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Author(s): Philippe Devillers

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NORTH VIETNAM

The Struggle for the Unification of Vietnam

By PHILIPPE DEVILLERS

FOR many years, many thousands of Vietnamese patriots have sacrificed themselves for a double objective—the unity and independence of Vietnam—and it was in pursuit of these aims immediately after the Second World War that, first the Viet-Minh,¹ then the anti-Communist nationalists, brought into operation all the means at their disposal, both military and diplomatic. The Geneva Agreements of July 1954 confirmed the independence of Vietnam at international level. Yet, at the same time the country's unity, which for several years had no longer constituted a problem, was destroyed.

In fact, by splitting the country along the 17th Parallel, the Geneva Agreements made geographic a cleavage which had formerly been in evidence over the whole national territory, since it was by nature ideological and not racial or regional.

A military arrangement, the Geneva Agreement put an end to an armed conflict, and was solely concerned with fixing the limits of zones of regroupment for the two opposing forces after the cease-fire. The demarcation line was to be purely provisional; the principle of Vietnamese unity was not questioned, and the idea of partition was officially rejected with indignation by both sides. When military forces were regrouped and administrative divisions laid down, national political unity would be restored by free general elections—the only well-tested instrument for measuring public opinion. The Final Declaration at Geneva had provided for elections to be held at the latest by July 1956, and for authorities from the two zones to make contact in order to organise them before July 1955.

During the conference, French diplomatic strategy with reference to this problem had been wholly inspired by the idea that if the elections took place quickly, while the effects of what appeared to be a great success for the Viet-Minh were still apparent, Ho Chi Minh and his

¹ The term Viet-Minh is used in this article to designate not only this organisation which lasted ten years (1941–51), but also those which took over after it (the Lien-Viet, 1951–55, and the Patriotic Front). Viet-Minh is a useful and well-known term, even when it is not strictly accurate.

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followers would emerge triumphant. On the other hand, given a reasonable delay, the prestige of the Resistance would have waned, the people, given time to recover, would be more aware of their best interests, more conscious of ideological affinities and an atmosphere of freedom, thus providing an opportunity for the non-Marxist parties (liberals, democrats, etc.), to step in.

THE PROSPECTS IN 1954

The majority of Western observers had undoubtedly few illusions about the non-Marxists' chances of "recovery." The political cliques which had formerly existed in nationalist Vietnam merely represented scattered bourgeois elements, whose political ideology was of the vaguest, or groups of civil servants, all of whom had practically no contact with the people. It was most probable, therefore, that they would all be carried away in the powerful stream of the wind blowing from the Viet-Minh. There were still, of course, the more coherent groups, such as the politico-religious sects in the South, the Catholics in the North, and the national army. But would they be able to remain standing, supposing the masses in the countryside and the towns were stirred up and worked upon by the Viet-Minh?

The disproportion between the monolithic power of the Viet-Minh, armed, and with the halo of victory, and the almost derisory weakness of the so-called nationalist Vietnam was such that, in the summer of 1954, almost no one thought that the two years' delay won by M. Mendès France at Geneva could be anything but a respite in which to salvage as much as possible from the wreck. At the end of the period, unity would certainly be restored, this time to the benefit of the Viet-Minh, the basic hypothesis then acknowledged by all being that the Geneva Agreements would definitely be implemented.

In actual fact—though this was ignored at the time—the peak hour had passed, and a more balanced state of affairs was beginning to take shape. The DRV (Democratic Republic of [North] Vietnam), exhausted, but still very strong, had been forced by its allies to agree to a less advantageous compromise than the one it might have hoped for (to go any further would doubtless have involved it in open war with the United States). The result was that for the moment it could no longer exercise force south of latitude 17°, but it was relying on the prestige of its leaders, its own political dynamism, and well-tried methods of warfare, to bring about the desired outcome within the period laid down.

Its chances of victory were, however, linked to two factors:

- (a) the implementation of the Geneva Agreements;
- (b) the possibility of preventing the consolidation of the South by

preserving the initial unequal situation, and maintaining the crushing political progress which it had been making at the time of the Geneva Conference.

Nevertheless, the Hanoi government was to realise very quickly that in both respects the situation was evolving in a way disturbing to it, without it being able to exercise any influence whatsoever on the process.

(a) As far as the legal aspect was concerned, who could guarantee that the Agreements would be respected and implemented? South Vietnam which was not a signatory, was already declaring that it was not bound by them. The United States had stated that it would not oppose the carrying out of the agreements, either by force or by the threat of force, but it had not identified itself with them. Where did France stand? The Geneva Agreements (on military regroupment and a cease-fire) had linked the commands of the Popular Army and the forces of the French Union, but the latter had not entered into any *political* agreement, certainly not in the name of a country like Vietnam whose full and complete sovereignty and independence France had just recognised. Thus, neither South Vietnam, nor its two allies, France and the United States, upon whom depended the implementation of the agreements, appeared to be really committed by them.

(b) The consolidation of the South was to take shape fairly rapidly. In the first place, American support contributed to stemming the wave of discouragement which followed the disaster, and reminded South Vietnam that it was neither alone nor abandoned.

For months the United States had been anxious to establish a line of resistance to Communism in South-East Asia. For Washington, the Geneva Agreements represented a cutting of losses—the amputation of the gangrenous part of Vietnam. It was now necessary to save the healthy part at any price, and transform it into a “bastion of the free world.” The setting up of S.E.A.T.O. and the Treaty of Manila (September 1954) gave the states of Indo-China a guarantee on the part of the Western Powers against external aggression and even subversion. This was a pointer that the United States would not sit quietly if faced with the prospect that South Vietnam might go Communist, even perhaps as a result of free elections. The threat of a Viet-Minh victory (brought about by pre-electoral manoeuvres) was offset for the time being by this American guarantee.

As early as September 1954 it became clear that the Americans' desire to hold on to the 17th Parallel at all costs, would constitute a serious obstacle to the reunification of Vietnam. The latter was in danger of being sacrificed to the demands of Pentagon world strategy. The DRV did not fail to realise this. It protested immediately, naturally

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without eliciting any response. It was open to query whether this American resolution would continue to hold if international tension were relaxed. For the moment, under the shelter of the American umbrella, South Vietnam had time to recover.

The second element acting in a way detrimental to the interests of the North, was the progressive coagulation of the still fluid mass of the South around a hard core.

THE RISE OF NGÔ DINH DIEM

M. Diem, the anti-Communists' last card which they played at the eleventh hour and in the worst conditions, had found himself, just after the armistice, practically without means of action and isolated in the midst of the hangers-on of the French administration (the politicians, sects, army, police, etc.). His personal prestige could not, on its own, make up for the absence of a faithful party and political cadres.

The Americans, having decided to place their stakes, had already reached the conclusion that South Vietnam could not reasonably be held and preserved without the help of anti-Communist nationalism as proclaimed by Diem and his family. As early as October 1954, a letter from President Eisenhower assured M. Diem of the unconditional support of the United States. On their side, the nationalists, who suspected the French either of gambling on a *rapprochement* with Hanoi, or of seeking to prolong the colonial régime by putting their friends in power, considered that, for themselves, the only hope of resistance was to stake everything on the American alliance.

The North, at this time, underestimated the importance of the fact that for the first time it was not confronted by people linked in one way or another to discredited colonial authorities, but by a man whose past testified to his patriotism and integrity, and whose uncompromising anti-Communism did not stem from calculated self-interest, but from deep religious convictions.

Furthermore—and to the detriment of the North again—military regroupment was accompanied by an important political “regroupment.” Hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life escaped southwards from the victorious Viet-Minh—and by their exodus showed that a great many Vietnamese (like the people of East Germany) preferred to risk everything rather than to live under Communist law.

The South was thus increased in numbers, reinforced, and revitalised by a flood of refugees, the majority of whom were Catholic—people who had not fled from the North to risk finding themselves two years later under the Communist rod of iron, or obliged to flee elsewhere yet again. These people would inevitably be hostile to reunification so long as it would seem that the Viet-Minh would profit by it. Knowledge of their

experiences contributed greatly to reinforcing the potential moral resistance of the South, and spread amongst the people a lasting repulsion towards a régime so often based on the arbitrary authority of brutal, narrow-minded, and sectarian *can-bo* (cadres). It was among these refugees from the North that M. Diem recruited his guards and the cadres faithful to his régime.

It was now that Diem began to assert himself, to overcome the veiled resistance of the generals, and to ensure that the army over which he exercised control should be primarily devoted to the nationalist ideal. At the beginning of 1955, Diem, strong this time in American support (the French had just agreed to this shift of responsibilities), tackled the sects. South Vietnam was emerging from chaos. The Southern nebula was solidifying.

But the North still held a master trump: fear—based on the conviction of the majority of people in the South that the elections of 1956 would result in a victory for the Viet-Minh—a fear which encouraged each one not to compromise himself. It was Hanoi's interests to prevent fear being dispelled.

NORTH VIETNAMESE POLICY

It was not long before the DRV revealed its hand. As from February 4, 1955, it proposed the restoration of normal relations (for posts, roads, railways, air- and sea-traffic, etc.), between the two zones, and declared itself ready to carry this out immediately.

This was the first volley fired in a diplomatic shooting-match, which has practically never stopped for seven years, over the two questions on which the R.D.V.N. has chosen to concentrate: (a) the restoration of normal relations between the two zones, (b) the implementation of the Geneva "decisions" concerning pre-electoral consultations and general elections.

As far as the first question is concerned, the proposal of February 4, 1955, was to be repeated many times, in particular on March 7, 1958, and October 4, 1960, each time with no more success than previously, with the result that in 1962 the frontier of the 17th Parallel is one of the most closely sealed in the world. There is still no regular communication through any medium at all between North and South Vietnam. As for postal exchanges, these were and still are restricted simply to interzonal letters.

The Diem régime, to justify its refusal, has never ceased to assert that the North, in proposing this resumption of "normal relations" had no other aim than to infiltrate agents or propaganda into the Southern zone. It cannot be denied that there is a grain of truth in this, but it is possible to wonder whether the anti-Communists' lowering of this iron curtain

(revealing a singular inferiority complex on their part) has not ultimately caused much injury to the Vietnamese nation, and has not made the ordeal of the whole people more difficult.

The intransigence of the South has, in fact, destroyed any hopes which the North might have had of putting its reconstruction policy and its economic development upon a "pan-Vietnamese" footing, and has forced it to seek the aid necessary to it exclusively in the Communist *bloc*. Instead of relying on the South to make good its food deficits, the North has had to intensify agricultural production at a costly price and in difficult conditions. The South's decision has probably contributed towards pushing the North into the arms of China, has been a justification for the pre-eminence of pro-Chinese elements in the inner councils of the Lao Dong Party (the Communists), and has certainly made it more difficult for the DRV to turn towards South-East Asia, as certain elements would have liked it to do. Has not the South, by its refusal, condemned itself to an ever-increasing state of dependence in relation to its great protectors?

Nor were the Geneva "decisions" implemented, and the strong position which the DRV believed itself to be in, was ultimately of no use to it.

The first date-line fixed by Geneva—for July 1955—passed without incident. The South, urged by Hanoi to take part in the consultative conference provided for, gave a negative reply (August 9, 1955), invoking the totalitarian nature of the Northern régime, the absence of guarantees, and the multiple violations of the agreement of which it had been guilty. It also requested that those held in the North against their will should be allowed to leave. Hanoi could only protest to the co-presidents of the Geneva Conference, and ask them to intervene.

To make an impression on the South, and, doubtless, to "attenuate" the totalitarian nature of the régime, the DRV employed time-honoured methods of deception: a new party was formed in September at Hanoi—the Patriotic Front which absorbed the Lien Viet. The aim was to unite in one immense organisation (which would be manipulated by the Lao Dong Party) all those who were working only for the independence and the unity of the country.

But the appeals made by the North fell on deaf ears in the South, where Diem, having secured army support, compelled the sects to go into hiding and forced the liberal and democratic politicians into exile, was now launching an attack upon corruption and the last vestige of the *ancien régime* in the person of Bao Dai himself. Following a hastily organised referendum, in October 1955, Diem replaced Bao Dai at the head of the Vietnamese state, and proclaimed the "Republic of Vietnam"

of which he became President. Once again Hanoi could only protest against this "separatist" action.

The constitution of the South, which was largely inspired by American models, contained, certainly, a reference to the unity of Vietnam. But what it did in fact was to sanction the division of this unfortunate country and turn it into another Korea, another Germany. Saigon had fallen into line with Seoul, Taipeh and Bonn. In the same way as Hanoi, the Saigon régime (the only one recognised by the West as "free" and "untainted") felt itself called upon to bring about (to its own advantage, of course), the unification of the country.

It would seem that for a long time the DRV relied upon the powers that had signed the Geneva agreements to make the authorities in the South respect the provisions made. Here again the Hanoi government was to travel a long road of rebuffs and disappointments.

THE FRENCH WITHDRAWAL

It was on France that Hanoi was relying most heavily. This was emphasised by M. Pham Van Dong when he declared on January 1, 1955: "It was with you, the French, that we signed the Geneva agreements, and it is up to you to see that they are respected." France was, in fact, the only great power which was both bound by the agreements and at the same time capable of action in South Vietnam, thanks to the important effectives still at her disposal there. Hanoi built certain hopes on the pressure which the "democratic" forces might be able to exert in Paris in a direction favourable to her. The presence and the attitude of the Sainteny mission in Hanoi had, for a certain time, encouraged Ho Chi Minh and his followers to hope that France, disappointed or exasperated by the affronts offered them by the followers of Diem, might change partners, and gamble on unification (in agreement with the North) in order to maintain her presence in Vietnam.

This was the same grave misunderstanding of the "balance of strength" as had been shown in 1946. For one thing, the so-called "democratic elements" were no longer in a position in France to impose any policy whatsoever, and certainly not on the question of Indo-China, concerning which there was a growing and widespread desire for disengagement, at a time when the events in North Africa were increasingly claiming attention. In addition to this, Hanoi was over-estimating the amount of influence wielded by those French who supported the idea of a change of policy, for in political circles in Paris they were of small importance compared with the adherents of a policy of loyalty towards the "free world" (the U.S.A.) and towards their former Vietnamese comrades-in-arms. Moreover, in a somewhat tragic reappraisal of her foreign policy,

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France was, in fact, in the process of abandoning her political responsibilities in Asia to the Americans.

But what Hanoi had not foreseen was that France would disengage her forces so quickly. In withdrawing the Expeditionary Force at the end of April 1956, that is, three months before the deadline fixed for the elections, France was undoubtedly fulfilling her engagements towards Vietnam (*i.e.*, to respect the independence of the country and the promises made) but at the same time she was placing herself in the situation predicted by M. Pineau, where, as a guarantor of the Geneva Agreements, she no longer had the means of seeing that they were carried out.

This somewhat premature withdrawal of the French forces, on the eve of the date fixed for the elections, brought about a timid intervention on the part of the Powers. The occasion was a lesson to the DRV on the importance which the great powers attached to the problems of their small allies.

The government of the South having reasserted that it did not consider itself bound by the Geneva Agreements, and that it would refuse not only to assume in the mixed commissions the responsibilities formerly held by the French, but also to take part in pre-electoral consultations or in general elections, the great powers began to fear a rapid renewal of tension along the 17th parallel. It was to guard against this danger, and for that purpose alone, that they took action, and it was brought home to the DRV on this occasion how feeble was the support given to it by its great allies during this period of *détente* based on the *status quo*. China had asked that a new conference should meet in Geneva. The co-Presidents of the first conference (English and Russian) agreed simply to extend *sine die* the functions of the International Control Commission beyond the term initially fixed (July 20, 1956). Concerning the elections, which it was recognised would not be held within the stipulated period, the two parties were merely enjoined to advise the co-Presidents when they had agreed on a date to begin consultations and to hold the elections.

BURIAL OF THE GENEVA AGREEMENTS

This was, in fact, the occasion for the great powers to bury the Vietnamese problem. With the consent of the other signatories to the Agreements, unification by elections was to all intents and purposes postponed *sine die*, at least until Saigon, without which they could not be organised, had modified its attitude. If the United States had exerted pressure on M. Diem, it was not so much in order to soften his intransigence over the basic issue, as to persuade him to present his views in a more intelligent manner: henceforward, M. Diem would no longer question the very principle of elections, he would simply refuse to consider the

problem as long as the Northern zone remained under Communist control or at least did not give way to a free multiple-party system.

Repeatedly, in May and June 1956, in July 1957, in March 1958, and in July 1959 and 1960, the DRV returned to the charge, suggesting to Diem that the pre-electoral consultative conference should be held, and offering to negotiate on the basis of "free general elections by secret ballot." Each time it met with scornful silences or stinging replies. Each time Soviet and Chinese support was restricted to kind words, warm gestures of solidarity, and a few propaganda campaigns.

There was a similar lack of support for the DRV among the nations of the Bandung group; neither India, Burma, nor Indonesia made any effective gesture—not even one merely intended to facilitate what Nehru and Ho Chi Minh's joint communiqué of February 1958 called "understanding between the two zones of Viet-Nam," and one may suppose that none of these powers, even today, is particularly anxious to see the red flag with the yellow star floating over Saigon.

By taking up the Communist challenge, by coldly refusing to lend himself to the electoral game provided for at Geneva, Diem had clearly freed the Southern populace from the fear complex which had been Hanoi's master card. The dangerous cape of the summer of 1956 was weathered calmly, without incident, to the astonishment of almost everyone. Diem's position was further consolidated the following autumn by the public revelation of the terror reigning in the North, by Giap's own recognition of the "errors" committed in the course of agrarian reform, and of the cruelties which had accompanied it. Coming immediately after the events in Budapest, the small peasant revolt of Nghe An, crushed in November 1956, was highly exploited by Diem's propaganda machine. The whole South vibrated at this time to tales of the brutalities suffered by "our brothers of the North," and there was a further revulsion from Communism. The mistakes of the Lao Dong Party and the successes of M. Diem seemed to be slowly immunising the South against contagion from the North. Better still, Saigon, with growing assurance, now spoke of "liberating" the North.²

From this time onwards, it would seem that Hanoi became painfully resigned to the situation. It was recognised in the course of the sixth session of the National Assembly (January 1957) that "the struggle for

² A Saigon daily paper at this time said: "In the North, the fall of the illegitimate régime is near. . . . As soon as the people's hatred of the Communist dictatorship is sufficiently mature for it to succeed in overthrowing it, then general elections which are really free will take place in the whole of Vietnam, and will peacefully bring about the reunification of the country."

"If he refuses to have recourse to force in order to liberate the North, while yet realising the dearest aspirations of the people, the supreme head of the Republic of Vietnam does so solely in order to avoid bloodshed and undesirable fratricidal strife." (*Cong Nhan* quoted by *Vietnam Press*, the official agency, November 9, 1956.)

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unity would be long and difficult," and that a prerequisite would be the "consolidation" of the already-liberated North: to disguise the failure of the campaign for unification, they fell back on the building of "Socialism within one country."⁸

After this there were merely patently ineffectual attempts to keep alive "the desire of the Southern compatriots to achieve unification," attempts to procrastinate and keep the case open, and, before long, to canalise the grievances of the Southerners. The enemy was all the tougher because he depended only on himself and the Americans, and not on public opinion, so that there was no way of getting a grip on him. But Hanoi could reasonably hope for good dividends from a propaganda campaign which put the blame for the division of the country on the Americans, and denounced Vietnamese allies of the Americans as puppets and lackeys. This was a line which, at one and the same time, gained the favour of the Communist *bloc* and created the psychological conditions for a North-South *rapprochement*; anti-Americanism, that latest of national binding-forces, would permit the question of Communism to be relegated to a less prominent position. From 1956 on, American intervention in the South was constantly denounced as the principal obstacle existing in the way of reunification. But such denunciations were for long of a purely negative character. International *détente*, until 1959, operated entirely in favour of Ngô Đình Diem.

Apart from the United States, from which South Vietnam had obtained real protection and support, it seemed that nobody henceforward had the slightest hope of securing any softening of the rigid position which the Saigon oligarchy had taken up, fully realising what it was doing. In these conditions, it seemed likely that the division of Vietnam would last long. The North would have had little hope of setting the wheels of reunification in motion if the South had been able to forge itself into a real nation, that is to say, if the Saigon government had succeeded with its internal policies, and had received the full support of the people. But the wheel was soon to turn, and the North was to find itself with trump cards in its hand, for M. Diem had begun to dig his own grave.

MISTAKES OF THE DIEM GOVERNMENT

The best is often the enemy of the good. The "mistakes" of the South, from 1957 onwards, were to furnish opportunities to Communism and to the movement for reunification which operated under its aegis.

As if not satisfied with the re-establishment of calm and security,

⁸ It is to be noted that at this time (the beginning of 1957) the U.S.S.R., showing small regard for Vietnamese national sentiments, proposed at the United Nations the simultaneous admission of the two Vietnams.

the Diem régime, haunted by a strange desire to bring back into being the society of former days, when there were no sects and no Communists, and reckoning that it would itself be safe in the future, accentuated its authoritarian and repressive character. There are serious reasons for supposing that it was encouraged along this path by certain American activist *milieux* who were alarmed by the agreement reached over Laos (the entry of the Pathet Lao into the government) and by the continued existence in rural areas in the South of certain cells and centres of Communist allegiance. The *de facto* integration of South Vietnam within the American military defence structure implied that the region ought to be secure, and, hence, ought to be purged of anything which might, however remotely, serve the Red cause.

Men who fought for the Viet-Minh (insultingly termed Viet-Cong) have since this date been to all intents and purposes outlaws. The Diem government, profiting from the wave of emotion aroused by the putting-down of the Hungarian revolution, and the events at Nghe An, launched out in 1957 into what amounted to a series of man-hunts. The population were called upon to redouble their vigilance and to denounce all Communist activity. The organisation of the police, which was already elaborate, was yet further strengthened. Guided by informers, "mopping-up operations" became only too frequent, especially in the Centre, where the President's brother, Ngô Đình Can, had recourse to the toughest of methods.

A considerable number of people were arrested in this way, and sent to concentration camps, or political re-education camps, as they were euphemistically called, under conditions which, to be sure, reflected no credit on a state which proclaimed itself to be a respecter of the human person.

This repression was in theory aimed at the Communists. In fact it affected all those, and they were many—democrats, socialists, liberals, adherents of the sects—who were bold enough to express their disagreement with the line of policy adopted by the ruling oligarchy, which was now relying for its support upon two parties, the *Cach Manh Quoc Gia* (National Revolutionary Movement) and the *Can Lao Nhan Vi*. Often too (in error!) people of no political affiliations found themselves subjected to the repression.

It soon became evident to many Western observers, and to the most clear-sighted and best-informed among the Vietnamese themselves, that this policy was playing into the hands of the Communists, and warnings were frequently announced to this effect.⁴

⁴ At the beginning of 1958 the press of Saigon, and the National Assembly itself (in the sessions of January 3–4, 1958) gave voice to the serious popular unrest provoked by the way the police were acting; the brutal behaviour of the prison

In 1958 the situation grew worse. Round-ups of "dissidents" became more frequent and more brutal. The enemy (those suspected of Communist activities or of being affiliated to the sects) were difficult to apprehend. The areas where they took refuge—the Rachgia and Hatien regions in the West, and the Bien Hoa-Thu Dau Mot-Tay Ninh region in the East, with their marshes and forests, were not favourable for operations by government forces. Moreover, the way in which many of the operations were carried out very soon set the villagers against the régime. A certain sequence of events became almost classical: denunciation, encirclement of villages, searches and raids, arrest of suspects, plundering, interrogations enlivened sometimes by torture (even of innocent people⁵), deportation, and "regrouping" of populations suspected of intelligence with the rebels, etc.

Diem never succeeded in winning the peasants and tenant farmers over to his side. His policy of agrarian reform, an extremely timid one in the first place, became bogged down before very long, and, what is more, the tenant farmers were afraid that the benefits which had been conceded to them during the war would be called in question by the landlords. For so long as it did keep order the régime could get certain measures accepted, even when they were unpopular; but now disorder and insecurity were returning, and the villagers, exposed to the depredations of foraging parties sent out by both the Communists and the sects, suffered even more from the reprisals and operations organised by the police and the army.

RESISTANCE BY COMMUNISTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

As early as 1958 the cycle of events, so well described by the Viet-Minh theoretician, Truong Chinh,⁶ was set in motion in Cochinchina. The Communists, finding themselves hunted down, began to fight back. Informers were sought out and shot in increasing numbers, and village chiefs who had presided over the denunciations, village notables, and

authorities was mentioned in forthright terms. The semi-governmental newspaper *Tu Do* wrote (March 4, 1958): "We must have done with arbitrary arrests and imprisonment. The citizens of a free and independent country have the right to be protected in accordance with the spirit of the Constitution." Some days earlier, on March 18, the National Democratic Movement of South Vietnam launched an appeal to the French and American peoples in which it stated, "We enjoy neither justice nor freedom of the press nor free speech nor freedom to travel and meet together. A revolt is simmering."

But the régime had prepared in advance weapons to deal with such a situation. Ordinance No. 6, dated January 11, 1956, authorised the arrest or imprisonment of "any person considered to be a danger to the defence of the state or to national interests," and their detention until order and security were fully restored. By Article 98 of the Constitution, the President was empowered provisionally to suspend all liberties in case of danger.

⁵ Cf. the case of Ng. Xuan Hieu and Lam Van Nanh heard by the Saigon Court of Appeal in January 1961.

⁶ Cf. Truong Chinh, *La Résistance Vaincra*, 1947, Chap. XV.

members of the militia who took part, were frequently treated in the same way. The people of the villages, thus intimidated, fell silent. Diem's police and army saw their sources of information drying up one after another. To make good the lack, they resorted to worse barbarity, hoping to inspire an even greater terror among the villagers than that inspired by the Communists. And in that fateful year of 1958 they overstepped all bounds. The peasants, disgusted to see Diem's men acting in this way, lent their assistance to the Communists, and even to the sects, going so far as to take up arms at their side. The opposition (and deserters) found it increasingly easier to find hide-outs, they were able to set up more and more supply-dumps and outposts, and even to fortify villages according to well-tried methods, transforming them into bases for their operations.

In December 1958, the death of some 20 Viet Cong detainees in the Phu Loi concentration camp served to fan the flames of anger of the guerrillas—and gave Hanoi an opportunity for propaganda—and to bring them to the point where they decided to answer force by force. In the course of that December and the following January armed bands sprang into being almost everywhere. The ground was well prepared; many villages fell under their control and were straight away transformed into bases. To mark the festival of *Tết* 1959, the Resistance put on a large-scale raid, and a group attacked the outpost of Trang Sup near Tay Ninh in strength.

Keenly alive to the danger, the Diem government tried to re-establish its administrative hold over the lost villages. It launched against dissident regions (in the Plaine des Joncs and Eastern Cochinchina) what amounted to a series of full-scale military operations, bringing infantry, artillery, paratroops and aircraft to bear. But this time the forces of Diem met with resistance from the inhabitants themselves in many places. At the end of March 1959 M. Diem told the correspondent of *Figaro* that "at the present time Vietnam is a nation at war."

Under the pressure of the rising tide of terrorism and sabotage, the Saigon government passed the celebrated Law 10/59, which provided for the "repression of acts of sabotage, of infringements of national security and of attacks upon the life or property of citizens." Special military tribunals were convened which could only pass sentences of death or of hard labour for life, with no provisions for appeal against their decision. In an effort to wrest the population from the grip of the rebels, the Diem government made various attempts to set up villages on new sites in groupings at key points, imitating the policy the French had tried in Tonkin in 1953 (Hanoi-belt experiment, especially Hoa My), only to find that it had played into Viet-Minh hands.

And, indeed, in the course of 1959 the battle spread and became

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more intense. From the stage of scattered guerrilla operations it passed gradually into partisan warfare. Caught between two fires, and in a state of terror, the population witnessed tragic man-hunts. The power of the Diem government, in spite of American aid, was, it is true, on the ebb, but no village could feel that it was yet safe from the danger of "reprisal" operations.

REACTION OF DRV GOVERNMENT

What did the authorities of the Democratic Republic of [North] Vietnam do in the face of these sad circumstances? They protested in diplomatic notes. The members of the Viet-Minh cadre in the south, who had been promised by Hanoi that unification would be rapidly achieved, had to listen to the bitter remarks that were made to them about the inability of the North to do anything about the Diem dictatorship. The overriding needs of the world-wide strategy of the Socialist camp meant little or nothing to guerrilla fighters being hunted down in Nam-bô. It was in such a climate of feeling that, in 1959, responsible elements of the Communist Resistance in Indo-China came to the conclusion that they had to act, whether Hanoi wanted them to or no. They could no longer continue to stand by while their supporters were arrested, thrown into prison and tortured, without attempting to do anything about it as an organisation, without giving some lead to the people in the struggle in which it was to be involved. Hanoi preferred diplomatic notes, but it was to find that its hand had been forced.

In March 1960 the "Nam-bô Veterans of the Resistance Association" published a long declaration. After describing the reign of terror to which the country was submitted by the Diem régime, it declared that the government had "driven the people of South Vietnam to take up arms in self-defence." The Veterans of the Resistance thus called upon the people to intensify their struggle to oblige the authorities to change their policies: to put an end to the bloody rounding-up operations, to repression, to the pillaging of crops, to the moving of villages. They almost certainly did not believe that the régime could be reformed, for they declared that, in all this, they were fighting "to put an end to the Fascist dictatorship of the Ngo family" and to "set up a democratic government of National Union in South Vietnam . . . in order to realise national independence and democratic liberties and to guarantee a decent life to the people." But they added (and it is here that one can see the tip of the Devil's ear poking out) that this should be "in full and energetic implementation of the terms of the Geneva agreement by entering into talks with North Vietnam with a view to the peaceful reunification of the Fatherland. This government shall base itself on the principles of the Bandung Conference and institute a foreign policy of

Peace and Friendship." A little after the date of this manifesto,⁷ a People's Liberation Army of South Vietnam appeared in Nam-bô. From this time forwards it carried on incessant guerrilla operations against Diem's forces.

It was thus by its *home* policy that the government of the South finally destroyed the confidence of the population, which it had won during the early years, and practically drove them into revolt and desperation. The non-Communist (and even the anti-Communist) opposition had long been aware of the turn events were taking. But at the beginning of 1960 very many elements, both civilian and military, in the Nationalist camp came to a clear realisation that things were moving from bad to worse, and that if nothing were done to put an end to the absolute power of Diem, then Communism would end up by gaining power with the aid, or at least with the consent, of the population. If they did not want to allow the Communists to make capital out of the revolt, then they would have to oppose Diem actively.

OPPOSITION TO DIEM

In a manifesto dated April 26, 1960, eighteen well-known personalities of varying political affiliations demanded that Diem should liberalise his régime. If not, they added, a revolution would follow. On August 1, the Block of Liberty and Progress launched a petition to the same effect. Neither of these approaches elicited any response from the government. But among the Nationalist opposition the tone grew more bitter month by month. At the beginning of November an influential Nationalist journal, after indicating that the government would have in all probability to deal with a popular insurrection, wrote : ⁸

This rising is justified : in a country where the most elementary rights of the people are ignored, where the legality of the actions of the government has become an empty expression, the will of the people can only make itself felt by means of force, that is to say, by means of a revolution and the taking over of the government. . . . We Nationalists, all of us, know that there is a race against the clock taking place between the Viet-Minh and ourselves.

Even in the Army, the mood of the staff officers became hostile to the régime. But the abortive military *coup d'état* of November 11, 1960, followed as it was by a large-scale purge, of which the principal victim was brave Dr. Phan Quang Dan, leader of the "legal" opposition, was to show that the ruling oligarchy had made up its mind to hang on to its power and privileges at all costs.

⁷ Declaration of the Veterans of the Resistance on the current situation in South Vietnam, March 1960.

⁸ *Pour le Viêt-Nam*, Paris, No. 2, November 1960.

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After the spectacular failure of this first right-wing Nationalist plot, the initiative passed to the Communist Party and its allies once more. But it would be as well to analyse in a little more detail the background to this development.

When it decided to take up arms against the Diem régime, the Resistance movement in the South placed the leaders of Communism in Vietnam in an embarrassing situation. In the field of international relations the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had in all essentials kept to the Soviet line of peaceful co-existence, taking great care not to give, through the slightest provocation, any pretext to M. Diem or to the Americans. But could the Lao Dong Party stick to this policy of "peaceful co-existence" when its result was, in effect, to allow the Diem police to proceed with impunity to take their toll of the best elements in the Party?

Whereas the leading group of the Lao Dong Party seemed to be afraid that they would be dragged, behind the "adventurism" of members from the South, into a series of international complications likely to hinder the diplomacy of the Socialist camp, some "activist" elements came out in favour of a bolder policy of effective support for Southern comrades. This tendency had already appeared at the meeting of the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party in May 1959, and had made itself felt in the field in the shape of the aid given at the beginning of 1960 to the *maquis* of the High Plateaux (Pleiku-Kontum region).

These hesitations, and the divergence between the two tendencies, had an international bearing. And in the light of what happened at the Twenty-second Party Congress at Moscow (the Russo-Albanian dispute) we can better understand what was at stake in Hanoi during the Third Congress of the Lao Dong Party held there in September 1960. The question of national reunification was then at the heart of the debate, along with the question of support to be given to compatriots in the South. We have every reason to think that Moscow counselled prudence. It is interesting to note that the chief Soviet delegate, Mr. Mukhitdinov, stressed on that occasion that "peaceful co-existence was the only line which was in complete accord with the ultimate aim of Communism,"⁹ while the chief Chinese delegate, Mr. Li Fu-ch'un, reminded the Congress of the importance of Lenin's teaching "when one is struggling against Imperialists," and went on to denounce those revisionists who set about blackening the name of those who gave firm support to the Marxist-Leninist standpoint.

⁹ The Soviet-Vietnamese talks which followed after the Congress, according to the communiqué issued, served to bring out "the complete identity of the points of view" of the two governments as regards "the essential aspects" of the problems discussed (among which was the international situation).

The prudent (and pro-Soviet) tendency finally won the day, but the "activist" faction scored many points. Ho Chi Minh demanded that "greater efforts" should be made to achieve unification, and it was a former guerrilla leader in Nam-bô, Le Duan, who was elected Party Secretary. In this way closer liaison with the South was assured: the situation was deteriorating there, and the Lao Dong Party was afraid that the situation would slip from its control.

THE "NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT"

It is against this background that we must estimate the importance of the setting up in December 1960 "somewhere in Cochín-China" of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (*Mat-Tran dan-toc giai-phong*). The weakening of Diem's régime which resulted from the *coup* of November 11 made it, straightaway, the principal political force in South Vietnam. How effective its armed struggle was, and how serious a threat to the Diem régime it represented are now facts known to the whole world.

In the space of two years the Liberation Front of the South gained control of the greater part of the countryside in Cochín-China and also of a large zone between the fourteenth and seventeenth parallels. It built up a strong organisation by setting up at the various administrative levels (provinces, *huyen* and villages) committees which have already assumed governmental powers over whole regions, and then provided itself with effective means of action by attacking government positions, by desertions,¹⁰ through accomplices in Diem's army, by setting up factories to manufacture arms, and also through outside aid of by no means negligible extent which furnished arms, ammunition, medical supplies and money. Its propaganda is skilful, and hits its mark. The growing power of the Front is shown by its very ubiquitousness, and by the increasing tendency of the forces of Diem to fall back on the main lines of communications and on the principal centres of population.

If it maintains and extends its hold over the countryside, the Front will be in an increasingly stronger position, and able to determine the policy of South Vietnam. Already it constitutes there a factor which cannot be ignored.

To what extent have the successes of the Front and the weakening of the Diem régime increased the chances of unification coming about? The situation is complex. The point of view of most foreign governments, in the West especially, is that the fighting going on in South Vietnam is simply a subversive campaign directed from Hanoi. The DRV, unable to get the better of Diem by means of diplomacy, and not daring

¹⁰ At the beginning of 1961, for example, Diem forces discovered, near the Khmer frontier, a hide-out where 400 deserters had taken refuge.

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to resort to direct action, has chosen to attempt to overthrow him from within, sapping tirelessly the foundations of the régime and spreading terror.

The hypothesis is certainly a plausible one¹¹ (and to formulate it serves the purposes of Communist propaganda); but it leaves out of account the fact that the insurrection existed before the Communists decided to take part, and that they were simply forced to join in. And even among the Communists, the initiative did not originate in Hanoi, but from the grass roots, where the people were literally driven by Diem to take up arms in self-defence.

We do not at the moment know the composition of the Liberation Front of the South, or its leading elements, but it seems likely that it reflects the chequer-board variety of the political forces within the opposition (even if the delegates are not all representative). Now, the majority of the opponents of M. Diem are still anti-Communist, and the inhabitants of the South feel as yet only a slight sympathy for Communism. It is for this reason that the Communists, even though they do play a preponderant part in the National Front, are in no position to comport themselves as if they were the dominant force, and indeed have to proceed with great caution.

For the people of the South unification is not an essential problem. Peace, security, freedom, their standard of living, the agrarian question—these are far more important questions to them. The strong hold of the sects over certain regions remains one of the factors of the situation, as is also, in a general fashion, the distrustful attitude of the Southerner towards the Northerner, who is suspected of a tendency to want to take charge of affairs.

The Communists, whatever the extent of their loyalty towards Hanoi, have had to take this national or regional sentiment of the South into account. This is evident from the programme of the Front,¹² which, by and large, transposes on the level of internal politics the manifesto of the Veterans of the Resistance. While it does call for the overthrow of the government and the setting up of a government of national and democratic union, nevertheless the points most stressed are those concerning the establishment of a democratic régime guaranteeing peace for all and a decent standard of living, the giving of land to the peasants and political autonomy to ethnic minorities. Efforts have been made to give a “Southern” slant to the movement. The flag chosen by the Front is not that of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam: it is not red but red and

¹¹ Leading articles like that of April 3, 1961, in the *Nhan Dan* of Hanoi make it seem very likely.

¹² Programme published in the *Echo du Viêt-Nam*, No. 4, Paris, May 1961.

blue. As for the Front's attitude towards reunification, it is defined as follows in its programme:

The National Liberation Front of South Vietnam advocates the progressive reunification of the country by peaceful means on the basis of negotiations between the two zones with the object of finding by common agreement what measures and practical steps towards reunification can be taken in conformity with the interests of the people and of the Fatherland.

In the period before the reunification of the country, the governments of the two zones will meet to negotiate, and will engage themselves not to undertake any propaganda activities likely to lead to division and war, and will also pledge themselves not to use military force against the other party, also to encourage economic and cultural exchanges between the two zones, and to allow the inhabitants of the two zones full liberty to travel, trade, and carry on correspondence between the two zones.

All this is prudent and restrained enough. A simple matter of tactics, one might object: the Viet-Minh is out to gain the confidence of the population and to get itself accepted in order to win key-positions, and to set up its private army which will later enable it to lay down its own law. When it is master, it will oust its rivals one by one. Indeed, one observes that, wherever it can, it eliminates those men of recognised competence or of wide political influence who might prove awkward: certain rural agitators won over to the Nationalist opposition, for example.

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Yet the problem of reunification must be considered without overdramatising it. In the present international context the Government of Hanoi knows quite well that it is impossible to realise this policy of unification without risking open war with the United States. It will try nothing in that direction, for it follows the "Khrushchev line." The only solution envisageable by Hanoi is to take advantage of the mistakes committed by the Americans in order to gain acceptance for a "Laos-type" solution: that is to say, within the framework of a given nation where American policy has provoked an open conflict between Right and Left, to obtain, through military pressure, the overthrow of a reactionary dictatorship and its replacement by a democratic and neutralist government benevolently disposed towards them.

We should be quite frank with ourselves: this is the solution towards which we are heading directly. Month by month the forces of Diem are losing their hold on the countryside: before long there will only be a few pockets and bridgeheads left, and these they will probably be able to hold on to indefinitely with American aid. One thinks of Hué-Tourane, Nhatrang, the region of Saigon, and of perhaps one or two scattered

“ hedgehog-type ” defensive positions. But what can be the outcome of this? Neither side can allow such an *impasse* to continue for long, and sooner or later it will be necessary to come to the point of negotiating a political settlement re-establishing for this country the unity of the cities and the country regions. It is when this inevitable meeting takes place that we will be able to estimate what chances there are of speedy reunification.

At that moment everything will depend, on the one hand, on the balance of forces existing between the Liberation Front and its enemies (amongst whom one must include the Americans), and, on the other hand, on the balance of forces within the Front itself, exactly as in Laos. It is obvious that the stronger the Communists are when the moment comes, the greater the chances will be of a speedy reunification taking place (and to the extent that Hanoi is able at that time to furnish proof that it is truly independent, it is not certain that fundamental obstacles would be met with on the international plane).

This is the prospect that faces us. As things are at the moment, one can hardly see how the Diem Government, discredited and detested as it is, could restore its authority in South Vietnam. Its enemies will, henceforward, be strong enough both to resist any plans it may undertake and also to deny it the exercise of power in the countryside. The Americans are themselves aware of this situation. In May 1961, the Secretary of State, Mr. Dean Rusk, emphasised that it was no longer possible to oppose Viet-Minh threats by purely military means. The recent Taylor-Rostow mission has confirmed this point of view. Profound reforms are necessary, and the first thing to make sure of is that the Saigon Government is capable of inspiring confidence, which, under the Ngô family, it is no longer able to do.

The problem of the nature of the régime is thus, at the present moment, underlying all others in South Vietnam. Whether the process of unification is speedy or slow depends on whether it is solved or not. The methods and the nature of M. Diem's régime are indeed such that with every month that goes by the grip of the Communists in Vietnam grows firmer over the forces of the Resistance. The process which, under the French régime between 1930 and 1954, operated in favour of the Communist Party, operates still today, for the fact is that the people of Vietnam have always been caught between Communism and a form of anti-Communism which they could not accept. In the days of the French, they had to choose between Communism and a hated colonial régime; today the Americans give them a choice between Communism and a dictatorship of a type which is at one and the same time Fascist and medieval. Everything leads one to think that “ if they had at all costs to

choose between Communism and reaction, the masses of Vietnam would opt for the former.”¹³

The longer Diem's régime lasts, the more enemies it has, and the stronger Communist and anti-American influences become within the Resistance. This development could doubtless be stemmed and reversed, but to do so would require a way out to be found from the terrible choice “either Diem or the Viet-Minh.” It would require the emergence of another pole of influence. A change of Government in Saigon, with the advent to power of a popular and democratic Nationalist régime resolved to have done, once and for all, with the use of terror as an instrument of government and to follow an advanced economic and social policy would in all probability help towards the relaxation of tension, and would bring about the progressive sterilisation of the ground which now acts as a seedbed for Communism and Communist sympathisers. In the same way, if such a government abandoned the purely negative attitude adopted by the Diem régime towards relations with the North, the *détente* which would result, both in the minds of the people and throughout South-East Asia, would destroy many of the most cherished debating points of Northern propaganda.

For the die is not irrevocably cast, and the situation remains fluid. That part of the Nationalist movement in Vietnam which is not identified with Marxism has still a few good cards up its sleeve, but, unfortunately, it has very little time left in which to play them. It would be possible for it to play them to some advantage, even maybe win back the sympathy of the population, and this without abandoning its ideological references, truly democratic attitude, or its Western friends and the support they bring. But even if it ought to preserve a healthy suspicion of reunification for so long as it seems likely to be achieved to the advantage of the Communists alone, one can see no reason why it should fear contact with the North. After all, there are not two peoples nor two nations in Vietnam, and if certain regional interests diverge, if families and individuals look upon themselves as being for or against such and such a social system, this does not mean that they all of them want to live as strangers and enemies to each other. When one represents freedom (which ought to be the *raison d'être* of the South) one can, if one wishes, work effectively towards the mutual understanding and coming-together of the two Vietnams, and to that end put forward confederal solutions which would serve both the interests of the present time and the opportunities of the future.

The Liberation Front of the South constitutes, on the other hand, an unknown factor. The bigger it grows, the more non-Communist adherents

¹³ Cf. Nguyen Ngoc Huy, “Open letter to Mr. Kennedy,” in *Pour le Viêt-Nam*, No. 6, March 1961.

it contains. If there were a *détente* in Saigon, could the Communists remain dominant or preponderant in it? ¹⁴ The risk now for Hanoi is that the Front, which is essentially a Southern movement, should remain open to non-Marxist influences coming from powers which, for example, considering the victory of the Front as a virtual certainty, might wish in this way at least to make some provision for the future.

These are merely conjectures. But can what happened in South Korea happen again in South Vietnam? The blindness displayed over Laos by the Western Powers, and by the United States in particular, leads one to think that for Hanoi the risks of failure are not large this time either, and that, as Ho Chi Minh has said, "Reunification is now only a question of time." At this very moment a process of osmosis is taking place between the North and the country districts of the South through that open sieve, the Laotian border, and it is taking place to the advantage of the Communists alone. The situation is thus evolving towards the tragic ranging of city against countryside to which allusion has been made above. Who is still able, at the present time, to make a new deal?

¹⁴ The creation in January 1962 of a "People's Revolutionary Party" (a "party of the working class") within the framework of the Liberation Front is probably designed as an insurance against the risk that they could not. It would be interesting to know whether this new move was made on the advice of the Chinese that it was essential to have in the South an ideologically solid core to ensure that the Front maintained a correct line. It was certainly the Chinese who advocated a similar relationship between the Viet-Minh and the Lien Viet in 1951.