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# INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

## POLITICALLY SIGNIFICANT GROUPS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

### DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Directorate of Intelligence  
4 May 1966

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM\*

Politically Significant Groups in South Vietnam

Summary

South Vietnam has a multitude of religious, political, and regional factions. Some are large, loosely organized federations; others are just a handful of men backing an influential leader. Only the various religions have anything like a wide popular base, but they are split internally, and their followers are concentrated for the most part in a few geographic areas. Of the religions, the Buddhist faction headed by Thich Tri Quang has by far the largest popular following. Only two of the political parties have national significance and these are also splintered internally.

At best no more than a tenuous guess can be made on the potential voting strength and voting strongholds of most of the politically influential groups. It appears, however, that Buddhist-backed candidates will garner the largest popular support, and that it will take a rather strong alliance between other factions and groups to offset potential Buddhist strength.

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\*Prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence

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### The Buddhists

1. Firm adherents of Buddhism probably comprise only about 15 to 25 percent of the roughly 15.5 million South Vietnamese. However, up to 60 percent of the population has been estimated to identify itself loosely with the religion. The Unified Buddhist Association (UBA), a national organization headquartered in Saigon, is presently the principal vehicle for Buddhist political influence. The UBA has at least a partially effective provincial and grass-roots structure extending down to individual pagodas. However, the UBA is divided along regional lines into two major factions, which have tended to act as the militant and moderate wings of the association.

2. The Central Vietnamese Buddhist faction is headed by Thich Tri Quang, whose power is centered in the northern city of Hue and extends roughly from the northernmost provinces along the coast to the southern part of the central lowlands. Quang's influence is greatest in urban areas and mirrors the somewhat xenophobic, militant attitudes of the central Vietnamese populace with its traditional antagonism toward the southerners. Quang's chief lieutenant is Thich Thien Minh, the UBA's youth commissioner; his key lay followers include the Hue University Rector Bui Tuong Huan, Professor Le Tuyen, and former cabinet minister Tran Quang Thuan. It has been estimated that the influence of the central Vietnamese faction extends over as many as three million South Vietnamese. However, probably less than one million of these are registered voters. The faction has been trying for some time to form a lay Buddhist political party, the Vietnamese Buddhist Forces (UVF), but the party is not yet formally in being.

3. The more moderate southern wing of the UBA is led by Thich Tam Chau, chairman of the Buddhist Institute. Chau is actually a spokesman for the refugee Buddhist clergy from North Vietnam, but he appears to control the bulk of southern-born Buddhists, estimated to number from one to three million. The southern Buddhists, however, appear to be far less tightly knit than those under the influence of Tri Quang's faction. Chau is less politically effective than Tri Quang, and has at times allied

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himself with politicians whose actions have later cast discredit on him. His principal associates in the clergy are Thich Tam Giac, head of the Buddhist chaplain corps, and Thich Ho Giac, deputy chaplain and a fiery orator.

4. A splinter group, the Southern Buddhist Studies Association, is headed by lay leader Mai Tho Truyen, who has been prominent in international Buddhist circles but has split with the UBA. Although seldom involved in domestic Buddhist "campaigns," Truyen has participated in various government-sponsored civilian councils. He may have several thousand close followers, most of them scattered among the southern provinces, as well as considerable appeal among UBA adherents generally.

5. The Theravada Buddhist sect numbers more than 500,000. Members are largely of Khmer (ethnic Cambodian) stock, and live in the provinces bordering the Mekong River, primarily near Cambodia but also in Vinh Binh Province near the coast. They have been politically inert at the national level, but their leaders--including Son Thai Nguyen, brother of Khmer Serei leader Son Ngoc Thanh--often exert considerable influence in the provinces where they are concentrated. Nguyen's faction is considered rather militant in its actions; the other major faction of the Theravada Buddhists, the Nguyen Thuy Association, is an older, and more conservative group.

#### The Catholics

6. It is estimated that there are between a million and 1.5 million Catholics in South Vietnam. They have long been prominent among the country's educated and administrative circles, and are numerous among the military officer corps. The Catholics are concentrated chiefly in Gia Dinh and Bien Hoa provinces near Saigon where there are several refugee settlements. There are also pockets of Catholic influence in the delta, east of Saigon, and in the northern provinces.

7. Almost a million of the Catholics are refugees from Communist North Vietnam. They are

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very active politically and very vocally anti-Communist. Their acknowledged leader is Father Hoang Quynh, described as a militant, and a political activist. During the past year, however, Quynh has taken a rather moderate tack in relations with the Buddhists and other sects, and his influence has been challenged by other refugee priests, including Fathers Nguyen Quang Lam, Nguyen Van Luc, and Tran Van Kiem. Quynh often chooses to conduct his political operations through an organization headed by lay Catholic leader Nguyen Gia Hien.

8. The Catholics native to South Vietnam are less well organized and less aggressive than their northern refugee counterparts. Their principal leader is the archbishop of Saigon, Nguyen Van Binh, generally a voice for moderation and a widely respected figure. The most vocal of their political spokesmen, however, is probably Father Ho Van Vui, a more militant figure who broke openly with the Diem regime.

#### The Cao Dai

9. The Cao Dai are an eclectic religious sect combining elements of Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, and animism. The sect was formally organized in 1926. Under the French, the Cao Dai enjoyed a measure of political autonomy, including their own army. They claim a following of one to two million, although their real adherents probably number closer to a half million. There are scattered Cao Dai villages in the western provinces of the delta, but the principal base of Cao Dai influence, and the seat of the sect's "Holy See," is in Tay Ninh Province, northwest of Saigon. The Cao Dai population in Tay Ninh appears to number a few hundred thousand.

10. The sect suffers from serious internal splits and it is problematical whether it could become a unified electoral bloc, although it certainly might elect some members to an assembly. Former chief of state Phan Khac Suu is a Cao Dai, but representative of the somewhat independent political Cao Dai elements in Saigon.

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11. One principal faction of the sect, and probably the most nationally minded, is led by former Cao Dai "general" Le Van Tat and his brother Le Trung Nghia, who are strongly anti-Buddhist. Tat was chief of Tay Ninh Province from Diem's overthrow until late in the Quat regime. Close to them is Tran Quang Vinh, a "spiritual" leader who served as a member of the advisory High National Council under the Quat government. A rival of Tran Quang Vinh is Cao Hoai Sang, who ousted Vinh from the "Holy See." Sang's political ties, however, are not clear. Another of the sect's factions is led by former "general" Nguyen Thanh Phuong, who heads a small Cao Dai political party, the Vietnamese Restoration Party. Phuong ran as a vice-presidential candidate against the Diem ticket in 1961. At least one Cao Dai faction, under a Major Mung, is openly affiliated with the Viet Cong.

#### The Hoa Hao

12. The Hoa Hao are a spiritualist Buddhist sect, with possibly close to a million followers, although they claim two million. Most of the members are concentrated in the westernmost area of South Vietnam--An Giang and Chau Doc provinces bordering Cambodia, where they are the dominant political and religious influence. The Hoa Hao still retain remnants of their former private army, but they have suffered from internal divisions and are still without significant national influence. They are, however, a source of recruitment for government paramilitary troops in several delta provinces outside their own domain, and thus may be in process of spreading their local influence.

13. Among the most important Hoa Hao leaders at present are Colonel Tran Van Tuoi, until recently chief of An Giang Province, and Colonel Nguyen Van Hue, the chairman of the An Giang provincial council. Hue is a follower of a once-powerful but unsavory Hoa Hao "general," Tran Van Soai.

14. Other key Hoa Hao figures at present are Colonel Ly Ba Pham, the new An Giang Province chief, and Pham Ba Cam, a Saigon politician who probably has little influence at the local level. One of the many factions in the sect is led by Truong Kim Cu, another former "general" and erstwhile troublemaker.

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### The Dai Viet Party

15. The Dai Viets are one of the two nationally significant political parties in South Vietnam. They are also splintered into several factions, only two of which are of importance.

16. The northern branch of the Dai Viet Party is composed chiefly of refugees from North Vietnam, and has little in the way of formal mass organization to support its nationally prominent politicians. The faction is led by Dang Van Sung, a publisher, and includes former premier Phan Huy Quat. Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs Bui Diem, an adviser to Premier Ky, has also been associated with this faction. As national figures, some of these men probably could draw a substantial vote, particularly in Saigon, but they have no local strongholds.

17. The southern faction of the Dai Viet Party has been weakened by events of the past two years, and is partly splintered between southern and central wings. Its nominal leader, Nguyen Ton Hoan, is once again in exile after having been ousted as deputy premier to General Khanh; he calls his party the Dai Viet Nationalist Party. Hoan appears to have had ties among several top military officers including Chief of State Nguyen Van Thieu, whose brother, Nguyen Van Kieu, is a prominent Dai Viet Party member. Leadership of the faction by default now is claimed by Ha Thuc Ky, whose actual base of power is in Quang Tri Province in central Vietnam. Ky calls this faction the Revolutionary Dai Viet Party. Its popular strength is unknown. The southern faction has been estimated to have about 50,000 active followers.

### The VNQDD (Nationalist) Party

18. Like the Dai Viets, the VNQDD Party has been badly splintered. Its strength and organization are greatest in the various provinces of northern South Vietnam, known to the Vietnamese as "central Vietnam."

19. The southern branch of the VNQDD, based largely in Saigon, does not appear to have extensive grass-roots support. Among its leaders is Nguyen Hoa Hiep, minister of interior under Quat and a somewhat

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ineffective administrator who used his government post to build up the faction. Another old-time VNQDD leader, also in Saigon, is Vo Hong Khanh, a businessman and one-time minister in the Bao Dai era. It was recently reported that Khanh will be recognized by local VNQDD factions as the party's national leader in an effort to unify the VNQDD as a counterforce to the Buddhists. Also prominent in the southern branch, although born in North Vietnam, is former deputy premier in the Quat government, Tran Kim Tuyen.

20. The primary base of VNQDD strength is in central Vietnam where the party appears to have some genuine organization and a grassroots structure. The VNQDD could probably command a following of a few hundred thousand throughout central Vietnam. The party has been particularly active in Quang Ngai and Quang Nam provinces, where it has entrenched itself to some extent in the provincial administration. It has nevertheless experienced internal provincial factionalism, chiefly between younger and older elements. The party has strength in Quang Tin, and also has some following in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces, but substantially less than Tri Quang's central Vietnamese Buddhist faction. Some VNQDD leaders in central Vietnam have cooperated with Tri Quang in the past, but are now in the process of allying themselves against him. The secretary general of the central Vietnam branch of the VNQDD is Nguyen Dinh Luong. However, a genuine regional leader for this faction has not yet emerged.

#### Independent Politicians

21. A large number of independent politicians, most of them living in Saigon and heading their own small political parties, are nationally prominent and might well be elected if they were to be candidates for a constituent or national assembly. Some of these men wield influence in the current political scene, but probably have no real power or popular support outside of the political and government circles in which they lobby. Many are former government officials and ministers; others are leaders of regional factions; some are former army officers.

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22. Among these men are Pham Quang Dan, a Gia Dinh council member; Tran Van Van, a southern leader; Hoang Co Thuy and his brother Hoang Co Binh, a Saigon councilor; former premier Tran Van Huong, and such figures as retired Generals Tran Van Don, "Big" Minh, etc. In very few cases is it possible to estimate the extent and locale of support such men might draw from the electorate, unless they were endorsed by organized parties, religious groups, or the military. Among them, however, are probably some of the country's best political and administrative talent, as well as some of its most overrated politicians.

23. Of the numerous groups with which many of the individually prominent politicians are associated, the Southern Old Students' (or Dong Nai) Association is one which could develop considerable strength, at least in the southern part of South Vietnam. The Association, founded in 1965 and headed by retired General Tran Van Don, reportedly has about 1,200 members. More than 700 are in the Saigon area. Although it is ostensibly an apolitical association of alumni and teachers from four well-known lycees in South Vietnam, the Association is actually a cover for political activity by southern intellectuals and politicians, many of whom wish to see a predominant southern voice in the government. Among other members of the Association, which reportedly meets regularly each month, are former chief of state Phan Khac Suu and Tran Van Van, prominent in the now defunct High National Council and its secretary general, Nguyen Van Loc.

#### Labor

24. Although there are several competing trade unions, the only labor organization in South Vietnam with any substantial following is the Confederation of Vietnamese Labor, or CVT, headed by Tran Quoc Buu. The union claims a membership of about 300,000 from its affiliates, but actual strength may be less. Most of the CVT support is in the Saigon area, but it has some relatively important affiliates in Da Nang and other cities of I Corps and in the delta. The CVT gains some rural following from its plantation workers' affiliate, but most of the plantation areas are now Viet Cong - infested and residents there may not be permitted to vote.

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25. Among the rivals of the CVT is the General Confederation of Free Syndicates (CGSL), an unregistered union led by Bui Luong, a somewhat unsavory political figure who has sought to draw strength away from the CVT. The Confederation of Vietnamese Trade Syndicates (CSTV) under Vui Van Thien and a splinter group of the CSTV under Le Van Thot and Le Dinh Cu are also rivals of the CVT. The Thot-Cu group draws its present strength from the textile workers, whose ranks have reportedly been infiltrated by the Viet Cong.

### Military

26. With approximately 600,000 men under arms, the military could be a potentially powerful voting bloc, although there has never been any evidence that the military would vote as ordered in a secret ballot. A past practice of allowing army troops to vote in areas where they are currently based or operating gives the army the potential of swinging the outcome in a given electoral district. Most of the rank and file of the military, however, would probably vote their own political and religious persuasions, although they might support popular military candidates. The influence of the Buddhists among the officers and ranks of both the army and police in I Corps has recently been demonstrated; certain troops in the delta are known to be strongly Catholic.

27. Veterans of the armed services also constitute a potential political force, possibly allied with the military. There are presently estimated to be as many as 500,000 veterans in the country, but they are less likely to vote as a bloc than in accordance with their individual political and religious loyalties. The only significant veterans' organization, the Veterans' Legion Associations des Anciens Combattants Vietnamiens reportedly has about 30,000 members; only some 4,000, however, are said to be interested enough in the organization to pay dues. Under the Diem regime the Legion was of little significance, but it gained prestige from the election of General Pham Xuan Chieu, secretary general of the Directorate, as its president in September 1965, and from the creation in February 1966 of a new cabinet post for war veterans.

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### Youth and Students

28. About 60 percent of South Vietnam's population is estimated to be below the age of 30. As a result of past electoral laws which have lowered the voting age to 18, youths in their teens and early 20s could exert a significant political impact. Rural and urban youths have different attitudes and outlooks, as do working youths and students, with the latter exercising the most vocal impact.

29. High school age youth apparently have long been the major target of various pressure groups, including the Viet Cong. Because they contain a less sophisticated and more malleable age group, the high schools have often provided the hard core for political demonstration. Many of them reportedly contain Communist cells. The Viet Cong regard the high schools as a means of infiltrating confirmed followers into the universities and as a source of military and agent recruitment. The proportion of students over 18 is unknown, but somewhat greater than in US high schools.

30. University students, often from conservative middle-class families, remained largely uninterested in politics until the Buddhist campaign against Diem in 1963 enlisted their energies and organizations. There is now a plethora of political organizations in the country's four universities: Saigon with 16,000 students; Hue with some 3,600; Dalat with about 1,600; and Van Hanh--a new Buddhist university in Saigon--with a few hundred students. Both at Saigon and Van Hanh universities, the students have tended to be restrained in their political actions over the past year. The Saigon Students' Union, claiming 4,000 of Saigon University's student body under Tran Quang Tri as president and To Lai Chanh as executive committee chairman, has been particularly resistant to recent political agitation. In general, religious organizations in the Saigon universities, such as the Catholic Students' Federation and the Buddhist Students' Association, have exhibited less religious and political fervor than other student groups.

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31. The students at Hue University, who generally represent a less privileged class and are under strong Buddhist influence, have been more militant. The Hue Students' Union, under Tuan Xuan Kiem, has been periodically in ferment during the past two years and has been involved in recent "struggle movement" activity. There is a militant, leftist faction among the Hue faculty, including the rector, and the student body has also been reported as increasingly receptive to Viet Cong propaganda. The university of Dalat is under Catholic administration, but has a militant pro-Buddhist element.

#### Overseas Chinese

32. The Chinese community in South Vietnam is estimated at about a million, most of whom live in Cholon, the Chinese city adjacent to Saigon. They are Vietnamese nationals by decree of the Diem regime, but have managed to retain their own schools which teach Chinese and their internal societies which have begun to operate more openly since Diem's downfall. The Chinese are strongly entrenched in South Vietnam's commercial life, but few have taken an interest in politics.

33. The increasingly disturbed economic situation, however, together with increased government efforts to bring Chinese youths into the armed services, may draw the Chinese more openly into the picture as a political pressure group. Although most of them appear to be oriented to Taipei rather than Peking, there is some Viet Cong influence among them. A few Chinese firms, apparently motivated by profits, supply the Viet Cong, and some Chinese laborers, particularly in the textile industry, are reported to be Communist agents.

#### The Montagnards

34. The ethnic tribes in South Vietnam number about 500,000, and are scattered throughout the central highlands, primarily close to the main towns. If allowed to vote, they would probably support tribal candidates, but as there are more than 35 different tribes, any real cohesion among the montagnards is questionable. One of the most

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prominent tribal leaders now active in the government is Paul Nur, newly appointed to the commissariat for montagnard affairs, but it is by no means clear that he speaks for all the montagnards.

#### Popular Voting Strength

35. At the present time, there is insufficient information to support any assessment of the potential voting strength and voting strongholds of any or all of the politically influential groups and factions in South Vietnam. Elections held under the Diem regime were controlled or influenced by the government in such a manner as to provide no framework for a study of voting attitudes or habits. Although provincial and municipal council elections held under the Quat regime in May 1965 appear to have been generally free of government domination, available data on them provide only a rough gauge of political and religious influence among the electorate. Moreover, the issues and candidates were local, and the 1965 results may not necessarily have a valid bearing on a national election.

36. It is not yet known whether the coming elections will be organized to run provincial candidates locally, either as individuals or as party slates, or to run all the national candidates on the same ballot. Such arrangements will be very important as they will help determine the vote-drawing power of candidates with either local, provincial, or national reputations. The 1965 local elections brought out some 3.5 million voters, or perhaps half the estimated potential as measured by voter turnout claimed by the Diem regime.

37. Attempts to plot the areas of probable strength or control by the various power groups--Buddhists, Catholics, the sects, the Dai Viets, or VNQDD--can be done only roughly. There are data concerning the political and religious affiliations of individual provincial council members, and the size of the vote won by each member, but no information is at hand concerning the total vote or affiliations of losing candidates. Moreover, the 1965 results provide almost no clue to political affiliations at the district level.

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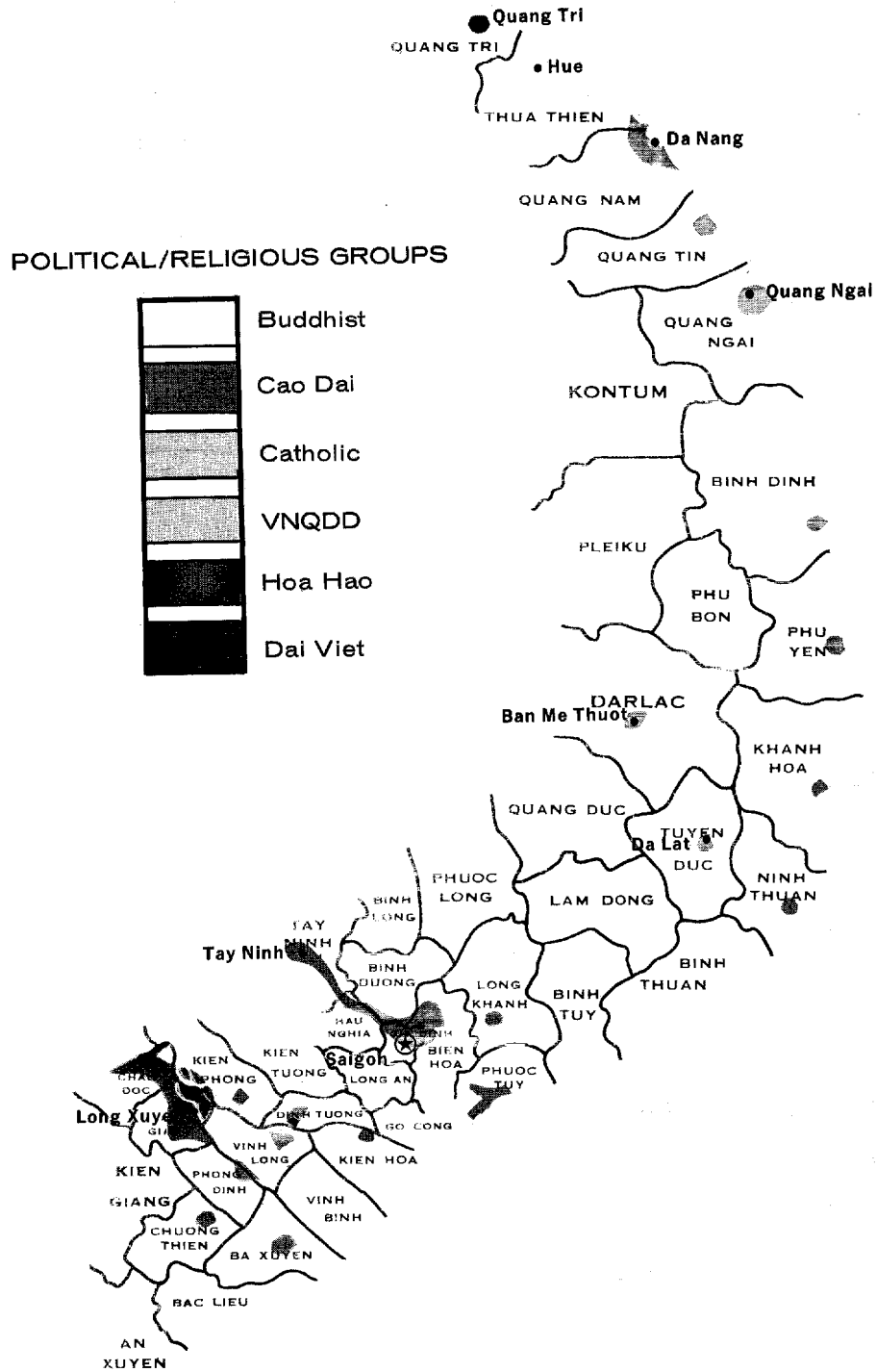
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38. Finally, the suppression of genuine political activity by the Diem regime, and to some extent by the power of the military since that time, has prevented the development of political parties, contributed to their internal splits, and forced or encouraged them to operate clandestinely. Most of the parties are reluctant to reveal their membership, and their strength claims, when made, tend to be inflated. Moreover, candidates in the past elections ran as independents or with government endorsement, but usually without political party or religious labels. There is no accurate census of the population as a whole, or of popular religious affiliations.

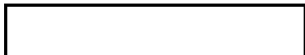
39. On the accompanying map, an effort has been made to pinpoint known strongholds or pockets of political or religious influence. It has been impossible to estimate group strengths by cities on the map, except for Hue where Buddhist domination is evident. No attempt was made to estimate possible party or religious voting strength. Attempts to pinpoint areas of major strength by religious or political affiliation have been necessarily limited to the populated coastal areas in the northern part of the country, and the major towns and cities in the delta. Most of the inland area of central Vietnam is sparsely populated, and relatively little information is available on rural political allegiances in the delta outside of the known strongholds of the sects and the Khmers.  
(Map)

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