

SAIGON RESUMING LOCAL ELECTIONS

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Decision on Village Councils

Said to Show Optimism

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 16—The South Vietnamese Government will hold new nationwide elections for village councils, reversing a ban put into effect last May during the Communists' spring offensive, a Government spokesman announced today.

The decision to resume the elections, despite the unsettled military and political situation, appeared to reflect a new mood of confidence in the Saigon Government that the cease-fire might be working to South Vietnam's advantage.

Last week, in another action reflecting that optimism, President Nguyen Van Thieu is reported to have quietly ordered his commanders to obey the cease-fire as carefully as possible and to begin cooperating with the two peace-keeping commissions—the Four-Party Joint Military Commission and the International Commission of Control and Supervision. The order marked a major departure for Mr. Thieu, who had long opposed the settlement as a Communist trick.

Pleased by Successes

According to a Cabinet Minister, President Thieu and his aides have been pleasantly surprised by the ease with which the army recaptured almost all the 400 villages seized by the Communists in the early hours of the cease-fire. He added that they were pleased with the lack of popular response there has been to the Communists.

The new elections will be held "in the near future" in all villages under Government control, said Pham Duong Hien, the government spokesman. Some 90 per cent of South Vietnam's 2,130 villages are estimated to be held by the Government.

The decision to resume village elections, made by the Cabinet late last week, is important because the village council is now the only body popularly elected at the local level.

Until last August, when President Thieu invoked emergency powers, villagers could vote for their hamlet chiefs. The hamlet is the lowest administrative unit in Vietnam, with the village made up of several hamlets.

Sign of Confidence

Mr. Thieu abolished the election of hamlet chiefs and canceled further village council elections last year out of fear that the Communists would take advantage of the confusion surrounding their offensive to win many offices. Hence American and Government officials interpret Mr. Thieu's restoration of village elections as a sign of his returning confidence.

However, there was no indication that Mr. Thieu would take the further step to elect hamlet chiefs again. They are currently appointed by the province chief, usually a colonel or lieutenant colonel, who is directly responsible to the President.

It was widely felt last year that his restrictions on elections weakened the villagers' sense of local autonomy and consequently their allegiance to the Saigon Government.

An important role of the village council is the selection of the village chief from among its members. All village chiefs and council members had been frozen in office since the election ban.

Vietcong Not Consulted

Mr. Hien, the Government spokesman, said that Mr. Thieu's decision to restore village elections "is clear evidence of our intention to consolidate democracy and to insure our people's right to self-determination at the grassroots level."

Mr. Hien added that the Saigon Government had made no effort to consult with the Vietcong's Provisional Revolutionary Government before taking the action, explaining that "all our laws and regulations remain in effect pending a political settlement in Paris with the Communists."

The spokesman said that any villager could run for office as a council member except those with legal charges against them, which would include Communists.

And he explained that candidates did not have to be members of the highly restrictive new political parties provided for in an electoral law issued by Mr. Thieu last December just before his emergency powers expired. Mr. Hien did not say why the new law did not apply.