

NEW THIEU DECREE CURBS OPPOSITION

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Regulations for Parties Said To Eliminate Almost All Groups but President's

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Dec. 28—Acting on the last day before the expiration of his special decree powers, President Nguyen Van Thieu last night quietly signed a law that South Vietnamese political leaders say will eliminate virtually all political parties except Mr. Thieu's new Democratic party.

The complex law requires, among other things, that each of South Vietnam's present 24 parties immediately create a vast new village-based political organization and win at least 20 per cent of the vote in any national election or be "automatically dissolved."

Opposition Leader Complains

Although Mr. Thieu had long been expected to seek some legislation regulating the country's fractious parties—which are often little more than conglomerates of personal interests—the toughness of the law caught both Saigon's politicians and the United States Embassy by surprise. There was no official announcement of the law; it was disclosed only in this evening's issue of the newspaper Tin Song, which often gives voice to the views of the Presidential Palace.

Deputy Tran Van Tuyen, a widely respected leader of the opposition party, Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang, said on hearing of the bill today, "It will drive the people underground and into the Communist side. Only Thieu's Democracy party can meet the criteria."

The Democracy party, one of President Thieu's long time pet projects, was announced to the public earlier this month after Mr. Thieu is said to have secret-

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ly pressed almost all of the country's province, district, village and hamlet chiefs into joining. The party's organizers say that it already has a membership of over 100,000.

While the American Embassy did not learn of the new law until it appeared in Tin Song tonight, one official said he thought the effect would be "healthy."

"You wait and see, many opposition groups will be in favor of it," the official said. "It will more likely lead to a consolidation of parties than to their complete elimination."

No spokesman for the Presidential Palace was available to explain Mr. Thieu's position on the new decree, but the President in the past has repeatedly stated that he believes democracy has too many loopholes that allow the Communists an opportunity to subvert the government.

To help clear up these loopholes, Mr. Thieu last summer used his special decree powers to impose a stringent new press law, requiring all newspapers and magazines to post large financial bonds, thus forcing many dissident publications to close. At the same time, Mr. Thieu also removed almost all local village and hamlet jobs from the elective category and made them appointive.

The new law, which is written as an amendment to the law governing political parties, lays down the following restrictions:

¶ Within three months, every party must establish branches in at least a quarter of the villages of half of South Vietnam's 44 provinces and in every city. East branch must enroll as members at least 5 per cent of the registered voters in each area.

¶ To avoid elimination, a political party must run candidates in all National Assembly elections and must win at least 20 per cent of the 136 seats in the lower house. A party must also win 20 per cent of the total national vote cast for the 60-seat senate. Senators are elected at large.

¶ While a party has the option of not running candidates for president, if it does, it must get at least 25 per cent of the total vote.

Thus mathematically four parties at the most could continue to exist, since each surviving one must get at least 20 per cent of the vote. And in a

presidential race requiring at least 25 per cent of the vote apiece, only three parties could survive.

Thieu's Power Questioned

On learning of the new law tonight, several political leaders questioned whether Mr. Thieu had the power to enact it under his six-month emergency powers. These powers, which expired last night shortly after he signed the decree, were to be limited to the fields of national security, defense, economics and finance.

"It is a very surprising law since Mr. Thieu does not have the right to pass it under his presidential powers," said Prof. Nguyen Ngoc Huy, the head of the National Progressive Movement, one of the few parties large enough to have a chance of surviving the new decree.

Professor Huy, who is generally considered a supporter of Mr. Thieu, said even his party would have difficulty meeting the requirement of setting up branches in an eighth of all the for us to organize in the villages," he explained.

Violations Are Charged

Like a number of other politicians, Professor Huy also complained that while it was illegal under South Vietnam's Constitution for soldiers and civil servants to be members of a political party, tens of thousands of officers and bureaucrats have joined the Democracy party.

"How can we compete with that?" he asked.

The new decree appeared to be Mr. Thieu's latest move in a series that began last summer to use the special decree powers to reduce opposition to his regime.

Last August, for example, he removed most local village and hamlet jobs from the elective category and made them appointive. At the same time he also established a stringent new press law, requiring all papers and magazines to post large financial bonds, thus forcing almost all dissident publications to close.

Discussing the decree, the American officer suggested that the group most badly hurt by the new restrictions would be the Buddhists, who have never had a separate or effective political party of their own. Several Buddhist politicians refused to comment on the decree tonight, saying it would be too dangerous to talk about since the police overhear them.

A few of the older political parties, mostly Catholic and pro government groups are known to have held talks in recent months about possible consolidation, but little has come of similar talks in the past.

Another group that the new law might adversely effect, the American official said, could be the Communists. For if a cease-fire is agreed on, the Communists would have serious difficulty openly organizing party branches in South Vietnam's cities, where the Government police would remain active.

Thus under the terms of the decree, the Communists would be legally dissolved.