

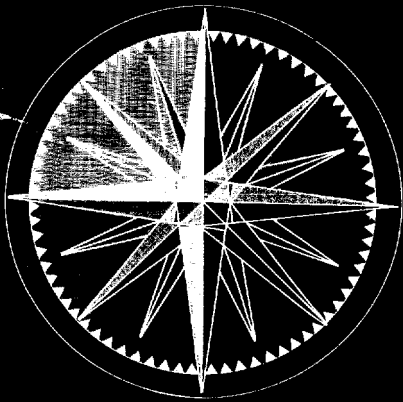
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SPECIAL REPORT

OFFICE OF CURRENT INTELLIGENCE

THE BUDDHISTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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THE BUDDHISTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

The conflict between South Vietnam's Buddhists and President Diem's authoritarian Catholic-oriented regime has increased the significance of the Buddhist community as a factor affecting the country's internal stability. Because of the passive character of their religion and the looseness of their organizational ties, the government up to now has not looked upon the Buddhists either as a force for effective support or as one whose disaffection might have serious consequences. However, their confrontation with Diem--now nearly two months old--seems certain to have lasting political repercussions, possibly affecting the regime's capability to carry on the war against the Communist Viet Cong. If the Buddhist dispute involves further violence, it could even lead to Diem's overthrow.

Number of Buddhists

The number of South Vietnamese who consider themselves at least nominal Buddhists has been estimated at between 9 and 11 million, or roughly 70-80 percent of the population. Ngo Dinh Nhu, President Diem's brother, recently stated that this estimate is derived largely from the practice of the former French rulers of identifying as Buddhists all Vietnamese not openly claiming some other religious affiliation.

South Vietnamese who actively practice the Buddhist religion are estimated to number no more than 3 million and allegedly are preponderantly women. Many more, however, reportedly retain some ties with the Buddhist clergy, or bonzes, particularly for funeral rites, and recent events suggest that a fairly high proportion of purely nominal

Buddhists have some emotional identification with the religion.

Nature of Buddhism in Vietnam

Buddhism was introduced into Vietnam principally by Chinese bonzes during the second and third centuries, although it was propagated also by Buddhist clergy from India. The religion flourished through the thirteenth century under the aegis of successive local rulers, but began to decline well before the imposition of French rule in the nineteenth century and to depart increasingly from original Buddhist scriptures. Thus Buddhism in Vietnam today, like its Chinese parent, is highly flavored with ancestor cults and with Confucianist and Taoist ethics and beliefs, and has been further modified by traditional Vietnamese animism.

The major branch of Vietnamese Buddhism is the Mahayana school, practiced in China and other North Asian countries. This school countenances the type of self-destruction which occurred in Saigon on 11 June, when a bonze set himself afire. The more orthodox and pacifistic Theravada school, which prevails in most of South and Southeast Asia, has a smaller number of adherents in Vietnam, largely among the Khmer people.

Organizations

Buddhist organizations, not unlike governmental administration in Vietnam, have tended to develop around regional ties. Mass loyalties often focus even more narrowly on highly autonomous pagodas. Nevertheless, some Buddhist associations have a centralized, national framework with parallel clerical and lay hierarchies.

The most important organization, the General Association of Buddhists (GAB), is of the Mahayana school; it spearheaded the current protest over religious discrimination. Founded in 1951, it is still a loose regional confederation, but maintains a public relations director and a kind of ministry for lay activities. Its northern branches are composed mainly of refugees from North Vietnam. Both its northern and southern branches are now headquartered in Saigon, while the central branch is in Huế. The GAB claimed in 1962 to have

some 3,000 monks, 600 nuns, and up to 3 million lay members, of whom 70,000-90,000 were in youth groups.

The president of the GAB is the octogenarian bonze, Thich Tinh Khiet, a member of the central branch and resident in Huế. Its leading lay official is a retired civil servant, Mai Tho Truyen, who heads the GAB-affiliated lay organization, the South Vietnamese Buddhist Studies Association, with headquarters at the Xa Loi Pagoda in Saigon. Two GAB vice presidents, bonzes Thich Thien Minh and Thich Thien Hoa, described as heads of the central and southern factions respectively, were leading negotiators along with Truyen in recent talks with the government. Thich Thien Minh and Thich Tri Quang, head of the clergy in Huế, seem to represent the more uncompromising Buddhist views. Quang was active in the Buddhist outburst in Huế which set off the present conflict.

The Theravada organization --officially the Vietnamese Buddhist Theravada Sangka--is believed to include about 350,000-400,000 members and to have close hierarchical ties with Cambodian Buddhists. Its clerical leader is a Vietnamese named Pham Van Tong who calls himself Naga Thera; its lay affiliate, the Association of Original Buddhists, is headed by Nguyen Van Hieu.

BUDDHIST MASS DEMONSTRATIONS IN VIETNAM...

... AT HUÉ, 10 MAY 1963.



... BEFORE THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY BUILDING IN SAIGON, 30 MAY 1963.



Despite some competition between the Theravada and Mahagana organizations for international prominence, and some personal rivalry between Naga Thera and Mai Tho Truyen, now an official of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, there has been evidence of Theravada support for the GAB leaders in the present confrontation with the government.

There are several smaller Buddhist organizations in South Vietnam. One is the Co Son Mon, which claims a following in the Mekong delta provinces. It is reported to be government-subsidized and government-manipulated. Another, the Hoa Hao, ostensibly a "reform" Buddhist sect founded in South Vietnam in 1939, retains a loose following in the southwest provinces. In the past, it has had considerable importance as a disaffected politico-military sect, but its political threat was largely eliminated by Diem in 1956.

Buddhist Grievances

The most recent round of troubles erupted on 8 May in the city of Hue' over government regulations restricting the display of religious flags during the commemoration of Buddha's birthday. The Buddhists were particularly upset because Catholics in Hue' had been permitted to violate the regulations only a few days earlier. Although the issue might otherwise have been short-lived and localized, it took

on new importance when several persons were killed during efforts by security forces to disperse a crowd--deaths which the government tried to blame on Viet Cong terrorists.

The Hue' incidents apparently unleashed long-simmering Buddhist resentment over the privileged status of Christians, particularly of South Vietnam's 1.5 to 2 million Roman Catholics. Lack of Buddhist unity and the long Vietnamese tradition of religious freedom probably tended to avert serious open hostility in the past, although Christianity was identified as a product of foreign presence, and local disputes have occurred between Buddhists and Catholics over the disposition of communal lands and the prerogatives of village notables. Strictly speaking, Diem has not violated either the traditional or constitutional principle of religious freedom, but the Buddhists clearly feel that his family bias has perpetuated the privileged status Catholics enjoyed under the French.

The series of Buddhist demonstrations since mid-May have been designed to honor recent "martyrs" and to attain five demands levied on the government. The demands concerned measures to rectify abuses relating to the Hue' incidents, and legal restrictions on the status and property rights of Buddhist associations. The restrictions stem from a decree issued in 1950 under Bao Dai, from which Catholics were

specifically exempted. Buddhist leaders claim their protests against this decree date back to 1951, even before Diem came to power.

A compromise agreement on the demands was reached by Diem and Buddhist leaders on 16 June, but even if it is implemented, Buddhist irritations over other government practices which reflect the Diem family prejudice are likely to persist. The regime's official philosophy, which Diem and his brother-adviser Nhu are trying to make the basis of a grass-roots revolution, is essentially Catholic in origin as are many of its policies and laws affecting education and public morals.

Many Vietnamese Catholics as well as Buddhists have deplored the Diem family tendency to place greater trust in Catholics in the civil bureaucracy and the military--which has led to many "rice-bowl" conversions--and to lend official sanction to Catholic religious holidays and processions. It is perhaps significant that trouble broke out in the city of Hué, where Buddhist organization is strong, but also where the government is under the tight control of Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Can. Catholic influence there is particularly manifest in increasing homage paid to still another brother, Ngo Dinh Thuc, the archbishop of Hué, who is

leading a highly "visible" program of Church renovation and construction.

Political Influences
Among the Buddhists

There seems to be little doubt that the intensity of the Buddhist protests reflected general discontent over the entrenched, autocratic rule of the Diems as well as specific grievances against their religious biases. There have been persistent reports that some extremist Buddhist leaders have been determined to keep up the momentum of demonstrations, not just to secure satisfaction of demands, but in hopes of bringing about the government's overthrow. Available information, however, indicates that most Buddhist leaders hoped to keep the religious issues isolated from broader political discontent and avoided collaboration with political opponents of Diem seeking to use the Buddhist issue to bring down his government.

Some government officials, particularly Ngo Dinh Nhu and the influential Madame Nhu, have sought to discredit the Buddhists as representing neutralist or pro-Communist sentiment in foreign Buddhist circles, or subversive elements in South Vietnam. The lay leader, Mai Tho Truyen, has been mentioned by some local oppositionists in the past as an acceptable

replacement for Diem, but he is not known to have ties with any opposition group.

Communist Influence
And Exploitation

There has been no evidence that the Communists instigated or influenced the Buddhist demonstrations or demands. However, propaganda from Hanoi and from the Viet Cong has played up the issue as an example of the Diem government's repressive tactics and has portrayed the dispute as a movement by all religious faiths as well as by youth and students. There has been some evidence of covert Viet Cong efforts to intensify and drag out the crisis. Prolonged demonstrations clearly offer the Communists opportunities to incite disorders.

Little is known concerning the extent of Communist penetration of organized Buddhism in South Vietnam generally. One alleged Viet Cong document which contained directives for cultivating the Buddhist hierarchy, particularly lay leaders, would suggest that Viet Cong influence to date is minimal. Some government officials, however, insist that they have evidence that high clerical leaders collaborated with the Viet Cong resistance against the French until as late as 1951, and that a leading Buddhist visited Communist China in 1957. Another official has stated that there is deep penetration of the middle-level Bud-



MAI THO TRUYEN

dhist clergy, and that many Viet Cong prisoners enter monasteries when they are released.

The National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, the political arm of the Viet Cong, listed an elderly bonze as one of its vice presidents until his alleged death a few months ago, and still lists on its central committee Thich Thien Hao, purported chairman of a Vietnamese Buddhist Association; no information is available on Hao's stature. The clearest clue to some Communist inroads into Buddhist circles perhaps lies in the strong Communist propaganda protest over the repression of four "patriotic" bonzes, who were sentenced for subversion last March by the Diem government.

Repercussions

The greatest opportunities for Communist exploitation of

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the present Buddhist crisis appear to lie in its effect on popular and government morale. Diem's dispute with the Buddhists seems to have increased antagonism toward him in the larger cities and towns, although the extent to which the feeling has spread to rural areas is not yet known. While there is so far little visible effect on the conduct of military operations, considerable governmental attention has already been diverted from the counterinsurgency problem.

The conflict also reportedly has created some schism along religious lines inside the government. Although a large number of high officials are Catholic, Vice President Tho and at least three cabinet officers are Buddhists, as are several top generals and an estimated 80 to 90 percent of the rank-and-

file military. There have been reports of serious concern by officials with the government's handling of the entire affair.

Buddhist protest activity throughout South Vietnam has revealed that the Buddhist leadership is capable of mobilizing popular action and of disciplining its followers. Moreover, the confrontation with the government has tended on the whole to unite the previously diffuse Buddhist community, although it has revealed clear differences in the outlook of various top leaders. There are some indications that the effect of Diem's 16 June agreement with the Buddhists has been to drive a wedge between the more extreme and more moderate leaders. In the prevailing atmosphere, the Buddhist movement may increasingly solidify around extremist elements.

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