

SNIE 53-65

Short-Term Prospects in South Vietnam

4 February 1965

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APPROVED FOR RELEASE
DATE: JAN 2005

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SNIE 53-65

Advance Copy of the Estimate
4 February 1965

(b) (3)

SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

SHORT-TERM PROSPECTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

- Political Dynamics
- Present Power Relations
- Near-Term Prospects

NOTE: This is an advance copy of the estimate as approved by the United States Intelligence Board. The printed text will be circulated within five days of this issuance.

Central Intelligence Agency

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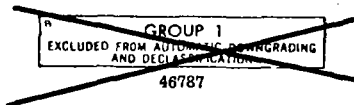
Submitted by the
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate: The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, Defense, AEC and NSA.

Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

on 4 February 1965. Concurring were the Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; the Director, Defense Intelligence Agency; the Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the USIB; and the Director of the National Security Agency. The Assistant to the Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of his jurisdiction.

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

4 February 1965

SUBJECT: SNIE 53-65: SHORT-TERM PROSPECTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

THE PROBLEM

To assess significant political forces and attitudes in South Vietnam, and to estimate the prospects over the next month or so.

THE ESTIMATE

I. POLITICAL DYNAMICS

1. Significance of the Immediate Situation. Recent events in Saigon underline the fact that apart from the Communists -- and the US presence -- the two primary political forces in South Vietnam today are the military establishment and the political bonzes who direct the "Buddhist movement." At present, US political leverage appears to be at a low point.

2. Neither the military nor the Buddhist leadership is homogeneous or monolithic; both suffer from factionalism and personal rivalries. Dominant

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power obviously rests with the military, but the Buddhists are strong enough to make unworkable any set of political arrangements their leaders care to oppose. Whatever legal or constitutional form the Government of Vietnam (GVN) takes in the near future, the military and the Buddhists will almost certainly retain an effective veto power.

3. The removal of Huong on 27 January was the product of cooperation between the Buddhists (under Tri Quang) and the military (more or less under Khanh). This cooperation has produced at least a temporary stabilization, though the balance struck is delicate and could easily be upset. There are rumblings within military and Buddhist ranks and in various other quarters, e.g., the Catholics, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects, and the students and other political elements in Saigon and Hue. However the events of 27 January appear thus far to have had almost no disturbing effect in the provinces. The course of political developments will depend on what the Buddhists do and on the degree of military unity. Either the Buddhists or the military or both may exploit anti-Americanism as a tactical device. The explosiveness of this issue will depend on how it is handled by all parties concerned, including the US. Notable Viet Cong military successes could also adversely affect the course of events.

- 2 -

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4. Basic Political Determinants. South Vietnam is in the midst of a social and political revolution. In the political vacuum occasioned by the French departure, power was initially assumed by an elite of French-educated and predominantly Catholic mandarin types, of whom Ngo Dinh Diem was both symbol and archetype. Power is now passing to a much more "Vietnamese," militantly nationalistic and potentially xenophobic group of which the political bonzes, the students, and certain young generals are prime examples. This revolution is a formless thing, uncontrolled, and in many ways genuinely spontaneous. The Communists are obviously exploiting it. Nevertheless, it is something quite apart from the VC-directed insurgency; indeed those who aspire to lead this revolution claim that unless it is successful the Communist insurgency cannot be defeated. This shift in the alignment of fundamental political forces is responsible for much of the turbulence we are witnessing -- and will continue to witness -- largely on the urban scene, particularly since this process involves the striking of new power balances in the midst of a war and in a situation where no parliamentary traditions or institutions can effectively channel political conflict.

5. Tri Quang and the "Buddhist Movement." Because of the historical context in which this revolution has developed, contending factions tend to group under religious labels. The issues involved, however, are ones of

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political power, not religious doctrine. The "Buddhist movement" derives its political strength partly from the political acumen and demagogic skill of its leaders, but primarily from the fact that "Buddhism" has become the rallying point for emotionally charged though inchoate revolutionary aspirations. The bonzes who lead this "Buddhist movement" have found the exercise of political power both heady and habit forming. They do not appear to desire the responsibilities of office or direct participation in government, but they are determined to prevent a revival of what they consider Catholic dominance and to have a veto power over major GVN policies and personnel. Furthermore, as in many protest movements, no contender for primacy within the Buddhist leadership feels he can let a rival appear more "militant" than he.

6. Among these leaders, Tri Quang is the most influential and politically skillful. He seems to have outmaneuvered all existing or potential rivals within the Buddhist movement and is not likely to be deposed from within the movement itself. However, were Tri Quang to leave the scene, the Buddhist movement would probably continue essentially unchanged. Tri Quang is vain and hyper-nationalistic; thus he probably resents the extent of US involvement in Vietnamese affairs. Although he recognizes the present need for US support, he regards the US as incapable of understanding the political situation in South Vietnam and, over the long run, would like to see the US out of the country.

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7. Tri Quang's short-run intentions are harder to divine and may not be systematically or consistently developed even in his own mind. He professes to be anti-Communist and at times appears to recognize that his position and the movement he leads would get short shrift under a Communist regime. Nevertheless, he has such a high opinion of his own political abilities that he may come to feel that he can outwit the Communists and use them for his own ends; indeed, he may have already reached this conclusion. The relevant evidence is conflicting and precludes confident judgment. On balance we incline to the view that he is probably not now deliberately working for a Communist victory or Communist-dominated "neutralist" settlement. Regardless of his intent, however, disruptive actions such as his thus far are serving these ends.

8. The Military Establishment. Through a combination of luck and political skill, Khanh has managed to retain a paramount position within the military establishment, but he wears an uneasy crown. During 1964 there emerged a group of officers labelled the Young Turks who saved Khanh in September, but who suspect his motives and who, so long as they maintain their solidarity, constitute a potent threat to his position. Below the Young Turks (most of whom are now one-star generals) there is another unstructured but perhaps even more restless and ambitious group of colonels and majors -- unit commanders who during the past year have

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borne the brunt of the fighting against the Viet Cong. Some of these officers commanded the units which made possible the military pressure plays of the past year.

9. By and large the military leaders are intensely nationalistic. They have no intention of abandoning the war, but are impatient and frustrated over the lack of progress. At the same time, however, they are divided among themselves and deeply involved in politics, and some have overriding personal ambitions. Many military officers do not trust Khanh and not a few are resentful and suspicious of the Buddhists. Khanh remains in serious danger of being ousted -- particularly if he should make too obvious a bid for personal political power, if he appears to become overly subservient to the Buddhists, or if his efforts should not soon begin to produce some political stability or military progress.

10. The Communists. The military establishment and the Buddhist movement have long been prime targets for Communist penetration. The present military leadership seems resolutely anti-Communist even though the Viet Cong have almost certainly penetrated the military establishment at least enough to acquire considerable capabilities for collecting intelligence. The situation in the Buddhist movement is less clear, particularly since much of the Buddhists' agitation lends itself so

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easily to Communist exploitation. There is no evidence that the movement itself is Communist-directed or controlled, but there are strong presumptive grounds for believing that Communist penetration is having some success. The student movement seems to have been even more vulnerable to Communist penetration.

II. PRESENT POWER RELATIONS

11. Khanh and Tri Quang. There is conclusive evidence that the dismissal of Huong on 27 January and the interim political solution then announced were based on an arrangement between Khanh and Tri Quang; the circumstances lead us to infer that they had cooperated for some time in preparing the crisis. This cooperation may have originated in the wake of the December dissolution of the High National Council by Khanh and the Young Turks, a move occasioned by pressures within the military establishment but which the US strongly opposed.

12. Not long after, the Buddhists, who had intermittently engaged in demonstrations against the government, renewed their campaign against Huong. They also emphasized anti-Americanism, or, more precisely, opposition to the US Ambassador for his support of Huong. This gave the Buddhists' anti-Huong campaign an emotionally inflammatory ingredient it had hitherto lacked. It is extremely unlikely that the Buddhists would

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have dared stress this anti-US note without at least some confidence that the military would not interfere. In any case, this theme proved politically beneficial, and was probably personally gratifying, to Khanh. Tri Quang's political position was helped by the ouster of Huong, to which he was publicly committed. Khanh obtained at least temporary hold over the levers of power, and in such a manner that his opponents could do little but acquiesce. All this has so clearly been to the benefit of both Khanh and Tri Quang that it seems unlikely to have been fortuitous.

13. Any alliance between Khanh and Tri Quang must be inherently unstable. Each strongly distrusts the other. Tri Quang is not likely to abide by any commitments made; signs of this, in fact, are already beginning to emerge. Unless he assumes the responsibilities of office, which he is unlikely to do, Tri Quang's position as a militant leader of an emotionally charged movement almost requires that he continue to criticize governmental policy. On past form he is unlikely to be a constructive critic, though he will probably take some care not to alienate the Young Turks. Khanh, for his part, cannot afford to alienate the Buddhists -- no Vietnamese politician can do this in present circumstances and survive in power -- but neither can he be too accommodating to them without running the risk of being deposed by some of his military colleagues. Most politically influential Vietnamese, civilian and military, have generally acquiesced in the 27 January "solution," though there is apprehension in some quarters. Furthermore, there are influential officers who were not happy with these

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arrangements and are probably determined to prevent Khanh from making a personal bid for permanent political office and from giving in too far to the ever demanding Buddhists.

III. NEAR-TERM PROSPECTS

14. The present political arrangements in Saigon are avowedly temporary, and there is at least a faint chance that the scenario announced for the ensuing weeks may hold promise for improved political stability in South Vietnam. However, in the present political context, tolerable stability can only be achieved if there is a central government whose structure and ranking personnel are acceptable to the majority of the important military and the majority of important Buddhists -- a contingency which cannot at present be judged likely. Nor is it likely that a National Assembly, even if convened in March, will devise a more permanent structure which meets Vietnamese desires and is adapted to current political power realities in South Vietnam. Yet if both these contingencies were met, the spring and summer might see the evolution of a stronger base for prosecuting the counterinsurgency effort than has heretofore existed. The odds on such a fortunate outcome are considerably less than even.

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15. The course of events in the near-term future will be materially influenced by the ultimate effect of the extreme nationalist sentiments whipped up in recent weeks. Such sentiments, because of their xenophobic and anti-US overtones, will obviously cause considerable complications for the US effort. The regime is still aware of its need for US support, but even in the short run we expect that nationalist sensitivities will set severe limits on the degree to which the US can influence Vietnamese actions. The chances have increased that nationalist sentiments, in combination with war weariness and frustrations, will take a pro-neutralist turn which the Communists would certainly endeavor to fan and exploit. On the other hand, however, a vigorous nationalism identified with an indigenously devised government reflecting local political realities will be an essential ingredient for any dynamic and successful counter-insurgency effort.

- 10 -

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