

Letters to The Times

Buddhists in Vietnam

Regime's Denial of Their Civil and Personal Rights Protested

The writer of the following was for some 14 years a member of the C.I.A., working chiefly in the Far East. He served under General MacArthur during the first three years of the occupation of Japan.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES:

One of the most disturbing features of the current crisis with South Vietnam is the apparent failure of both the United States Government to understand the real basis for the internal turmoil in South Vietnam and that of the American press to report the facts to our people.

To me, with some knowledge of the culture and history of Southeast Asia, the current crisis in South Vietnam bears a striking resemblance to what happened in Burma between 1907 and 1948 and what has more recently happened in Ceylon. Madame Nhu (who reminds one of Madame Chiang Kai-shek), her husband and President Diem to the contrary notwithstanding, the Buddhists are in the right.

What is involved here is the social dynamic of Buddhism—its long fight against a Catholic-dominated oligarchy.

The Buddhists have been deprived from almost every point of view, but most importantly with respect to their schools, which have been the foundation of social and cultural education throughout Southeast Asia.

Aid Denied Them

They have been denied Government aid and support by a regime which has insisted that public moneys go to educate and support an oligarchy that is essentially urban and wealthy—an oligarchy having nothing in common with the men and women who live and work within the framework of a village agricultural society. The city in Southeast Asia is, generally speaking, an alien imposition.

In Burma, from the first decade of the 20th century, the Buddhists fought not only for political recognition but also for public support for their schools—particularly the village schools. In Ceylon, the 1956 general election turned on this.

The Buddhist way of life is the essence of social organization and regulation throughout Southeast Asia outside of the cities. They, the Buddhists, are in the right because they are of and for the people. The Anglican-Catholic ruling oligarchies have been discredited elsewhere. In South Vietnam they are still trying to maintain privilege and position despite the wishes and desires of the people themselves. Anti-Communist they may be—one would expect them to be so. But this is hardly a basis for their current conduct.

Persecution Not Protested

United States failure to condemn—clearly and plainly—repression and persecution of the Buddhists, and United States condonation of the use of American weapons and American-trained military personnel for such purposes is intolerable.

One protests not only the flagrant violation of civil and personal rights by a regime that professes support for anti-Communism while still denying the right of the Buddhist to exercise his ancient and social duty to educate his young, one also protests the repeated failure of our Government to recognize that the dominant cultural and social pattern in Southeast Asia is Buddhist.

We failed to support Tibet in her hour of need; we have been lukewarm in Burma and Ceylon. We seem to prefer to support repressive minority oligarchies, city-based and Western colonial-oriented.

If any office or segment of the United States Government is advising or supplying funds to any South Vietnam groups engaged in defending that country against military infiltration or internal subversion they should be clearly instructed as to the difference between infiltration or subversion and rightful popular protest. Perhaps a short course in the history and culture of Southeast Asia is the answer.

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Westport, Conn., Sept. 13, 1963.