

Democracy Ends

Thieu Forbids Village Voting

Examiner News Services

President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam has ordered an end to the country's oldest form of democracy, elections in villages and the country's 10,000 hamlets.

The action was taken after a resurgence of Viet Cong activity in the countryside led to fears by Thieu and his advisers that Communists would seek and win office in the grass roots elections, government sources claimed.

In Washington, Nixon Administration officials were privately disgruntled at the move.

"We feel this is a setback and we're not happy," said one U.S. official, even though the public position set down by the State Department is that the Saigon move is an internal matter now subject to American influence or comment.

Another official said elimination of democracy at the grass roots undercuts President Nixon's position that his administration is trying to support the principle of self-determination in South Vietnam.

Further, other officials said, it could hurt Nixon's re-election drive against Sen. George McGovern, who has charged the President with propping up an authoritarian regime in Saigon.

State Department spokesman Charles Bray said yesterday that Washington was not consulted in advance, but other officials said the United States knew of the decision "for quite a while."

The decision to halt the local democracy was made last month and printed early

this week in the semiofficial Vietnam Press.

The decree, ordered by Thieu under a law giving him absolute power in South Vietnam for six months and signed by Prime Minister Tran Thien Kheim, ostensibly fixed "new duties" for village and hamlet administrators. A Vietnam village is a group of hamlets.

The final paragraph of the three-page law, however, gave Thieu-appointed province chiefs the power to appoint "village administrative committees with limited composition."

The result will be appointment of military officers or progovernment persons to eight-member councils governing all aspects of village life.

Village and hamlet elections are the oldest form of democracy in Vietnam, traceable back through the country's history for more than 1000 years.

In 1956, President Ngo Dinh Diem halted all local elections, fearing that Viet Cong officials would win and govern the small towns for the Communists.

A successive chain of governments after the Diem assassination promised to restore village and hamlet independence through elections, but the voting never took place.

Nearly two years after his 1967 election to the presidency, Thieu was prodded into ordering a return to village democracy.

U.S. officials at the end of 1969 said that more than 90 percent of country's hamlets had held elections and praised them in official documents as "solid progress on the route of democracy building."