

Buddhist Monks Quietly Pressure Thieu

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SAIGON, Oct. 16—South Vietnam's most powerful Buddhist leaders are quietly pressuring President Nguyen Van Thieu to make significant steps toward peace or resign.

They are prepared to make more dramatic protests in the coming months if Thieu fails to respond. A special office to supervise this effort has been set up under the direction of the militant monk Tri Quang.

At a time of mounting antigovernment protest, the top Buddhist leaders have so far appeared to the public as conservative and even

hesitant by comparison with the various groups and fronts that have been marching in the streets.

But the influence of these monks is vast, and Tri Quang is known to be planning his moves carefully. Buddhist leaders' actions can be crucial in the confrontation between the government and its critics.

These leaders—including Tri Quang—are the 11 members of the ruling council of the An Quang Buddhists, whose protests against government repression preceded the overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963.

During the years of mili-

tary rule that followed Diem's overthrow, the An Quang Buddhists struggled for creation of democratic institutions.

Now they would like to see Thieu out, but they clearly feel a stake in the success of the institutions they helped create.

They want to exert pressure for reform, but they fear that violence or a sudden overthrow of Thieu might bring political chaos and an opening for the Communists.

Three-fourth of South Vietnam's 20 million people are Buddhists. While the religion has traditionally been fragmented, the An Quang

leadership exerts more influence than any other faction, claiming effective control of 3 million Buddhists and the ability to communicate through a chain of command to an additional 3 million.

In interviews, many An Quang leaders indicated that they are following a policy of gradual escalation in putting pressure on Thieu.

They are soft-spoken, impressive men with shaven heads who wrap themselves in gray or orange robes. Sitting in their small rooms in crowded pagodas, they speak with the calm authority of executives who

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have vast power at their fingertips.

They have issued careful public statements calling on Thieu to resign, and on both sides to stop fighting. They are also working behind the scenes to convey directly to Thieu the seriousness of their intentions.

There may be more dramatic actions later, but none of the leaders would disclose what these might be, although they said what actions to take has already been decided.

Before Diem's overthrow, there were Buddhist self-im-

molations, hunger strikes and marches. However, the current An Quang statements have had a strongly nonviolent tone.

"We have publicly asked Gen. Thieu to resign voluntarily if he feels he is standing in the way of peace and national reconciliation," said the Venerable Quang Do, one of the 11 leaders and their official spokesman. "If he is not willing to go, then he will be pulled down."

Quang Do said that if Thieu proves recalcitrant, "Action could take place in many forms, but none of these will depart from our firm stand against violence."

The Venerable Tri Thu, chairman of the ruling council, said, "Whatever we do, we must do it very carefully. The Buddhist religion is always in a standby position, ready to act."

Tri Quang declined to be interviewed, but it is known that he is now actively engaged in preparing the campaign of public antigovernment protest.

There will be several occasions to gauge the development of this campaign: Three days of peace seminars will be held in the An Quang pagoda at the end of this month; a national Buddhist youth conference will be held in Saigon next month, and Nov. 1 is the national day commemorating Diem's overthrow.

The quiet An Quang pressure, with the threat of direct action later, appears to be in line with the tactics of the Catholic Anti-Corruption Movement and other groups that say they are now in a consciousness-raising period of protest that may be a prelude to mass antigovernment protests and possible violence.

On the other hand, the An Quang leadership deeply distrusts the Catholics and has given only the vaguest support to the Anti-Corruption Movement.

They regard Catholicism, much as they regard communism, as a Western philosophy alien to the Vietnamese way of life.

"The Catholic priests in

this country have been traditionally so corrupt that maybe if we joined the Anti-Corruption Movement they'd suspect we were doing it just to get at them," quipped the Venerable Giac Duc, director of youth affairs for the An Quang.

An Quang support for Sen. Vu Van Mau's new Buddhist peace front, the National Forces of Reconciliation, has been widely publicized. The loose grouping of Buddhist politicians and other peace forces is supposed to provide a vanguard for national reconciliation under the terms of the January 1973 Paris cease-fire agreement. But Mau is widely suspected of creating it primarily to serve his own political ambitions.

The interviews indicated that An Quang support for Mau is tentative, and that the An Quang leaders intend to control the uses to which their influence is put.

"The Buddhist faithful will sacrifice their lives for Buddhism, but who wants to sacrifice his life for Vu Van Mau?" asked the Venerable Phap Lan, an important An Quang monk though not one of the top 11.

So far the An Quang leadership has made a declaration of "spiritual support only" for Mau's force. Spokesman Quang Do said that "If Mau group allies itself with any group acting against our policies, we'll reconsider our support."

One of the key jobs of

leader Tri Quang's office is to prevent Communist infiltration into Buddhist ranks, according to the monks.

The anticommunism of the Catholic Anti-Corruption Movement seems so far to have helped immunize it from government repression.

The Buddhists, on the other hand, have always been more open to Communist infiltration.

They appear to fear that infiltration at this time of rising tensions could provide Thieu with an excuse to crack down on them — which they think would result in chaos that they want to avoid.

"If Thieu tried to smash the Buddhists," said Phap Lan, "his fall would come very swiftly."

One reason for the apparent conservatism of the An Quang Buddhists today, compared with the tumultuous mid-1960s, is their relative freedom from repression.

In the 1960s, the An Quang Buddhists responded sharply to massive repressive measures by the pro-Catholic Diem government.

Now the An Quang leaders complain that Thieu is drafting monks, and that the government has denied the legality of the An Quang charter.

Nevertheless, the An Quang Buddhists continue to observe their religious practices freely and the conflicts of 1963 have not developed.