

# Thieu Using State To Build Own Party

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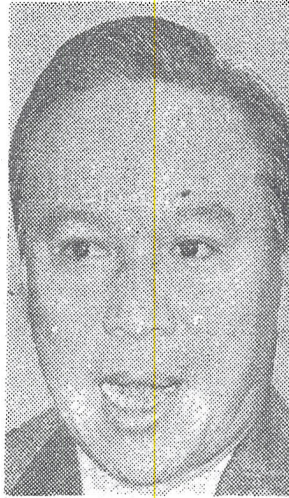
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GOCONG, South Vietnam, Dec. 31—President Thieu is openly using soldiers, civil servants, and publicly owned equipment, including materials paid for by the United States, to promote the development of his new political party.

The party, known as Dan Chu or the Democracy Party, is theoretically an independent organization with voluntary membership and no formal connections with the president. But it represents a major part of his effort to solidify his personal grip on the country and its people in anticipation of a postwar political struggle.

The party's organizers have been at work for more than a year, but stepped up the pace sharply in late October, when a peace settlement that would legitimize a Communist presence in South Vietnam became a real possibility.

Thieu has used the delay in



NGUYEN VAN THIEU  
... solidifying grip.

reaching a peace agreement to move on several levels to entrench himself in office. The chief public and ostensibly non-governmental move has been the unveiling of the party, which has opened chap-

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ters around the country though it has largely avoided scrutiny from foreigners by postponing its debut in Saigon.

The chapter here in Gocong, a sleepy province capital 30 miles south of Saigon, is one of the most fully organized, and no attempt is being made to hide the extensive use of public resources and government personnel in its development.

The staff at the party's temporary office in a Buddhist temple consists of four civil servants—three young men from province headquarters assigned by the province chief to work at the party office, and a woman typist from the Agricultural Development Bureau. Printing and typing of party documents and letters are done in government offices on government equipment.

The party's permanent Gocong headquarters is being constructed a few blocks away by a platoon of army engineers, using American-supplied equipment and imported Korean cement paid for by U.S. aid funds. The site is publicly owned land next to province police headquarters.

There are 2,673 names on the party's current Gocong province membership list. Among them are 459 police-

men and 1,134 teachers, agricultural development officials, and other civil servants. According to party chairman Nguyen Minh Huan, the roster comprises all public employees in the province.

In addition, Huan said a legal ban on partisan politics by military officers has been partly circumvented with government approval, to permit officers assigned to non-military duties to join the party. He called them "civilian officers."

He said there are about 50 such officers in Gocong, a minor and generally peaceful province where the government's military presence is minimal. There are several thousand of them around the country, according to other sources.

Huan said he was one of about 30 persons recruited for the party by the Gocong province chief and that the application forms filled out by all the members were being kept at province headquarters by one of the province chief's assistants—a lieutenant colonel who failed to appear at his office after being informed by telephone that reporters were

The ability of the party's organizers to command this kind of response from provincial officials illustrates the extend to which Thieu already controls the machinery of government. All province chiefs, or mili-

tary governors, are appointed by Thieu to their lucrative and powerful positions, and they in turn control the lower levels of government down to the remotest hamlet—including jobs, government services, essential personal documents, and security operations.

It comes as no surprise to Vietnamese or Americans here that Thieu would take advantage of his position to promote the development of his party. It was expected that there would be pressure on government workers to join and that some public money would be used for party activities.

Political parties have not traditionally been a dominant force in Vietnamese political life because there is none that has nationwide membership and influence, and the existing parties have been subordinate to regional and religious interests.

Last week, however, Thieu issued a decree that is intended to change that. Under the new law, electoral politics in Vietnam will be dominated by large, national political parties—and if only the Democracy Party is able to meet the new law's membership criteria and is eligible to run candidates, that would leave Thieu in an even stronger position than now.

"We're not asking to participate in Thieu's government," an opposition party leader

said wistfully the other day. "We just want to be left alone to compete equally. How can we compete with this?"

It will be difficult, if not impossible, for any opposition party to compete with the Democracy Party, if its performance here is any indication.

Huan, the party chairman, a 61-year-old schoolteacher, said he joined because "the province chief himself came into my home and invited me to attend the meeting. I am a supporter of Thieu and an anti-Communist. It would have been very difficult to refuse."

As party chairman for Gocong, he said, he has sought out "all the people I know personally" to explain the party's purposes to them and persuade them to join. "Nobody has refused," he said.

There is still a debate within the U.S. Mission in Saigon over what Thieu's likely political moves will be in the event of a cease-fire.

Basically the argument is between those who believe he will "move to the left"—broaden the base of his government, reestablish contact with the opposition, liberalize some of his political policies—and those who believe he will "move to the right"—further harden his uncompromising anti-Communist, antineutralist stand and exclude from the councils of power all those whose agreement with him is less than total.