct. 1 made a rhetorical offer to resign "if the entire people and army no longer have confidence in me."

Some Vietnamese consider it altogether possible that he will

eventually resign, if the opposition keeps up the pressure; others hope that he will, but fear that he will not.

"I think that Thieu should learn the lesson of Johnson, first, and, afterward, Nixon," asserted Dang Van Sung, publisher of Chinh Luan, Saigon's most-respected newspaper.

Mr. Sung, who has occasionally acted as a roving ambassador for Mr. Thieu and who is perhaps the closest thing the President has to a "loyal opposition," said that he has advised him to announce that he will "under no circumstances" run for re-election next year.

Then, the publisher said, Mr. Thieu should form a "national union" cabinet that would include many of his current critics. The opposition, in turn, should pledge its support to the new government.

Mr. Sung said that he had been told that Mr. Thieu was pondering his suggestion but that he has not yet reached a decision.

"He is someone who reflects overlong," the publisher remarked with a frown. "In the tradition of Mr. Thieu, I fear that his decision will be too little and too late."