

Military to Appoint Officials

Saigon Abolishes Hamlet Elections

By Craig R. Whitney

SAIGON (Sept. 7 (NYT))—The South Vietnamese government, by executive decree, has abolished popular democratic election of officials at the most basic level—in the country's 10,775 hamlets.

Under the new system, nearly all administrative officials, from the province chiefs down to the hamlet level, will be appointed.

The decree ends six years of popular election at the grass-root level. It was issued, without publicity, on Aug. 22 by Premier Tran Thien Khiem. It orders 44 province chiefs, who are military men appointed by President Nguyen Van Thieu, to reorganize local government and appoint all hamlet officials, and to finish the job in two months.

The new system calls for either two or three officials in each hamlet, depending on its population.

At the next highest level, the village—villages in Vietnam are administrative groupings of hamlets—chiefs and their staffs have been elected by provision of the South Vietnamese constitution. But now, according to the premier's decree, their deputies and staffs will also be appointed by the province chiefs.

In the space of a few months, since he began ruling by decree in June, Mr. Thieu has centralized power in his hands and through men appointed by him to a degree unknown here since the Americans came in strength in the 1960s and gave South Vietnam the forms of democratic gov-

ernment and popular elections. Since 1967, the country has been governed by an elected president and a two-chamber legislature. Mr. Thieu, who ran for the last October and won a reported 94.2 percent of the vote for his second term, controls a majority of the legislators in both houses but has been ruling by decree since June 27, when he wrested from the Senate the authority to govern by fiat for six months in the fields of security, defense, economy and finance.

But it is clear, from this latest decree as well as from earlier ones that placed restrictions on the press and stiffened the penalties for common crimes and for dereliction of duty, that the forms of democratic government are being weakened at a time when the United States is pulling troops out and, correspondingly, losing influence here.

President Thieu has been saying as much in recent speeches, which his government has not been translating into English or disseminating to the foreign press. For example, on Aug. 11, in a speech in Qui Nhon, capital of Binh Dinh Province, a speech which U.S. officials monitored and then translated into English, he said:

"I have never denied independence and democracy. As president of South Vietnam, I have always observed democracy. However, if I [may speak as] a citizen, I must complain that our government has allowed us to enjoy too much democracy too

to be elected, the village chief. The village chief, though still elected, will be in a much less commanding position, since the officials who work under him will now be appointed by the province chief."

Colonels Selected

The province chiefs appointed by the South Vietnamese president are military men—usually colonels—who owe their jobs to Mr. Thieu's patronage and are personally loyal to him. Often they do not even come from the provinces they serve. Last year, Mr. Thieu said he intended to gradually put into effect popular election of province chiefs beginning in 1972, but this has not happened.

The decree also provides that where there is a police station in a village, the police chief will assume the function of the formerly elected deputy village chief for security, an important post, because it includes such powers as determining who in the village might be a Communist sympathizer or a member of the Viet Cong.

The decree goes beyond instructions that Mr. Thieu issued to the province chiefs a few weeks ago. He told them then that they could replace elected village and hamlet chiefs at their discretion. The reason, according to U.S. officials, was the discovery during the offensive this year that many legally elected hamlet chiefs were, in fact, Communist cadres.

soon. "I have always respected the people's democratic rights and freedoms as basically outlined in our constitution. However, these rights and freedoms must be properly practiced, such as simultaneously respecting the constitution and responding to the demands of our nation."

'Gaps' in Democracy

In a key passage, he told his audience, "Our political parties are still small in number and are not united. Second, we are too complacent and are often disunited, and third, the most important is our disorderly democracy. Our democracy presents many gaps."

Mr. Thieu has often cited the extraordinary situation created by the Communist offensive that began at the end of last March as justification for restrictive measures. But the move to abolish election of hamlet officials and centralize local administration under the appointed province chiefs was in preparation even before the offensive.

U.S. interpretation of the decree says, for example, "these changes have been in the wind for the past several months." They were noted by the Americans in reports dated Feb. 28 and March 7.

The U.S. interpretation says of the decree's effect on the only local officials who will continue

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Vietnamizing Democracy

The abolition of popular elections in South Vietnam's 10,775 hamlets by the stroke of an executive order from Saigon once again underscores the futility of the war and the fatuousness—in today's context—of professed American war aims. The blood of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese and American soldiers and the suffering of millions of civilians has been rationalized by lofty commitments to assure for the South Vietnamese people the right to democratic self-government. In explaining his war policy, President Nixon has insisted that when the United States leaves Vietnam, it must be "in a way that gives the South Vietnamese a reasonable chance to survive as a free people."

The immediate result of the new decree is that President Thieu will determine who is to be in charge of local government, from province chiefs to the officials of the

smallest village. The extraordinary lesson in democracy thus continues. President Thieu, having demonstrated that it takes only one candidate to stage a democratic election, has more recently indicated through stringent rules controlling the press that in his version of democracy the right to know is as unnecessary as free political choice—in Saigon no less than in Hanoi.

If the experiment in popular government without the ballot works out to Mr. Thieu's satisfaction in the local communities, he will undoubtedly "recommend" it for the national level as well, further emulating the democracy to the North. The fact that the abolition of local elections in the South is to be accomplished within two months indicates that Vietnamization is working more smoothly in politics than in defense.

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