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Political Rival Backs Thieu 'At This Time'

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SAIGON, Nov. 10—The man who would become president of South Vietnam if Nguyen Van Thieu were to resign said today that "Thieu must remain in office to maintain the stability of the country at this time."

Nguyen Van Huyen, the spare, scholarly president of the Senate, said in an interview that "a change in the government now would be very dangerous" because it would lead to political confusion that could be exploited by the Communists.

Huyen is no admirer of Thieu. He has opposed the president on important issues during the past year, and had to survive a palace-supported attempt by pro-government senators to unseat him from his leadership post a month ago. As he acknowledged, he would prefer that someone else run the country "once its security is guaranteed."

His views on the current situation, which are accepted as sincere by many American and Vietnamese observers who know him, are significant because they coincide with those of several other opposition leaders interviewed this week: Thieu has his faults, but he is the only man able to stand up to the threat posed by the Hanoi-Washington draft peace agreement and that is what matters for now.

Draft Accord

Talk of Thieu's ouster and replacement by Huyen was common here until Oct. 26, when North Vietnam announced the draft peace agreement which appeared to contain a major concession by Hanoi. It provided that the Thieu government would remain in office until a permanent political solution was worked out after a cease-fire. Such a solution could take months, even years.

In the past few days the

Communists have again begun to demand that Thieu be ousted as part of a peace settlement.

Thieu is widely believed to be under pressure from the United States to accept the substance of the Hanoi-Washington agreement. In the event that the peace settlement or its aftermath should actually result in Thieu's departure from office, Huyen would succeed him as head of a caretaker government.

South Vietnam's constitution provides that the president be succeeded by the vice president, but it is taken for granted that frail, do-nothing Vice President Tran Van Huong would also resign if Thieu did. That would leave the president of the Senate next in line.

The interview with Huyen was conducted in his spacious, air conditioned office in the converted waterfront amphitheater that houses the South Vietnamese Senate.

"I am not a political man," he said. "I am willing to do what I can to serve my country, but what can I do? What is essential is to preserve the liberty of the country, and in that the president is right."

Hanoi Pullout

Thieu has been insisting that there can be no settlement of the war without withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops and a redefinition of the interim National Council of Reconciliation and Concord to establish that it is not a coalition government.

Huyen said he agreed with Thieu on both points.

"The removal of the North Vietnamese troops is essential," he said. "Without that, what was the use of all the Americans did here, to leave the enemy in place?"

He said the issue was set-

tled by Article 24 of the Geneva accords of 1954, theoretically still in effect, which provided that "the armed forces of each side shall respect the Demilitarized Zone and the areas under military control of the other side and shall not undertake any action and operation against the other side."

He omitted the last clause of that article, which provides that the armed forces of the parties "shall not engage in blockade of any kind in Vietnam."

Conciliation Suggested

Huyen said he shared the opposition view that Thieu should have made conciliatory gestures, at least, toward those who have been less than zealous in supporting him. But under the present circumstances, he said, the principal concern is keeping the country from falling into Communist hands.

Huyen has impeccable anti-Communist credentials, but he is also respected by the opposition for a record of independence that goes back to the days when he stood up to President Ngo Dinh Diem. As a result, he is believed to be acceptable to all sides as head of a caretaker or provisional government in such a situation should present itself.

He is a soft-spoken, frail-looking man of 59, a lawyer by profession, who lives modestly in a small cluttered house near downtown Saigon. As president of the Senate, he is entitled to the use of a big government-owned villa, but has chosen to remain in his own home.

Huyen is a Catholic native of South Vietnam, born in the Mekong Delta town of Soc-trang. Reliable Vietnamese observers say he reflects the political views of the ruling Catholic clergy, but he also had Buddhist support in his 1967 and 1970 Senate campaigns.

He was head of the Saigon

Bar Association three times in the 1960s and was a member of the High National Council, an advisory body set up in 1964 under the short-lived regime of Gen. Nguyen Khanh.

He is the only Senate president South Vietnam has had under the constitution that went into effect in 1967.

Two Issues..

Huyen has opposed Thieu on two of the most sensitive issues that have come up in South Vietnam's recent political history. He criticized last year's one man presidential election, and he unsuccessfully used every parliamentary maneuver available to prevent passage of the bill that gave Thieu power to rule by decree last June.

But on the question of the peace negotiations, Huyen has fully supported the position of the government.

"Politicians belonging to the opposition inside the country should not be lumped together with those who try to destroy that country's government in order to take it over," he said in a speech in Paris a year ago.

"Whatever the solution adopted, there can be real and long lasting peace only if it is just and respects the parties' natural rights, in particular the right of peoples to decide for themselves their own destiny in all freedom. Justice and freedom demand that North Vietnamese troops which entered South Vietnam in violation of Geneva be withdrawn as soon as possible to put an end to aggression."

Those views, he said, as he handed a visitor a copy of the speech, are still valid today. President Thieu could not have demanded more from his most loyal supporter.