

Saigon: The Wheel Comes Full Circle

By Martin Nicolaus

The collapse of the Quat Government means the end of the non-communist peace movement in Saigon and a return to Diemism.

No more inappropriate words could have been found to mark the fall of the Quat government on June 11 than the phrase used by its titular head, Phan Khac Suu, to end his speech of resignation. He appealed to the people to support the armed forces of South Vietnam "in the spirit of the November 1, 1963 revolution." That was the date of the military coup which overthrew Diem, when the city's population, liberated at last from an odious tyranny, cheered the victorious generals. They also cheered the courageous intellectuals who had openly dared to defy Diem and had thus contributed to his downfall.

Chief among these intellectuals, and one of the most respected civilians in Saigon, was Phan Huy Quat. At least three other members of his four-month-old government had also been members of the openly anti-Diem group, whose April 1960 "Manifesto of the Eighteen" remains a classic non-communist indictment of Diem's rule; these were two of Quat's three Deputy Premiers, Trun Van Tuyen and Tran Von Do, and the Head of State himself, Phan Khac Suu. They represented within the non-communist political spectrum the pole exactly opposite Diem.

The only similarities between the Diem and the Quat governments, which would lend meaning to Phan Khac Suu's allusion to the "spirit of November 1, 1963," were that both Diem and Quat were overthrown by the military after both had lost the support of the United States. But Diem's fall caused dancing in the streets, while Quat's demise only deepened the profound gloom in Saigon.

Diem was a Catholic, and Quat was Buddhist; and it is tempting to see the teeter-totter of governments in the past year and a half as a battle for influence between rival religious organizations. Religious strife has deep roots in Vietnamese history, and religious considerations played an undeniable role, together with regional and personal factors, in toppling Quat's government.

On the surface, it seems that Quat fell because a personal feud between him and the querulous figurehead, Suu, which was magnified into a major cabinet

crisis through the intervention of the Catholic groups, led to street demonstrations which compromised Quat in the eyes of the US embassy at a time of severe military defeats.

This picture is correct, but superficial. Although the agitation of the Catholics against Quat arose partly from motives as simple as a desire to grab power and undermine a rival religion, certain special factors were at play which greatly complicated the situation. Especially where the Catholics are concerned, Vietnam's religious politics is much more than the jockeying of different pressure blocs for position at the patronage pork barrel. The crucial difference between South Vietnamese and a hypothetical "normal" political situation, as far as religion is concerned, is the war.

It is the tragedy of Vietnamese Catholics since the rise of Vietnamese nationalism to be always identified with a foreign power. Through centuries of colonial occupation. Vietnamese Catholics have become culturally differentiated from the great majority of Vietnamese and have developed a distinct collective identity of their own; created by foreign missionaries, they let themselves be used by the French (and now the United States) as a "native elite," a group of ethnic Vietnamese acting in the political interests of a colonial power, and dependent upon it for privilege and protection. These circumstances made a clash between the rising Vietnamese nationalism and the much older Catholicism nearly inevitable.

When the great polarization of Vietnamese political forces took place during the Indochina war against the French, the Catholics by and large quite naturally fought on the French side. This made their flight from the North in 1954 inevitable; not only did the hate of the Vietminh forces for all things identified with France lead to a number of massacres of Catholic hamlets, but also it was evident that the new social order being constructed in the North had no place for the traditional Catholic style of life, and meant in fact the destruction of the distinctly Catholic cultural identity.

The purpose of this excursion into history is to show that for the Catholics, a great deal more is at stake in the current war than the mere possession of government authority in Saigon. The Catholic organizations, especially those made up of the approximately 750,000 Northerners who emigrated to the South after 1954, rightly fear that they will be forced to emigrate once again, should the National Liberation Front ("Vietcong") take power. The Catholics consider themselves unassimilable. They see no compromise between themselves and the NLF, and it is probable that the feeling is to a certain extent mutual.

Because of the strong identification of Catholics with the Diem regime, which continues to this day, Catholics have many political enemies, and not only in the NLF. Most importantly, Catholics feel that they are fighting a last-ditch effort, that their backs are to the wall. In short, Catholics are the most irreconcilable opponents of negotiations to end the war. Therefore, when the United States began to bomb North Vietnam on February 7, 1965, Catholic leaders were understandably pleased.

Although some of the Northern refugees resented this destruction wreaked upon a country which they considered their home and to which they had been taught to expect to return, the leadership recognized that the air strikes created conditions under which it was impossible for Hanoi or the NLF to negotiate, and that the continued bombings served to prolong the war, thus postponing disaster for the Catholics. It is chiefly they who are meant when commentators say that the bombings of the North bolstered the sagging morale of the South Vietnamese people. On most of the rest of the population, however, the air strikes had more or less the same effect as they had in the United States; that is to say, the escalation provoked a widespread and vigorous revival and intensification of peace activity.

The Quat government came to power in the midst of this agitation. A week before Quat's installation as Premier, the New York Times (2/18) noted that neutralist pro-negotiation sentiment had grown so strong that the US feared the immediate rise of a government of coalition with the Liberation Front. On the date of Quat's accession, a number of well-known intellectuals whose status was reminiscent of the 1960 anti-Diem opposition to which Quat had belonged, called a press conference to announce the formation of a new movement in favor of an immediate cease-fire and a negotiated peace. Military police broke up the very well-attended conference, arrested some of the leaders, and subsequently deported them. But despite the harshness of the police measures, only two days later an influential Buddhist group led by Thich Quang Lien issued even sharper demands, including specifically the withdrawal of American troops.

The reaction of Quat's government to these demands was uncharacteristic of any previous Saigon regime. Instead of immediate denunciations of the peace elements as traitors and collaborators with the Vietcong, instead of troop movements and mass arrests, the Quat government responded by retreating into its council chambers for two days of secret conferences. What was said in these two days was never revealed, but the mere fact that a Saigon government should find anything to discuss in these proposals is most startling. Diem would have seen nothing to talk about; and it is evident that to the Catholic leadership also, the mere suggestion of discussions about

negotiations was abhorrent. What followed was even less palatable to them and to the ultra right-wing army officers with whom they were allied.

Under the Quat government, South Vietnam had the rare experience of being ruled by men who attempted to confront the inevitable as gracefully and realistically as the circumstances of a long and bloody war allowed. They were unique among Saigon's rulers because their policies were based on the consideration that the vast majority of that small fraction of the population still under Saigon's control could not emigrate, but would have to live with the NLF as best as it could, would have to accommodate itself to the inevitable, and should prepare itself for as bloodless and honorable a transition as could be achieved.

Most directly, Quat and his small group of associates were able to express the profound war-weariness felt by a population acutely conscious that nothing worthwhile was to be won by artificially prolonging the hostilities.

In mid-April, Quat's Deputy Premier Tran Van Tuyen granted the French newspaper *Le Monde* (4/16) a most extraordinary interview, which, unfortunately, passed nearly unnoticed in the American press. Mr. Tuyen declared that a "decisive phase of Vietnamese history" had begun, brought about by the February 7 escalation. However, concurrent with and more important than the military escalation, he said, was the "diplomatic escalation" then in progress.

He agreed that President Johnson's April 7 speech calling for unconditional discussions with any government was a factor in this diplomatic escalation, but, he added, "what counts most for us is our people, who are suffering from the war, the women and children who are being murdered. This war must be stopped."

Although the direction of the insurrection came, in his opinion, from the North, he was quite ready to admit that the policies of the Diem regime, refusing peaceful reunification of the country, had "incited the North to unleash subversion in the South." While he did not feel himself bound by the policies of the Diem regime, against which he had fought (and which had imprisoned him), he recognized that "we are now confronted with his terrible heritage, because we are linked to him by the principle of the continuity of the state."

Most important, regarding the policies of the Quat government, he stated that "we still need several months to consolidate our regime, to create finally

a national front including all Vietnamese nationalist currents, in order to build a real force capable of negotiating with the adversary on a footing of equality.

Asked whether or not he had the intention of eliminating leftists from a future regime, he replied: "Not at all. Until now, all the governments that have succeeded one another in Saigon more or less 'fell out of the sky.' It is necessary to create a government with roots in the masses. In order to do that, we must follow a policy of democratic socialism. In such a context the left-wing South Vietnamese forces could find a place -- I mean the democratic leftist forces." This was further than any previous Saigon government had been willing to go in the direction of a realistic appraisal of the future.

Few American observers picked up the fact that this government had come to power with the express purpose of paving the way for negotiations and, possibly, coalition with the Liberation Front. But the Catholics noticed it immediately, and Tran Van Tuyen found himself under heavy fire. He spent much of his time, as the Times (5/7) reported, denying that he had consulted with neutralists while abroad.

Shortly after his return, on May 9, a new ultra right-wing Catholic group engineered by the acknowledged spokesman for the Northern exiles, the Rev. Hoang Quynh, adopted a resolution calling for invasion of the North, and denouncing the Quat government for religious discrimination, neutralism, and softness on communism.

The first charge against Quat had a superficial validity, in that Quat had begun to arrest persons accused of plotting to overthrow the previous government of General Khanh, a Buddhist. Those arrested were Catholics. The arrests continued for two weeks, until more than fifty persons were being held, this time for plotting to assassinate Quat. Among those jailed were the heads of the military intelligence and of the counter-intelligence services, both Catholic, ultra right-wing nationalists. Two-thirds of all the arrested were military men, and the majority again were Catholics. But it is evident that these arrests represented more than a religious shake-up. Their real meaning was that Quat was trying to rid himself of those ultra right-wing elements, especially in the military, who were in it position to block his progress toward a peaceful settlement of the war.

These moves were popular with non-Catholics both because they promised an end to war and because they represented the first real attempt to assert the supremacy of civilian over military rule. But the powerful Catholic groups became increasingly vocal. Quat defended himself as best he could. He patched up ties with France, hoping probably to gain diplomatic support for

an eventual solution along Gaullist lines. (The Catholics subsequently accused Quat of "collaborating with colonialists") An increasing number of pro-neutralist Vietnamese returned to Saigon from Paris. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of persons arrested for neutralism or pacifism were released from jail. Quat maneuvered feverishly within the military, pitting the generals against one another, trying to rule by creating divisions.

But as Catholic pressures increased, and spilled over into carefully staged street demonstrations, Quat was forced into open retreat. His political base in the army had always been fractional. The Buddhists, on whom he would otherwise have counted, were themselves deeply split on political and personal issues; like the Catholics, they were more adept at toppling governments than at holding power.

Finally, on June 8, came the kiss of death: The US Embassy withdrew its support. Two days later Quat threw himself on the mercy of the generals, and in another day his government abdicated.

And so the "Year of the Buddhists" which began with the fall of Diem is over. There was dancing in the streets when Diem was dead, but the fall of Quat only deepened the gloom of a city already near despair. Diem had accomplished nothing, all the coups since his death had accomplished nothing, and the coming to power of the respected anti-Diem intellectuals, the last political hope of the non-NLF Vietnamese, had accomplished nothing whatsoever.

With the Quat government eliminated the last political alternative to the NLF, other than the fanatic Catholics and the army. The chances for a peace negotiated with the NLF by a government enjoying at least a modicum of political leverage of its own disappeared with Quat. The only possible, the only credible peace hereafter is the peace that follows final military defeat. A Vietnamese who wants peace -- and most do -- now has no spokesmen, no leaders, and no organizations other than those of the National Liberation Front. The "democratic alternatives" have all been tried, the hopes for national self-development on other terms than those of the NLF have all disappeared.

After eleven years of agony, the Saigon government is right back where it started: based on nothing but the imported Catholics and the power of the United States. Every alternative to the NLF has already been tried and has failed. The political wheel has come full circle. Played against the background of an increasingly American war, the political drama of the next few months will feature the eradication of all elements not openly aligned either with the

Liberation Front or the United States. This polarization of forces, resulting in the virtually complete isolation of the United States, has long been the goal of Liberation Front political strategy. The fall of the Quat government represents the final stage of political escalation.