

The tragi-comedy 1967 elections in 'democratic' South Vietnam



On September 3, the Vietnamese people went to the polls for the seventh time in thirteen years. Here is one man's opinion of these 'free' elections.

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At present he lives in Washington, D.C., where he is a correspondent for the Saigon Post. He says, however, that his dispatches are rarely published, as they are usually censored by the Saigon government.

Read on gentle reader, and judge for yourself.

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WASHINGTON (CUP-CPS) — Politics in South Vietnam in the recent years have always had elements of a tragi-comedy.

As the main theme of the play is "democracy", the interested audience "American", the actors have to wear a mask to suit the purpose. The mask is "elections". Balloting would take place, over 80 per cent of the people would vote. Washington would call it a success until the stage collapses leaving dead bodies and broken furniture on the scene.

For the seventh time (two Presidential elections in 1955 and 1961; four legislature elections in 1956, 1959, 1963, 1966) since Vietnam was divided temporarily by the 1954 Geneva Agreements, the tired people of South Vietnam went to the polls. On September 3, from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m., 83 per cent of 5,853,251, voters proceeded to 8,824 polling places to cast their votes to elect a president, a vice-president and 60 senators. The number of registered voters had jumped from 5,553,251 in one month to the present 5,853,251.

"We are prolific in Vietnam, but not that prolific," said Tran Van Huong, a civilian candidate who finished fourth. Replied General Nguyen Van Thieu, the head of state and military candidate; with a touching candor: "Some soldiers have been given two voting cards."

The voter was given first eleven ballots, one for each presidential ticket (two names, president and vice-president, one symbol) then 48 other ballots, one for each senatorial slate (10 names on each). He had gone over 502 names (22 presidential, 480 senatorial) scrutinized 59 symbols (eleven for presidential, 48 for senatorial). He hardly could be that fast a reader, but he did not care. He looked at the familiar policeman who will be around in his locality long after the election day.

General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the chief of police, often called The Saigon Himmler, had declared on August 22: "National policemen would be stationed inside and outside booths all over the country. As the national police are the people in closest contact with the lowest echelon, there will be police telling them where to vote, how to vote, and when to vote." (Saigon Post August 23, 1967.)

CAPTIVE VOTER

The Vietnamese voter is a captive voter: the police stamped his registration card and anyone subsequently searched (a routine in South Vietnam) and found without the election day stamp on his card will be in danger of automatic classification as a Viet Cong and subjected to prison or death.

Even with these precautions, the military junta was not sure. Dictators everywhere and at all times are afraid of their own people or even of their shadow.

On the eve of the election day, two dailies in

Saigon, the Than Chung (Sacred Bell) and Sang (Light) were closed. Three weeks earlier, another daily, the Dam Chung (People) was shut down. All these despite the fact that officially censorship was abolished and the Constitution guarantees the freedom of the press.

Several officers, among them Brigadier General Phan Trong Chinh (commander of the 25th division near Saigon), and Colonel Pham Van Lieu, former chief of police, were put under house arrest.

STUDENTS DISAPPEAR

Several students (mostly Buddhists) disappeared from their homes, some imprisoned, some liquidated.

Declared General Thieu, when asked about the closure of the newspapers: "Even in a democracy, one has the right to suppress newspapers that aid one's enemies."

Echoed Chief of Police Loan: "Democracy is fine for the politicians, but me, I favour national discipline." (Washington Post, September 3, 1967.)

General Ky much earlier had been more specific on "democracy" and had stated that he "might respond militarily" if a civilian whose policies he disagreed with won the election. "In any democratic country, you have the right to disagree with the views of others" (New York Times, May 14, 1967). And on July 27, 1967, General Ky repeated "If any opposition ticket in South Vietnam's presidential elections should win by trickery, we will overthrow it."

Who else in South Vietnam could use tricks but the junta itself? General Ky's threat came at the time when, at his instigation, a "military committee" was formed to serve as a kitchen cabinet for the new military government if the Thieu-Ky ticket wins. In the most unlikely case of its ticket losing, the committee would serve to overthrow the civilian elected as President.