

PEACE AND THE VIETNAM ELECTIONS

By ALFRED HASSLER, New York

(Executive Secretary, The International Fellowship of Reconciliation)

The September 3 elections, though characterized by extensive manipulation and fraud, revealed the overwhelming desire for peace on the part of the South Vietnamese population.

On September 3 the voters of South Vietnam elected a President, a Vice-President and a Senate under their new constitution. Both the Constitution and the elections were a response to the insistent agitation of the "militant" Buddhists of South Vietnam, who have long made plain their dissatisfaction with the governing military junta and their longing for an end to the war. *General Nguyen Van Thieu*, the present chairman of the military junta, was elected President, and *General Nguyen Cao Ky*, the present premier, *Vice-President*. Spokesmen for the Johnson administration have hailed the elections as a significant step towards democratic self-government. The elections were highly significant, but not in the terms that the administration would like us to believe. What they demonstrated, against enormous obstacles, was the overwhelming desire on the part of the Vietnamese people for an end to the war. Any Americans who still believe that the United States is fighting on behalf of the South Vietnamese people should find in the results of the elections reasons for sober rethinking.

THE RESULTS

There were eleven sets of candidates for the Presidential and Vice-Presidential offices: one military and ten civilian. The results were as follows:

Ticket	Total Vote	Percentage
Nguyen Van Thieu- Nguyen Cao Ky	1,638,902	35
Truong Dinh Dzu- Tran Van Chieu	800,285	17
Phan Khai Suu-		
Phan Quang Dan	502,732	11
Tran Van Huong- Mai Tho Truyen	464,638	10
Ha Thuc Ky-		
Nguyen Van Dinh	346,573	7
Nguyen Dinh Quat-		
Tran Cui Chan	315,329	7
Nguyen Van Hiep- Nguyen The Truyen	158,498	3
Vu Hong Khanh- Duong Trung Dong	148,652	3
Huong Co Binh-		
Lien Quang Khanh	129,429	3
Pham Huy Co- Ly Quoc Sinh	106,388	2
Tran Van Ly-Huynh- Cong Duong	91,887	2
Totals	4,703,313	100

WERE THE ELECTIONS FAIR?

The South Vietnamese Government invited numerous "observers" to witness the elections and attest to their honesty. Some were individuals, some were representatives of governments. Of some 63 observers, 22 con-

stituted a team sent by President Johnson, headed by former ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge (Lodge had already, during his incumbency in Vietnam, demonstrated his objectivity by calling for the election of the generals).

The American observers reported to the President that the elections had been "reasonably fair". They pointed to the fact that 83% of the registered voters had actually voted, as compared with 63% in the last Presidential election in this country. One observer said that the absence of fraud had been demonstrated by General Thieu's failure to get more than 34.8% of the vote; fraud, he said, would have produced a much larger total. (Mr. Dzu, who came in second, said that without fraud Thieu would have got only 10%.)

The report of the observers is virtually meaningless. Few, if any, of them, spoke Vietnamese, so that they were dependent on government-provided interpreters. Visits anywhere outside the city of Saigon are dependent on the army and government officials, which allows for any necessary advance "arrangements" to be made easily.

Vietnamese opposed to the Ky-Thieu government warned before the elections that observers would not see the frauds, and that the only purpose they would serve would be to validate an invalid election. An election official declared to a reporter from the *National Catholic Reporter* that he expected to cheat, and that "you could send 10,000 observers—they never know. In the villages soldiers will fire guns in the air one kilometre away. They will say VC attack. People will not come to vote. The official, he will correct their vote, anyway. He will count 1-2-3-4-41-42-43-56". He went on to explain that the report of the balloting is written up in the evening by the senior election official (a Ky appointee) and the ballots then destroyed. But even if the balloting had been scrupulously honest, the fact would be largely irrelevant. So much had been done before the balloting to assure victory for the Thieu-Ky ticket that fraud on election day may not have been needed.

WHO VOTED?

The 38% who reportedly voted were 83% of the registered voters, not of the population. Excluded were (1) all those living in "insecure" areas, which means areas controlled by the National Liberation Front (Vietcong); and (2) all voters who were considered "unreliable", which, in South Vietnam, means people believed to be supporters of the NLF, or to stand for peace or neutralism, which are considered to be synonymous with communism. Novak reported that in a random sampling of Saigon students he found that three out of eight families had been disqualified and not allowed to vote. Thus the enormous "peace vote" becomes even more significant, since the government had already tried to exclude those most likely to

vote in this manner. By the American government's own figures (W. P. Bundy, *New York Times*, 9/8/67), 70% of South Vietnam's potential electorate were registered, so that approximately 56% voted. But this really means that the number of ballots reported amounted to 56% of the number of citizens of voting age. (This must be considered against the pre-election charge—and admission—that many soldiers had been given two voting cards each, that some civilian candidates charged that registration had leaped upward in certain regions just before elections, and that Mr. Dzu, who came in second, reported that only 10% of the voters in one district had come to the polls, but a 90% vote had been recorded.) Thus, even if balloting itself was strictly honest, Generals Thieu and Ky were elected by the votes of 34% of 56% of the electorate, or a total of 19% of South Vietnam's citizens of voting age.

ELECTED BY PLURALITY

Rules for the elections were set up by the Constituent Assembly, which in turn was elected in September, 1966. That election was so characterized by manipulation and fraud that the Buddhist leadership, whose actions had forced the elections to be held, publicly called for an election boycott. Here, too, public figures known to stand for peace or neutralism, as well as NLF supporters, were barred from becoming candidates, and American reporters noted that campaign speeches made no references to the war and government corruption, the two principal issues in the public mind.

Shortly after that election, a member of the Assembly widely considered to be a possible leader of peace sentiment, Tran Van Van, was assassinated. The government arrested and immediately executed a young man charged with being the assassin, and reported that he had been a Vietcong terrorist. Shortly after, the government suspended publication of the *Vietnam Guardian*, an influential English-language Saigon newspaper, for reporting the widespread belief that the assassin actually had been a government agent.

The Assembly, therefore, despite occasional flashes of independence, has been subservient to the government. Its first major demonstration of that subservience was the agreement that the Presidential election would be decided by plurality (more votes than any other candidate's) rather than by majority (more than half the votes cast) and that therefore no run-off election need be held. This decision was followed by a proliferation of civilian candidates, reportedly encouraged by the government, and pressure by the military junta on General Ky (then a Presidential candidate) to take the Vice-President nomination under Thieu so that there would be only one military ticket to contest the election with a number of civilian tickets.

CANDIDATES OF THE BALLOT

The second demonstration of subservience came with the Assembly's ruling off the ballot, in late July, the two candidates most likely to give the generals real trouble. These were General Duong Van Minh and Mr. Au Trung Thanh. General Minh, though living in exile in Thailand, is one of South Vietnam's most popular figures. He announced his candidacy and in its first vote the Assembly approved it. But General Ky refused to

permit Minh to return to Vietnam to campaign, and in its second meeting the Assembly obediently removed him from the ballot. Au Trung Thanh, a highly respected economist, had served in three South Vietnam cabinets, including General Ky's, from which he had resigned in protest this past spring. He announced his candidacy on a straight peace platform, with a crossed-out bomb as his symbol and "cease-fire" as his slogan. He, too, was first approved and then removed from the ballot by the Assembly, after the Ky police had announced that Thanh was a Communist.

At the same time, the Assembly meekly revoked a ruling of its own committee, denying Thieu and Ky a place on the ballot, because they had refused to resign their government positions as required of all candidates by the constitution, and had even refused to appear before the committee to defend themselves. The Assembly, acutely conscious of the loud and heavily armed presence of national police head, General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, voted to put Thieu and Ky on the ballot.

CENSORSHIP

It is a truism that free elections are not possible in the absence of freedom of speech and of the press. In South Vietnam, censorship of the press has been so blatant as to have embarrassed even the U.S. Embassy, which reportedly brought heavy pressure on the Ky government to eliminate at least its most obvious manifestations, large white spaces appearing regularly on the pages of Vietnamese newspapers where the censor had boldly removed whole articles found offensive to the government. Other newspapers were suspended, and General Ky warned that any criticism of his government would be regarded as support for the enemy.

Shortly before the elections, the Thieu-Ky government announced the end of censorship; then, on the day before the election, General Thieu announced the suspension "for an indefinite period" of *Thien Chung*, one of Saigon's most widely circulated newspapers and very much pro-peace, and a smaller paper, *Sang*. General Thieu explained that "even in a democracy one has a right to suspend newspapers that support totalitarianism"—a charge that the publisher emphatically denied.

Even without the overt censorship, however, the press has literally taken its life in its hands with even the mildest criticism of the government or support of opposition to it. Allocation of newspaper is determined by the government, and newspaper publishers tempted to get "out of line" know how easily their businesses can be closed. Thus, very little appeared in the press about the positions, or even identity, of opposition candidates, while the papers were constantly filled with the statements and activities of the existing government.

CAMPAIGNING

The "rules" provided that candidates could not begin campaigning before August 1. General Ky, insisting that other candidates adhere rigidly to this rule, himself began campaigning openly and vigorously in June. Civilian candidates complained even after August 1 of continued harassment; most of them were not able even to visit many areas where the generals had organizations operating. Thieu-Ky posters blanketed the

villages. Many Vietnamese did not even know who was running, much less what they stood for.

THE PEACE ISSUE

I have reported before (*Congressional Record* of May 4, 1967, page 4) that my visits last winter to South Vietnam had convinced me of the truth of the assertions by Thich Nhat Hanh in his book² and elsewhere³: "Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire." (Hill & Wang, 1967, \$1.50.)

where: (1) that the overwhelming desire of the South Vietnamese people is for peace, and (2) that there is a significant and vital peace movement coalesced around the Buddhist LaBoi and Catholic Song Dao movements. Their position is that it is *only* American military and economic pressure that keeps the Ky-Thieu government in power and the war continuing. Left to themselves, they say, they would form a genuinely representative government that would proceed at once to end the bombing, call for a cease-fire, and proceed to negotiations for peace with the NLF and the North Vietnamese, and for military withdrawal with the United States.

The elections testify to the reality of this sentiment:

(1) The Thieu-Ky ticket was expected to get at least 40-50% of the vote, and probably more than half. General Thieu himself had said it would be difficult to govern with a vote of less than 40%. He actually received, in spite of all the advantages he had, 34.8%. *Even to get this, Thieu was compelled by the peace statements of other candidates to say, as campaigning was drawing to an end, that if elected he would initiate a bombing pause and negotiations with representatives of the NLF.*

(2) The three candidates next in order (Dzu, Sun and Huong) all had announced for peace. Together they polled 38% of the vote.

(3) Only one of the civilian tickets (Co-Sinh) supported the war and called for invasion of the north. It came in next to last, with a total of only 106,000 out of 4,700,000 votes cast. Thus the total anti-Thieu vote on the peace issue was approximately 2 to 1.

(4) With General Minh and Au Truong Thanh out, the experts had expected Tran Van Huong to run second to the generals, with Phan Khae Suu a possible close third. Both Huong and Suu are fairly well known, both having served as premier since the days of President Diem. Both men came out for peace in their platforms, but without much in the way of specifics.

But actually in second place, with 800,000 votes, was a Saigon lawyer, Truong Dinh Dzu, whose candidacy had been regarded as a joke by the experts. He had no national reputation except for having been jailed during the Diem regime for allegedly passing a bad cheque. But Dzu took a flat-footed peace stand not unlike that formerly taken by Au Truong Thanh and criticised the Thieu-Ky government caustically for its prosecution of the war and for the corruption it had tolerated.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The people of South Vietnam, against immense obstacles, have shown unmistakably that they favour the end of the war through a cease-fire and negotiations with the National Liberation Front and North Vietnam. Even U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker declared: "It

represents the desire of the country, of everyone, for peace."

2. If there were provisions for a run-off election among the top winners, it is beyond doubt that they would elect a government that would end the war.

3. It is the United States that has maintained and presumably will maintain the Thieu-Ky government in power and will continue the war.

4. The peace issue has been brought out in the open to such an extent that the Thieu-Ky government, with American support, may be expected to make some 'peace moves', possibly including a new bombing pause'. But a 'pause' is not the same thing as a 'halt'. Stop the bombing unconditionally have said UN Secretary-General U Thant and the heads of the Soviet Union, and peace talks will begin shortly. But a pause, with resumption of the bombing an explicit or implicit threat, becomes an ultimatum, and warring powers do not accept ultimatua. In this and other ways, the 'peace moves' of the new government are almost certain to be put in terms that will be unacceptable to the other side. This will then make it possible for the Thieu-Ky-Johnson axis to announce piously that it has made every effort to end the war, but that the other side is unwilling to co-operate. This, in turn, will become the rationalisation for continuation and escalation of the war.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

There is no easy way out of the impasse the United States is in, but more of the same promises only further tragedy. Responsibility of Americans is first to recognise the facts, and, second, to insist that our government act according to those facts. Both supporters of American policy and its opponents insist on their desire that the Vietnamese be allowed to determine their own destiny. The elections reveal what that determination would be: peace. Those who are the spokesmen of the peace movement insist that only the total, unqualified support by the United States of the Thieu-Ky government prevents its replacement.

Therefore, the United States must say that it stands for the right of self-determination for the South Vietnamese, including their right to replace the Thieu-Ky government; that the elections reveal that an overwhelming majority want a different government; and that American military and economic support will be discontinued unless an opportunity is given for the honest and full expression of that will.

Then let the Vietnamese take it from there.

AUSTRALIAN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

The Summer School, usually held in January, will this year be held on the weekend of March 8-9, 1968. Single or half-day seminars are being arranged during January; these will be notified by circular and Press advertisement.

DIARY

Dec. 11: Australian School of Social Science, Executive Meeting, 7 p.m.

Dec. 14: Social Science Club, Christmas Party, from 7 p.m.

School classes have been suspended during December. The Association for Good Government study group has resumed, meeting on Tuesdays at 6 p.m.