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OCI No. 2339/63

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Office of Current Intelligence  
14 August 1963

MCO

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Coup Rumors in South Vietnam

Summary

Since the Buddhists' dispute with the Diem government entered a serious phase, reports have multiplied that various old and new critics of the regime were planning coups. The most serious reports concern plotting among senior military officers. These include remarks [redacted] by General Don, the chief of the South Vietnamese army, to the effect that the military have plans to overthrow Diem. Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, has also been feeling out the military, but his efforts may be designed to identify plotters. While the number and variety of reports do reflect some serious coup plotting as well as a general climate of dissatisfaction, we see at present no firm evidence of advanced planning or of immediate determination to act against the regime on the part of any group having real assets.

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1. Since the Buddhist dispute with the Diem government erupted on 8 May, there have been a series of reports indicating not only intensified plotting and grumbling among Diem's traditional non-Communist critics, but renewed restiveness and growing disaffection in official civilian and military circles over Diem's handling of the dispute.

2. During the first month of the confrontation, various sources of fair reliability expressed the opinion that South Vietnamese army ranks, a majority of whom are believed to be nominal Buddhists, would refuse to move against Buddhist demonstrators if ordered, and that many troop commanders would be

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reluctant to issue such orders. With one possible exception in the initial incident in Hué, we have noted no instances of troop indiscipline during the crisis. Brutality against Buddhist clergy and lay followers, particularly on the part of the police, have, in fact, been witnessed by US officials.

3. As the dispute dragged on, and before Diem's initial concessions in his 16 June agreement with Buddhist leaders to end religious discrimination, reports of official disagreement with his firm stand increased. [redacted]

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[redacted] reportedly [redacted] most senior military officers wished to dissociate themselves from his position and would back any non-Communist coup attempt. Res-tiveness was also reported among officers in the air-borne and armored brigades, who allegedly expected that the government would be overthrown. [redacted]

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[redacted] there was considerable dissatisfaction with the gov-ernment's attitude at various staff levels and branches.

4. The first reports of possible plotting were received in late June. They concerned remnants of the once influential, nationalist, Dai Viet Party and others of Diem's traditional but largely inef-fectual non-Communist opponents who were seeking to give political advice to the Buddhist movement. These elements appear to lack the military and political support to challenge Diem successfully.

5. Also in late June, two Buddhist leaders cau-tiously questioned a US observer concerning US opin-ions of various oppositionists, admitted they had been in contact with some, but denied accepting any political advice. The Buddhists stated they would support any change in the regime provided that new leaders were acceptable to the US and did not dis-criminate against them. We have no evidence that Buddhist groups are themselves plotting a coup.

6. [redacted]

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[redacted] a coup plot, which apparently centered on Tran Kim Tuyen, a cur-rent presidential advisor who was recently removed as chief of the presidential security service (SEPES). Tuyen reportedly claimed to be part of an organiza-tion planning to overthrow the government through a

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"palace revolution" which would eliminate the power of Diem and the Nhus, but would not cooperate with any traditional political oppositionists.

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[redacted] Tuyen had in mind a government which would be natural, i.e., would seek a middle road between popular democracy (Communism) and liberal democracy (Western democracy). It would be led by a revolutionary committee under Tuyen, with four action bureaus. Tuyen was said to claim to have the "full support" of the army, including several generals, as well as that of various protégés of his own in SEPES, in the Civic Action Ministry and in the Information Ministry.

7. Subsequent reports on Tuyen's plotting have made us more doubtful that he has significant military support, although he continues to claim some. Various reports have specified deadlines for Tuyen's action. Most of these have already passed, but some sources allege that he feels a move must be made before the arrival of Ambassador Lodge or be delayed from one to four months.

8. In view of Tuyen's past close ties with the regime--particularly with Ngo Dinh Nhu--and his continued role as a palace adviser, there is a possibility that he has been acting for the government to smoke out coup rumors. Over the past several months, however, there have been many reports that Tuyen is out of favor, and the loss of his SEPES job plus an attempt to place him in an ambassadorial post lend credence to this. On balance, US officials in Saigon believe he may be involved in coup plotting, but question both the firmness of his plans and the extent of his support. We doubt that he would be acceptable to the military as a successor to Diem. General Don, the commander of the South Vietnamese army, has said that he is aware of Tuyen's conspiracy which, he said, was composed of "young punks."

9. In late June, [redacted] three separate groups, each planning the overthrow of the regime, had united. [redacted] one headed by former Kien Hoa Province Chief, Lt. Col. Pham Ngoc Thao--now an official of the strategic hamlet program; a second called the "Tuyen group"; and an otherwise unidentified "military group."

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[redacted] there is no other evidence of the existence of a unified coup plot of such proportions.

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[redacted] Huynh Van Lang, who was recently ousted from his positions as director of the foreign exchange office and as the Can Lao finance director, as claiming to have organized a political group with the aim of eliminating Nhu's political influence. This group allegedly included several province chiefs, national assembly members, and a number of military and civilian officials, and had the guidance of the chief of staff to the Joint General Staff, General Khiem. This group may have overlapped in part with the alleged plot of Lt. Col. Thao, but it appeared to oppose a formal coup d'etat.

11. On 8 July, the commander of the South Vietnamese army, General Don, told a US observer that the military have plans to overthrow the government. He stated that all except one or two general officers agree that the entire Ngo family must be removed from the scene. This action was said to be necessary because Diem had allowed the Buddhist dispute to become a national crisis which would only benefit the Viet Cong. Don specified no timing for action and implied that there might be difficulty in lining up lower ranking officers--i.e., troop commanders--who apparently wanted their own future roles clarified.

12. Various other sources have alleged that a military plot against the government is brewing. Brigadier General Nghiem, disaffected commander in the northernmost I Military Corps, told a US observer on 5 July that a coup would occur soon, but that he was not in on the planning. [redacted]

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[redacted] according to some army captains, there would be a coup led by General Don with the support of Colonel Phat, a division commander under General Nghiem. [redacted]

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[redacted] an unidentified group backing General Don would carry out a coup shortly after the arrival of Ambassador Lodge.

13. The reports of military coup plotting, particularly that received through General Don, have seemed the most serious to date, but their

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actual content is hard to assay. They may represent the surfacing of what are really only contingency plans by leading military officers or even merely discussions on the need for some kind of action. A number of general officers, such as Don and General Duong Van Minh, have long been critical of certain aspects of the Diem regime, but many of them seem to have little taste for political action. Furthermore, their criticisms are well known to Diem and Nhu, and the most dangerous officers have long been deprived of direct troop command, making any plotting dependent on the support of their juniors. Some of the generals have demonstrated firm loyalty to the regime in the past, some appear to be pure opportunists, and the majority appear reluctant to risk their positions in any action not certain of success. Although we are inclined to believe that at least some of the generals would take action if they felt the situation had so deteriorated as to threaten a clear advantage to the Viet Cong, we do not find evidence that they have arrived at a firm plan or even a clear intention to act against Diem in connection with the Buddhist crisis.

14. Furthermore, government moves, particularly by Ngo Dinh Nhu, may have thrown any real plans awry. On 11 July, Nhu discussed coup plotting, family rule, and the Buddhist problem with the generals. The purpose of this meeting is still not fully clear. It is entirely possible that Nhu intended by his blunt remarks to indicate his and Diem's awareness of coup rumors and thereby to confuse and caution the military against rash moves. Since the meeting, and since Diem adopted a more conciliatory approach to the Buddhists, we have received almost no further reports alleging plotting by high-ranking officers. In an assessment of 8 August, [ ] field personnel noted a lessening of coup rumors by late July and an apparent abatement of the threat of a generals' coup. They regard as the most currently dangerous factor the rumors of a "false coup" allegedly to provide a cover for crushing the Buddhist leadership and warned that these rumors could trigger a coup attempt by some anti-government group.

15. Nhu's statements to the generals left many of them with the firm impression that he was seeking their support for some personal move against

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Diem. From what we can determine from reports by several generals, Nhu's remarks were similar to those he has made in the past [redacted] who in early July got the impression that Nhu strongly opposed any concessions to the Buddhists and would not hesitate to act against Diem if he felt it necessary. Nhu has subsequently made similar statements to the press, and there are now many open rumors in Saigon that he may plan a coup of his own. He has not flatly denied these interpretations. We have no firm evidence that Nhu is actively plotting with any of the military, although some generals apparently were favorably impressed by his statements to them. Our own interpretation is that while on this occasion Nhu, with Diem's knowledge, may have been attempting to surface and "deflate" military plotting, he is in fact determined to succeed Diem if possible, even if it means ultimately dissociating himself from his brother. However, Nhu has been more unpopular with the military than Diem, and we believe it unlikely he would be retained in power even if he succeeded in making a temporary alliance with them against Diem.

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16. In sum, the coup reports and rumors which have arisen since the Buddhist crisis seem to reflect some serious coup plotting but we have no firm evidence of advanced planning by any group to attempt to overthrow the regime. We have relatively little information, however, on certain elements of the more specialized military units--paratroops, armored brigade, air force--who could be engaged in advanced plotting and would have a good chance of success. Therefore, we cannot discount the possibility of a sudden coup for which we would have no warning.

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