

Thieu Ends Rule by Decree; Curbs Most Political Parties

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SAIGON, Dec. 28 — President Thieu's authority to rule South Vietnam by decree expired today but not before he issued a last-minute directive that will force most of the country's 24 political parties to merge or disband.

The thoroughgoing revision of the existing political party law, and the recent formation of a new nationwide party sponsored by Thieu, are part of an acknowledged attempt to impose a two-party system on a politically fragmented country where religion, regionalism and the army have been the main political forces.

The new law sets certain requirements for the participation of parties and individuals in the political process. It

would dissolve parties that boycott elections and reduce the influence of independent politicians and religious groups.

Thieu's own party, the new Democracy Party, which was announced just two weeks ago, is thought certain to meet the stiff membership requirements of the new law. Most of the other existing parties could not do so, in the view of analysts here, and will have to merge to stay in business.

The long range goal of the decree, aside from further solidifying Thieu's personal power, is to meet the objective stated in the country's 1967 constitution, a two party system. If the new law results in an opposition party formed by a forced marriage of convenience that would be unable to challenge Thieu's party effectively,

the constitutional requirement would be met but the basic political situation here would not be changed.

Thieu's decree powers were granted in a disputed vote by the National Assembly last June, at the peak of North Vietnam's gains in the 1972 military campaign.

They enabled him to bypass the legislature on matters of national defense, security and economics. Thieu used that power to promulgate more than two dozen decrees on a broad range of issues.

He proclaimed the death penalty for corrupt officials, airplane hijackers and heroin smugglers. He further restricted freedom of the press and forced some newspapers demonstration, strikes and out of business. He banned boycotts, and scrapped South Vietnam's creaking and out-moded tax laws, imposing an ambitious new system drafted with American guidance.

Thieu said last summer that he would not seek to have the decree powers extended when the six months expired because he did not want to become a "dictator." Political analysts here have offered two principal reasons for the decision to let his authority lapse: He did not need it, having done whatever he felt was needed during the past six months, and he might not have been able to get it, since the military crisis of last spring is past and the legislature is restive about its prerogatives.

The new political party law replaces an elaborate statute enacted in 1969 which, according to the semiofficial newspaper Tin Song, "did not meet the political requirements of the forthcoming phase," which means the period after a cease-fire.

The purpose of the new law, the paper said, is to "stimulate

an alliance of political parties to cope with the political struggle against the Communists."

The old law contained only minimum membership and organizational requirements for political parties to maintain their legal status. None of the existing parties has more than 60,000 known members, though traditionally each party has a clandestine wing, and none plays an influential role outside its own membership or geographic base.

The new law requires that parties maintain chapters in Saigon and in at least half of the country's provinces and autonomous cities.

In addition, parties would be required to participate in Senate and Lower House elections, party endorsement would be a condition of candidacy in these elections, which would force potential office seekers to work within the political party system.

Party membership would have to equal at least 5 per cent of the total national electorate. This would mean that only parties with 350,000 or more members would be recognized, a goal that only Thieu's Democracy Party can possibly hope to meet.

As for the others, in the view of Vietnamese sources, the progovernment parties will align themselves with the Democracy Party, the opposition parties will either call it a day, merge, or go underground, thereby surrendering their public influence and violating the law.

The only major elections scheduled for 1973 are contests for half the seats in the Senate next October. It is possible, however, that there will be a new presidential election or some other contests before then as a result of a peace agreement.

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