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SAIGON WAR POLITICS 1968-1975

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As the year 1968 drew to a close, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, the President of the Republic of Vietnam, could take satisfaction from the previous twelve months' progress. That spring, Communist forces had launched an all-out assault on South Vietnam's cities and provincial capitals, gambling that urban southerners would join them in toppling Thiệu's fledgling administration. Instead, the urban South largely spurned the Communists, recoiling in horror from the violence that the Tet Offensive had unleashed. Seizing upon the shift in momentum, American and South Vietnamese units counterattacked. Although characterized by inordinate disregard for civilians caught in the crossfire, the U.S.-South Vietnamese retaliation campaign exacted a heavy toll on the southern Communist National Liberation Front (NLF), prompting NLF and North Vietnamese forces to retreat and regroup, and exacerbating North-South tensions within the Communist movement. Meanwhile, Thiệu capitalized on the Tet attacks to consolidate power at the expense of his Vice-President and arch-nemesis Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. Dismissing Kỳ's backers within the South Vietnamese military [The Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or 'ARVN'], Thiệu used accusations of poor performance during the Tet Offensive as a pretext to replace them with loyalists of his own. Though fear of a Nguyễn Cao Kỳ-led military coup would preoccupy Thiệu for the remainder of his term in office, his position as head of state and military commander was secure by the end of the year.[1]

No less significant than Thiệu's triumph in Saigon's internecine military squabbles, however, was that the new, year-old constitutional system known as the "Second Republic" had survived the Communist attacks intact. Formally inaugurated in April 1967, the Second Republic was founded upon a new constitution with provisions to hold nationwide elections for President, and for representatives in a new National Assembly consisting of a Senate and a Lower House.[2] These constitutional reforms were intended to stabilize South Vietnam's turbulent political scene, wracked by years of military infighting, religious conflict, street demonstrations, and a series of regional uprisings following the assassination of former President Ngô Đình Diệm during a military coup in November 1963. Behind the scenes, the South Vietnamese military retained de facto power, which many civilian critics acknowledged to be necessary given a surge

[1] See Chapter ___ Volume ____of Cambridge History of the Vietnam War (Simon Toner chapter).
[2] The "First Republic" [Đệ Nhất Cộng hòa] refers to the period during the reign of President Ngô Đình Diệm, 1955-1963.

in Communist momentum following President Diệm's death. But South Vietnam's anti-Communist political constituents nonetheless hoped that the Second Republic would compel Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's military government to address civilian grievances, and bind it to the rule of law.[3] And, at a time when voters in the United States were increasingly beginning to question the prospects and the purpose of intervention in Vietnam, the 1967 reforms also served to alleviate American concerns over chronic instability in Saigon.

Initially, the reforms had been a disappointment in the eyes of the very constituents they were meant to win over. Anti-Communist civilian political observers were dismayed if hardly surprised by the military's blatant interference via ballot-stuffing and intimidation to administer the outcome in its favor. But in the aftermath of the brutal Tet campaign, when urban centers directly encountered the violence to which the rural South had long been subject, the legal and political framework ushered in by the Second Republic served as a rallying point for citizens stirred into action by the attacks. Far from evincing public sympathy, the Communist offensive instead achieved the unlikely feat of uniting long-antagonistic parties and factions in their outrage and determination to resist a North Vietnamese takeover. A wave of anti-Communist solidarity swept through South Vietnam's cities and provincial towns. Bitter political and religious rivals set aside their differences and formed coalitions to serve in the new National Assembly. And ARVN forces took advantage of NLF weakness to expand the Saigon government's presence into Communist-dominated areas in the countryside. This post-Tet spirit of resolution arguably marked the zenith of anti-Communist cohesion in Vietnam. And for a time, it appeared plausible that the balance in Vietnam's decades-long political conflict might be tipping in Saigon's favor. But as we shall see, in the years that followed, the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu government squandered this uniquely poised opportunity by moving to monopolize political power at the expense of civilian parties and institutions. Thiệu's authoritarian turn betrayed the constitutional order on which the state's legitimacy was based, in turn deflating post-Tet enthusiasm, accelerating American funding cuts, and catalyzing the state's abrupt collapse from within during a final Communist offensive in the spring of 1975.

To date, English-language scholarship on this decisive time-period has largely focused on American strategic deliberations and domestic political debates over U.S. troop withdrawal, or

[3] For the purposes of this chapter 'anti-Communist' refers to constituents in the Republic of Vietnam opposed to a communist takeover of the South Vietnamese state by force.

diplomatic maneuvering between Washington, Hanoi, Moscow, and Beijing. South Vietnamese political events such as elections, economic reforms, or legislative debates, on the other hand, are rarely afforded much attention in accounts of the war's final stages. Many historians have dismissed the South Vietnamese state as an American puppet regime, with little autonomy, ideological basis, or popular support. And its ultimate failure has often been regarded as preordained from the outset.[4] This chapter, however, proposes that far from American pawns, South Vietnamese political actors played a critical role in determining the outcome of the conflict, pursuing a range of competing agendas and confounding the United States Embassy's attempts to orchestrate events in Washington's favor. It also asserts the significance of South Vietnam's volatile political sphere between 1968 and 1975, when anti-Communist resolve after the Tet attacks gave way to outrage and despair following President Thiệu's authoritarian crackdown. In so doing, it suggests that well into the late 1960s, the fate of the Saigon government remained contingent rather than fixed, and that the state's rapid disintegration in 1975 stemmed largely from the breakdown in domestic political legitimacy that preceded and facilitated the final Communist attacks. Despite a sincere if short-lived post-Tet spirit of commitment, the military government ultimately failed to contend with the Communists' formidable rural political network, much less rally and unite urban anti-Communists behind a coherent ideological vision. These internal political failures would prove insurmountable, paving the way for the war's fateful denouement in the spring of 1975.

A COMPLEX POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Perhaps the most serious shortcoming in many English-language accounts of the Vietnam War has been a dramatic oversimplification of South Vietnam's intricate and evolving political geography. Accustomed, perhaps, to regarding Vietnam as merely a component part in the broader global Cold War, many early historians portrayed the war as a simple binary struggle pitting the Vietnamese Communists against the United States and its Vietnamese loyalists. But this approach belies the South's overlapping political, ethnic, religious, and regional schisms, as well as the extent to which the balance of power between its competing political authorities and

[4] Examples include Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972); James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

parties fluctuated over time. To a far greater extent than in North Vietnam, where the departure of some 800,000 political and religious emigres in 1954 facilitated Communist consolidation, the South's political, regional, and cultural heterogeneity posed a considerable challenge to any central authority seeking to enforce state power. An appreciation of this complexity is necessary in evaluating the challenges facing the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu government as it sought to capitalize on the failed Communist Tet attacks.

First, consider the political impact of religion. Perhaps the Saigon government's most formidable opponents, apart from the Communists themselves, were activist Buddhist political groups, particularly the faction led by Thích Trí Quang and associated with the Ấn Quang pagoda in Saigon. Representing adherents throughout southern and especially central Vietnam (or northern South Vietnam), the Ấn Quang Buddhists drew inspiration from early twentieth century Buddhist revival movements in South Asia, and asserted that Buddhism should be predominant in Vietnamese politics and culture. They were willing and able to stage largescale rebellions against the central government, hastening former President Ngô Đình Diệm's downfall in 1963 and temporarily wresting much of central Vietnam from Saigon's control three years later. This set them apart from a more moderate Buddhist faction headed by Thích Tâm Châu, which was more influential among newly arrived northerners and more willing to compromise with the South Vietnamese military state.[5]

Vietnamese Catholics, meanwhile, were even more divided by regional tensions. Politically active southern Catholics, particularly in the Mekong Delta, were in general more likely to consider peace negotiations and coalition government with their southern counterparts in the NLF. Often looking to the reformist spirit of the Second Vatican Council for inspiration, they were prominent in South Vietnam's liberal opposition to military rule, and outspoken against Nguyên Văn Thiệu's perceived reliance on hardline anti-Communist northerners. Northern Catholics, on the other hand, had arrived in the South en masse after 1954. Often informed by firsthand experience of the North Vietnamese state's own autocratic tendencies, they fiercely resisted compromising with the Communist side, and could tolerate Thiệu's mounting authoritarianism provided he appeared capable of keeping Hanoi at bay. Tightly

[5] Phi-Vân Nguyen, "A Secular State for a Religious Nation: The Republic of Vietnam and Religious Nationalism, 1946–1963," *Journal of Asian Studies* (2018); Robert J. Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed: the Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964-1966*. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2002).

organized at the parish level, they also wielded disproportionate influence in the Second Republic's bicameral legislature thanks to a network of disciplined voting blocs.[6]

Elsewhere, in the Mekong Delta, two small but locally dominant syncretic religious movements, the Hòa Hảo and Cao Đài, were regional players in their own right. Subdued by the South Vietnamese military in 1955, they each nonetheless retained a substantial degree of authority over their respective heartlands, in An Giang and Tây Ninh provinces respectively, where they proved rather more adept than ARVN forces at resisting Communist infiltration. Though both were hindered by perpetual infighting between regional and political factions, they wielded considerable influence over large swathes of the Mekong Delta. During the Second Republic, the military government maintained patronage ties with competing Hòa Hảo and Cao Đài sections, granting covert cash payments and ceding de facto autonomy in exchange for assistance contesting the Communists and delivering votes during national elections.[7]

Further south were the Khmer (ethnic Cambodians), the Mekong Delta's largest ethnic minority. Resident in the region long before the first ethnic Vietnamese settlers arrived beginning in the seventeenth century, Khmer identity crystalized in the nineteenth century in response to the expansionist and assimilationist policies of the Vietnamese Emperor Minh Mạng. More recently, the First Indochina War (1945-1954) had witnessed an explosion of violence between the Khmer and various rival ethnic Vietnamese political and religious groups, resulting in enduring mutual suspicion and animosity. During the Second Republic, most Khmer constituents in Vietnam's Mekong Delta retained the Khmer language, practised a different form of Buddhism (Theravada) than their ethnic Vietnamese counterparts (Mahayana), and looked more to Phnom Penh than Saigon as a center of cultural if not political authority. Less militarized and with weaker political structures than the Hòa Hảo or Cao Đài, they too fought to protect local autonomy in the face of perceived Vietnamese encroachment from both sides of the Cold War divide.[8] To the north meanwhile, in the highlands where central Vietnam meets Cambodia and Laos, a diverse coalition of ethnic minority communities likewise struggled to preserve their

[6] Trần Thị Liên, "The Challenge for Peace within South Vietnam's Catholic Community: A History of Peace Activism," *Peace & Change: A Journal of Peace Research*, 38, 4 (October 2013).
[7] Nguyễn Long Thành Nam, *Hòa Hảo Buddhism in the Course of Vietnam's History*. (New York: Nova Science Publishing, 2004); Jérémy Jammes, "Caodaism in Times of War: Spirits of Struggle and Struggle of Spirits," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 31, 1 (2016).
[8] Shawn McHale, "Ethnicity, Violence, and Khmer-Vietnamese Relations: The Significance of the Lower Mekong Delta, 1757–1954," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 72, 2 (2013); Philip Taylor, *The Khmer Lands of Vietnam: Environment, Cosmology and Sovereignty*, (Asian Studies Association of Australia: Southeast Asian Publications Series, 2014).

cultural and territorial integrity from the competing Vietnamese states centered in Hanoi and Saigon. Loosely united under the mantle of FULRO (The "United Front for the Struggle for Oppressed Races"[9]), military representatives of the highlands minorities launched uprisings in 1964 and 1965, protesting the South Vietnamese state's efforts to assert sovereignty over this strategically vital region by flooding it with ethnic Vietnamese settlers.[10] The rebellions were violently subdued, exacerbating divisions over strategy within the FULRO ranks. Still, given their relative strength in numbers, ability to deliver votes to the highest bidder, and willingness to take up arms if provoked, the highlands minorities were also a force to be reckoned with. Less numerous but also significant was South Vietnam's ethnic Chinese population, largely concentrated in Saigon and the towns of the Mekong Delta. Historically dominant in the rice trade, they too retained their cultural and linguistic identity, and were regarded with suspicion by military officials who feared their allegiance was to Beijing rather than Saigon.[11]

And then there were the political parties, every bit as fragmented into regional and ideological factions but still capable of challenging state power, albeit if only within specific provincial districts. Most prominent among them were the Đại Việt [Greater Vietnam] Party, and the Vietnamese Nationalist Party [Việt Nam Quốc dân Đảng, or VNQDD], loosely modelled on the Guomindang founded by Sun Yat-Sen in republican-era China. In truth, having been forced underground by the French colonial police and later the Vietnamese Communists, these were not so much membership-driven parties as semi-clandestine political networks. By now too weak to replicate the Communists' mass popular movement, the Đại Việts and Nationalists instead exerted power by infiltrating the South Vietnamese military and civil service. Once embedded within the bureaucracy, they combined their official responsibilities with the pursuit of partisan interests, coming to dominate clusters of towns and rural districts especially in coastal central Vietnam. That said, by the late 1960s each party was badly divided, into antagonistic northern and southern branches further fragmented in turn into quarreling local leadership factions. Nonetheless, despite their internal divisions, these parties were also significant regional actors, such that district- and province-level appointments and promotions within the South Vietnamese

[9] Or "Front unifié de lutte des races opprimées."
[10] Gerald Hickey, *Fire in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, 1954-1976*. (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1982).
[11] Mei Feng Mok, *Negotiating Community and Nation in Chợ Lớn: Nation-building, Community-building and Transnationalism in Everyday Life during the Republic of Việt Nam, 1955-1975* (PhD diss.) University of Washington, 2016.

military state were often selected to curry favor with the Đại Việts or VNQDD.[12] Finally, rounding out the picture were a medley of mostly urban civil society groups, including competing trade unions, politicized student organizations, and military veterans' associations. In common with virtually every other non-Communist entity in the South, these elements were also riven with schisms and infighting. But they too had the power to create chaos when they took to the streets, and could leverage the sympathy of influential counterpart organisations in the United States to advance their causes.

Making matters even more challenging for the government in Saigon was the rapid fragmentation of the countryside that resulted from the war's escalation after President Ngô Đình Diệm's death in 1963. During the First Republic (1955-1963), the writer Võ Phiến described a rural milieu where "newspapers were widely disseminated and went deep into the rural area. …Books would reach as far as the reading rooms of the district offices…and newspapers could go all the way down to the hamlets."[13] But as Communist momentum swelled beginning in the early 1960s, transportation and communication between Saigon and the countryside grew increasingly precarious. With control over rural territory now violently contested, official travel between provinces if not districts was fraught with peril. Even months after the Tet Offensive, a ground voyage from Saigon to Tân An, the nearest provincial capital to the west, was considered unthinkable for U.S. officials without accompaniment by a military escort.[14] The result was a rural environment where Saigon's authority was tenuous and decentralized, and where local officials' whims took precedence over instructions from the increasingly distant capital. News from Saigon - when it arrived at all – was transmitted by rumour through rural grapevines rather than formal public information channels.[15] Constituents in remote districts surrounding the capital, the U.S. Embassy reported, did not learn of President Diệm's assassination for up to six weeks after the event.[16] These conditions heightened longstanding cultural divisions between the

[12] Quang Minh, *Cách mạng Việt Nam thời cận kim: Đại Việt Quốc Dân Đảng*. [Modern Vietnamese Revolution: The Dai Viet Party] (Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ, 2000); Hoàng Văn Đào, *Việt-Nam Quốc-dân Đảng: Lịch sử Đấu tranh Cận đại (1927-1954)* [The Vietnamese Nationalist Party: The Contemporary History of a National Struggle: 1927-1954] (Saigon: S.i., 1970).
[13] Võ Phien. *Văn Học Miền Nam: Tổng quan* [Twenty Years of Literature in South Vietnam: Overview]. (Charleston, SC: Nguoi Viet Books, 2014): 79-80.
[14] "South of Saigon – The Battle for National Route 4," Airgram A-508 from Saigon to Department of State, 11 April 1968, POL 18 VIET S 1967-1969 Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF), Record Group (RG) 59, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).
[15] David Hunt, "Propaganda and the Public: The Shaping of Opinion in the Southern Vietnamese Countryside during the Second Indochina War," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 31, 2 (2016).
[16] Telegram 5649, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 12 September 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

countryside and the South's more cosmopolitan cities, and severed their commercial links such that the state resorted to importing rice to feed Saigon for much of the 1960s. They also played into the hands of the Communists, whose disciplined rural political network allowed them to exert disproportionate power across the countryside at a time when their political rivals were factionalized and contained to isolated regions. Despite being regarded by most American analysts as commanding no more than a plurality of public support in the South, the Communists enjoyed a considerable advantage as the country's only political institution with a nationwide presence, save the South Vietnamese military itself.

Suffice it to say, even as he consolidated his authority over the South Vietnamese military state, President Thiệu still found himself facing a litany of domestic challenges. Worse still, the shock of the Tet Offensive – a clear military defeat for the Communists – had shaken the American public's confidence in the war, with the scale of the attacks casting doubt on years of White House promises that victory was near. The scope and duration of Washington's commitment was called into question throughout the 1968 United States presidential election campaign, which South Vietnamese political observers followed intently. Indeed, should peace candidate Robert Kennedy so much as win the Democratic Party Primary, South Vietnamese Intelligence Director Linh Quang Viên warned, it would "weaken the will to fight of the anti-Communist people of Vietnam…[and] demoralize our soldiers before the battle is even over."[17] True, the Communists' failure during Tet left the South Vietnamese state in a stronger position than it had been since the days of Ngô Đình Diệm's regime. But even with the NLF on the back foot, South Vietnam remained, to borrow a phrase, an "archipelago state" whose sovereignty was contested across a bewilderingly complex political terrain.[18] Dominant in cities, scattered military outposts, and a patchwork spread of provincial towns, the government was elsewhere reliant on patronage-brokered alliances of convenience with locally preeminent religious, ethnic, and political groups, united only by their shared aversion to Communist rule. Thiệu's challenge then was to unite these quarrelsome factions, and rally them behind a constructive political programme capable of surmounting the chronic divisions that rendered anti-Communist Vietnam far weaker than the sum of its many parts. And from there, to extend the fledgling Second

[17] Linh Quang Vien, "Thuong nghi Si Robert Kennedy Quyet dinh Tranh chuc ung cu vien," n.d., Hồ Sơ (HS) 1600, Phủ Tổng thống Đệ nhị Cộng hòa (hereafter PTTDIICH), Vietnam National Archives Center II (hereafter VNAC2), Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.
[18] Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: Un État né de la guerre 1945-1954* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011): 63.

Republic's pluralistic constitutional vision into the countryside, building the mass political support necessary to breathe life into its legal structures and to counter the Communists' superior organization, legitimacy, and nationalist appeal.

THE PROMISE OF POST-TET REFORM

Given the depth and complexity of the South's internal divisions, the heartfelt outpouring of anti-Communist solidarity after the Tet Offensive was all the more striking. The weeks that followed witnessed a flurry of political organization and engagement. South Vietnamese military recruiters noted a brief but unprecedented wave of volunteer enlistment, particularly among previously indifferent Saigon youths. And political luminaries of all stripes came together to decry the violence. On February 9, for instance, 93 intellectuals and cultural figures - including prominent critics of the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu government - published a statement condemning "the treachery and inhuman action of the Viet Cong, who have dissipated all hope of peace in the people."[19] Among anti-Communist leaders, the Tet attacks inspired a renewed sense of purpose, and reinforced the urgency of political reform to sustain anti-Communist co-operation and momentum. As Phan Quang Đán, a prominent opposition figure admired for his bravery enduring torture by the Ngô Đình Diệm regime, exhorted, the aftermath of Tet offered a "tremendous opportunity to turn a temporary military success into a decisive political victory if it is seized upon by the South Vietnamese government to move forward fast, reorganize the ARVN and the administration, wipe out corruption, carry out sweeping land reforms, mobilize active popular participation and achieve national unity."[20]

To that end, representatives from the South's rival factions took it upon themselves to explore new multiparty coalitions, conscious that in its divided state anti-Communist Vietnam was no match for the Communists' rural political machine. Nearly a dozen such efforts burst onto the scene in the spring of 1968, many seeking sanction if not patronage from the military government in exchange for grandiose pledges to rally and unite the southern masses. Among the most prominent was the National Social Democratic Front (NSDF), a loosely organized network that brought together delegates from two northern Catholic parties; the Central Vietnamese Đại

[19] "Intellectuels Vietnamiens Condamnent le Viet Cong," *Vietnam Presse*, 9 February 1968.
[20] "Dr Phan Quang Dan Assesses the Post-Tet Situation," Airgram A-473 from Saigon to Department of State, 21 March 1968, Government of South Vietnam - Phan Quang Dan -73 (1), National Security Advisor: NSC Vietnam Information Group: Intelligence and Other Reports, 1967-1975, Gerald Ford Presidential Library.

Việt faction; one of two rival Hòa Hảo political parties; one of six VNQDD splinter groups; and the newly established "Free Democratic Force," itself a coalition simultaneously negotiating to form a rival bloc, the aptly named "Coalition" [Liên Minh] - an equally intricate confederation connecting the largest trade union with three smaller sub-coalitions. Merely to list these overlapping associations and their ever-changing constituent parts was to demonstrate the scale of the challenge anti-Communist leaders faced in their bid to forge coherent political institutions. Still, however unwieldy in their execution, these attempts to build working relationships between once-irreconcilable factions were a notable first step in harnessing post-Tet resolve toward constructive ends. Initially, President Thiệu appeared to embrace the coalitions. During a June 1968 speech he lamented that the "weakness of the nationalist parties has allowed Communist political organizers free reign in the countryside;" urged the country's "diverse political and religious groups [to] come together in a genuine attempt to seek unity;" and pledged to "encourage the development of a major party system which guarantees the right to opposition."[21]

For other aspiring statesmen, however, the most promising approach to fulfilling this post-Tet urgency was not byzantine coalitions but new mass political parties altogether. By far the most successful was the Progressive Nationalist Movement (PNM), led by law professor Nguyễn Văn Bông and diplomat Nguyễn Ngọc Huy, the latter a member of the South Vietnamese delegation to the ongoing negotiations between the United States and North Vietnam in Paris. No party or political organisation better embodied the liberal constitutional order promised by the Second Republic than the Progressive Nationalists. Founded in 1969, the PNM was South Vietnam's most outspoken champion of the 1967 political reforms. It took pains to portray itself as the government's "loyal opposition," pledging to support the President on foreign policy and security while offering constructive domestic policy suggestions in the spirit of overall co-operation. Almost uniquely in anti-Communist politics, it strove to promote a set of political ideals rather than to represent ethnic, regional, religious, or personal interests. For party elders, the PNM was not primarily a means of wielding power but rather, a vehicle for introducing the broader constitutional system to rural constituents, and for persuading a wavering American public that South Vietnam still merited prolonged support. Though its hierarchy was largely composed of professionals – lawyers, doctors, teachers, journalists, and civil servants – in Saigon and prosperous Mekong Delta towns, the party was committed to building a mass rural

[21] Telegram 31332, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 29 June 1968, POL 12 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

base. Taking advantage of improving security conditions after the Tet attacks, it staged formal inaugurations and membership drives across the countryside, including even remote outposts like Kontum in the central highlands. It also published "Progressive" [Cấp tiến], among the South's more reputable daily newspapers, and party co-founder Nguyễn Văn Bông even penned an annotated guide to the new constitution, aimed at persuading general readers to embrace the promise of the Second Republic.[22]

To be sure, these efforts were preliminary, and belated. As Nguyễn Ngọc Giáo, an influential PNM-affiliated physician in Long An province conceded, "it takes years to train a doctor and just as long to train a politician. The Communists have been training themselves for a long time, and we have only just begun."[23] Still, these overlooked examples of organisation and resolve after Tet delivered tangible if ultimately temporary results. Perhaps the most significant – and unexpected – political development was the abrupt shift in the Ấn Quang Buddhists' approach to the military state. Ấn Quang's protest campaigns had twice brought the Saigon government to its knees, in 1963 and 1966, with the latter helping compel the military to concede on civilian demands for elections and a new constitution the following year.[24] But after Tet, as the intensity of the Communist attacks grew clear, the group's lay hierarchy reconsidered its position relative to South Vietnam's military authorities. The Communist massacre in the city of Huế, in Ấn Quang's central Vietnamese heartlands, had a galvanizing effect, disabusing Ấn Quang leaders of the notion that their religious autonomy would be respected under communist rule.[25] While there was no love lost between Ấn Quang and the Saigon generals, whom they regarded as venal, heavy-handed, and incompetent, the Buddhist group increasingly favored its prospects under Saigon's weak and uneven dominion, rather than risking the Communists' far more capable authoritarianism. Accordingly, Ấn Quang surprised political observers by fielding a successful slate of candidates in the 1970 elections for the Senate, an institution it had boycotted in protest three years earlier.[26] This was a tactical calculation rather than an endorsement of the constitution's integrity or the state's legitimacy. But it nonetheless reflected

[22] Nguyễn Văn Bông, *Luật Hiện pháp và Chính trị Học*. 3rd ed. (Saigon: S.i., 1971).
[23] "Political Prospects in the Provinces: The Case of Long An," Airgram A-1139 from Saigon to Department of State, 26 December 1968, POL 18 VIET S 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[24] See Chapter ___ Volume ____of Cambridge History of the Vietnam War (Simon Toner chapter).
[25]Nha Ca. *Mourning Headband for Hue: An Account of the Battle for Hue, Vietnam 1968*. Translated with an Introduction by Olga Dror (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).
[26] Tai Van Ta, "Democracy in Action: The 1970 Senatorial Elections in the Republic of Vietnam," *US Vietnam Research Center*, 20 May 2020, https://usvietnam.uoregon.edu/en/democracy-in-action-with-american-influence-the-1970-senatorial-elections-in-the-republic-of-southvietnam-and-the-opinions-and-behavior-of-voters-part-i/

the promise of the South's brief experiment with constitutional pluralism, as a means of reconciling bitter adversaries behind a working political consensus. Indeed, as we shall see, even as more moderate groups again took to the streets to protest the military's excesses, Ấn Quang uncharacteristically opted for restraint - an overlooked but important factor, given its numerical strength, in prolonging the state's survival to 1975.

In comparison with the tumultuous years after President Ngô Đình Diệm's assassination, when religious partisans clashed on the streets, disaffected generals plotted coups, and regional movements sought to escape Saigon's authority altogether, the change in political atmosphere following the Tet attacks was dramatic. Yet mutual efforts to co-operate were merely the first step, and even then, the process was rarely smooth sailing. Managing functional multiparty coalitions proved more challenging than proclaiming them in the first place. And negotiating a program of political and economic reforms revealed that divisions among South Vietnam's legislators were nearly as intense as the aversion to Communist rule that united them.

Among the more pressing initial challenges was the need to articulate a position on the ongoing United States-North Vietnamese peace talks that would satisfy both overseas and domestic audiences. Though represented at pro forma official negotiations in Paris, Saigon was aware of – but pointedly excluded from – secret bilateral deliberations between Henry Kissinger and Hanoi's Lê Đức Thọ, where more substantive discussions were taking place.[27] With "Vietnamization" – the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam – set to commence in 1969, a growing sense that the United States could no longer be relied upon was heightened by South Vietnam's deliberate isolation in Paris. For liberal proponents of the new constitutional order such as the Progressive Nationalist Movement, the state could only survive by rehabilitating its dire international image with a pro-active peace platform, intended to win over war-weary global observers. South Vietnamese foreign ministry personnel also reasoned that a more constructive public stance toward a settlement with Hanoi was required to secure alternative alliances outside Washington.[28] The ministry sponsored worldwide tours for elected representatives from the new National Assembly, hoping to persuade prospective allies and a skeptical overseas public that democracy in South Vietnam was sufficiently established to merit further support. And it encouraged the establishment of the "Vietnam Council on Foreign Relations," a state public

[27] Nguyễn Phú Đức, *The Viet Nam Peace Negotiations: Saigon's Side of the Story* (White Lotus Press, Christiansburg, 2005).
[28] Nguyễn Phú Đức, "Đề nghị để vãn hôi hòa bình tại Việt Nam," July 31, 1972, HS1922, PTTDIICH, VNAC2.

relations office tasked with rebranding Saigon's image abroad. Back in the legislature, however, these largely symbolic peace gestures set alarm bells ringing within the vehemently anti-Communist northern Catholic-dominated political bloc. Though intended to placate overseas public opinion rather than as sincere attempts to compromise, the government's peace overtures were a bridge too far for Saigon's political hardliners. They asserted their displeasure by creating chaos in the Senate, using their newly established legislative prerogatives to dismiss a succession of presidentially appointed foreign ministers. The Senate's campaign against the foreign ministry reinforced militant anti-Communism as a force to be reckoned with. But it also undermined the government's diplomatic position and undercut the authority of President Thiệu, who quietly began considering ways to circumvent the Assembly altogether.[29]

Similar dynamics complicated the implementation of sorely needed tax reforms. By the end of the 1960s, the state faced severe fiscal constraints. American troop withdrawals were arguably a political necessity, as much in Vietnam as in the United States given rising anti-American sentiment even among fervent Vietnamese anti-Communists. But the G.I.s' departure left the government to bear an increasing share of its own defense burden, accelerating inflation while also contracting one of the South's primary sources of economic activity: the provision of services to American soldiers. Compounding the problem was the state's thin rural administrative presence, resulting in negligible tax collection rates and a reliance on import duties and foreign aid. In the fiscal year 1970, for instance, the state faced a budgetary shortfall of nearly 70% absent American assistance, with spending requirements estimated to increase by 20% even as tax revenues fell 30% short of expectations.[30]

As in the foreign ministry, a cohort of young, mostly American-educated Vietnamese technocrats grappled with the challenge. Hoping to contain inflation, reduce black market currency speculation, and mitigate chronic budget deficits, they proposed a sweeping austerity program of higher exchange rates and tax increases on imported goods, regarded as a critical test of the government's authority by both the United States Congress and President Thiệu himself. Responsibility for the budget was shared with the National Assembly, however. And the newly elected legislators were determined to exact a price for their support. Many sought to leverage the importance of the tax amendments to press President Thiệu into giving way on other social

[29] Sean Fear, "Saigon Goes Global: South Vietnam's Quest for International Legitimacy in the Age of Détente," *Diplomatic History* (2017).
[30] Tổng nha Ngân sách và Ngoại viện, "Ngân sách Quốc gia Tài khóa 1970," n.d., HS80, PTTDIICH, VNAC2.

and economic reforms. Others were less scrupulous, parlaying their approval into kickbacks and personal favors from the state. As former Minister of the Economy Phạm Kim Ngọc recalls, "one elected representative demand[ed] a lower tax rate on imported scooters – and then publicly criticiz[ed] me, after I agreed, for 'doing a favor' for the scooter company. This was the moment when I lost my innocence in the world of Saigon politics."[31] Negotiations in the legislature dragged on for weeks in the autumn of 1969, with little sign of leadership or direction from the President. Privately, even Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's closest supporters were alarmed by his political aloofness, worried that he was becoming, as one confidant put it, "a prisoner of the Palace… institutionalizing his natural shyness into official austerity."[32]

Then, with little warning, Thiệu took action, bypassing the Assembly altogether and unilaterally imposing dramatic tax increases by executive decree. The next morning, shoppers awoke to discover that the cost of staple items had increased by up to 25%, with rural markets hit hardest. Gasoline prices doubled within a week. And rice sold on average at 18% higher than it had the previous month.[33] Worse still for the government, there had been little effort to prepare for the inevitable backlash much less organise a coherent communications response. The state's official news agency complained that even a week after the price hikes, it had yet to receive guidance on presenting the President's decision to the public. Legislators hastened to distance themselves, with the Lower House unanimously calling on Thiệu to suspend the decree pending a Supreme Court review of its constitutionality. In response, the government attempted to parry the blame, charging the Assembly with recalcitrance. "The National Assembly was probably right when it questioned the legality of the decree under which the government acted," Minister of Trade and Industry Nguyễn Đức Cường later conceded, "however, it was probably wrong when it contended the Assembly could have enacted such unpopular measures."[34] The consensus among legislators, however, was that the most frivolous and extravagant bargaining conditions came not from earnest reformers but from the President's own hand-picked and often handsomely bribed Assembly loyalists. The influential Budget, Taxation and Finance Senate

[31] Pham Kim Ngoc, "Reform or Collapse: Economic Challenges during Vietnamization," in *The Republic of Vietnam 1955-1975: Vietnamese Perspectives on Nation-Building* Tuong Vu and Sean Fear eds. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Press, 2020): 69.
[32] Telegram 000746, State Department to Embassy Saigon, 2 January 1970, POL 15-1 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[33] Telegram 22414, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 8 November 1969, E 8-1 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[34] Nguyen Duc Cuong, "Coping with Changes and War, Building Foundation for Growth," in *Voices from the Second Republic of South Vietnam (1967–1975)* K.W. Taylor ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Press, 2015): 110.

Committee Chair Lê Phát Đạt insisted that had Thiệu been willing to negotiate directly, a compromise could have been reached "in a weekend." Instead, Đạt lamented, the executive's "refusal to share responsibility with the legislature… makes the Assembly appear meaningless to the people."[35] In the end, the President had prevailed. But his decree struck many constituents as arbitrary, and its haste prompted chaos and resentment, at significant cost to the broader legitimacy of the constitutional system.

Deteriorating relations between the legislature and the executive branch had a cascading effect. Senator Nguyễn Văn Chức, a passionately anti-Communist northern Catholic, warned journalists that "Thiệu has become more and more dictatorial and ignorant in his treatment of the Assembly, and has weakened the legal basis of the government by ignoring constitutional requirements." Given that Nguyễn Văn Chức served as Chair of the powerful Senate Agriculture Committee, and with rural land reform next on the government's agenda, his constitutional scruples could not be cast aside lightly by the President.[36] To an even greater extent than the tax amendments, the "Land to the Tiller" program - the government's bold nationwide land reform campaign – served as a yardstick of its legitimacy, both at home and abroad. Intended to coax war-weary rural constituents back to the fold, it also beguiled South Vietnam's supporters in the United States, who, then and since, saw land reform as a panacea for the state's corruption, uneven administrative performance, and thin base of support in much of the countryside. More than any other endeavor, the Land to the Tiller campaign demonstrates both the depth and the limitations of the Second Republic's reform ambitions. It was also first and foremost a Vietnamese initiative. While popular with American members of Congress, Saigon's land reform proposals were met with skepticism by American analysts in Vietnam, who feared the fiscal and administrative burden would overwhelm the state's stretched bureaucracy. Vietnamese officials led by Minister of Agriculture Cao Văn Thân were the driving force in designing and implementing the program, belying the notion that South Vietnam was merely an American puppet creation. On paper, Land to the Tiller proposed a radical reordering of the rural economy,

[35] Telegram 21633, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 28 October 1969, POL 15-2 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[36] Nguyễn Văn Chức. *Việt Nam chính sử hay là những sai lầm và gian trá trong "Việt Nam máu lửa quê hương tôi của Đỗ Mậu*, (Falls Church, VA: Alpha, 1992).

breaking up landed estates and redistributing the fields to their former tenants, in turn creating a class of smallholding farmers theoretically beholden to the regime.[37]

A program of this scale required legislative consensus, however, and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's relationship with the Assembly was deteriorating. Recognizing that American congressional aid was increasingly contingent on the progress of the Saigon government's reforms, the Assembly's constitutionalists dug in their heels, hoping to extract promises that the President would respect legislative authority in exchange for Land to the Tiller's timely passage. Nguyễn Văn Chức in particular stepped to the fore as the Senate's Agricultural Committee Chair, making clear that his price for endorsing land reform was Thiệu's compliance with the constitution. Matters were not helped when Thiệu then ordered the arrest of three sitting Lower House representatives, breeching their constitutional immunity from prosecution on the grounds that they had offered covert support to the Communists. Few legislators were convinced, suspecting that the arrests were politically motivated if not the product of Thiệu's personal vendettas against the accused. Deliberations on land reform ground to a halt for months as elected representatives instead used their Assembly pulpit to excoriate the President.[38] Finally, the legislature relented, and Land to the Tiller was belatedly ratified in March 1970 - albeit over a year after initially intended and with little to show for the delay.

While clearly a constructive offering to rural constituents, Land to the Tiller's political and economic impact fell short of its proponents' exuberant aspirations. Indeed, perhaps its most perceptive feature was its restraint. Acknowledging that the Communists had long since implemented their own experiments with land reform in the South, the Saigon government quietly enshrined its adversary's earlier redistribution efforts, appending legal titles in de facto acknowledgment of prior Communist land allocations. This approach wisely defused the animosity certain to ensue should the state dispossess beneficiaries of Communist redistribution from land they had long regarded as their own. But it meant that Land to the Tiller's effect was titular rather than transformative in former Communist-held areas, merely reinforcing farmers' claims to land the enemy had already bestowed them. And it was not without controversy. Upholding the status quo in contested areas was a bitter pill for the government's most ardent rural supporters, who, having endured years of violent civil war, now felt that authorities in the

[37] Cao Van Than, "Land Reform and Agricultural Development, 1968-1975," The Republic of Vietnam 1955-1975: Vietnamese Perspectives on Nation-Building Tuong Vu and Sean Fear eds. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Press, 2020).
[38] Nguyễn Bá Cẩn, *Đất Nước Tôi: Hồi Ký Chánh Trị* [My Country: Political Memoir], (S.i.: Hoa Hao Press, 2003): 187-191.

capital were rewarding families who had backed the other side. Military veterans, often compelled away from their land by the government's own conscription regime, were particularly disaffected, fuelling a growing veterans' protest movement in South Vietnam's largest cities. Beyond these conceptual complications, implementation of the program was slow and often marred by corruption. Government communications were inconsistent and as a result, some farmers continued paying rent to landlords for land they themselves now legally owned. Others complained of land allocations in remote or Communist-held areas, where the South Vietnamese military had neither the aptitude nor desire to enforce ownership claims. For ethnic minority groups, particularly in the central highlands, the program was a pretext for Vietnamese settlement on their traditional lands. And farmers on the less arable central coast objected to valuations based on the more fertile Mekong Delta, disadvantaging them relative to their southern peers.[39] Finally, in addition to land redistribution, the program also introduced new pest- and weather-resistant strains of rice, theoretically capable of boosting crop yields. These necessitated greater quantities of imported fertilizer, however, and skeptics questioned whether increasing farmers' exposure to currency fluctuations and precarious supply chains was prudent during a brutal ongoing war. Sure enough, as the 1973 Oil Crisis sent fertilizer prices soaring, farmers found themselves at the mercy of their creditors, while unscrupulous officials hoarded fertilizer to sell on the black market or pocketed funds intended to subsidize rural loans.[40]

Despite these shortcomings, the Land to the Tiller campaign was a noble effort, testament to the Second Republic's ambition and early promise. Many farmers benefitted, particularly where the program did not overlap with the Communists' earlier interventions. But its political effects were limited, and the economic impact fell short of proponents' often fanciful expectations. If anything, the greatest beneficiaries were absentee landlords, the recipients of American-backed windfall compensation payments for the expropriation of rural holdings they had little hope of reclaiming.

[39] David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003): 1235-1244.
[40] Douglas Dacy, *Foreign Aid, War, and Economic Development South Vietnam, 1955–1975* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 77.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

As we have seen then, by the end of 1968 the cooperation and purpose that characterized the post-Tet period were already beginning to waver. Paradoxically, anti-Communist Vietnam was at its most coherent when facing an imminent Communist threat. And as the violence receded, with Hanoi laying low to wait out unilateral American troop withdrawals, the centrifugal forces that had long conditioned politics in the South returned to the fore. In the Mekong Delta, ethnic Khmer leaders undertook a campaign of protests, demanding the right to appoint the military Province Chiefs who governed their region and rejecting Thiệu's unpopular pick to lead the state's Directorate of Cambodian Affairs.[41] Meanwhile, in urban centres a coalition of students, military veterans, dissident trade unions, and religious splinter groups resumed demonstrations against the government. Though Communist agents succeeded to some extent in infiltrating the urban protest movement, most demonstrators were motivated not by subversion but broad dissatisfaction with corruption, inflation, the state's growing authoritarianism, and disaffection with the ongoing war.[42]

Activist groups like these attracted overseas media attention, exacerbating foreign ministry efforts to persuade American patrons that Saigon's commitment to democracy merited further support. But in the Vietnamese political context they were a small if vocal minority. More serious for the government's bid to achieve broad legitimacy was the growing rift between President Thiệu and more moderate elements of anti-Communist civil society, including elected legislators, journalists, civil servants, professionals, and other constituents from a largely urban middle class. Bickering between the Assembly and the President on land reform and tax policy generated resentment and long delays, in turn fuelling concerns that Thiệu was isolated, authoritarian, and aloof. Corruption in particular was a source of mounting alarm. Given poor tax collection rates, persistent inflation, a large fixed-income civil service, and a torrent of American capital pouring into the country, corruption was endemic during the Second Republic. Citizens might be willing to make allowances for poorly paid minor officials, but were incensed at senior figures seen as profiting from the war; as one opposition politician fumed, South Vietnam was "a

[41] Telegram 623, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 14 January 1970, POL 23-1 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[42] Van Nguyen-Marshall, "Student Activism in Time of War: Youth in the Republic of Vietnam, 1960s–1970s," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Spring 2015)

system whereby a policeman goes to jail for receiving a 100 piastre bribe while a general is exiled to Hong Kong for stealing millions."[43]

Reducing corruption was therefore an urgent objective during the Second Republic, which even included constitutional provisions for an independent anti-corruption inspectorate. Initially, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's dismissal of his rivals' proteges could charitably be interpreted as a step in the right direction. But his appointment to Prime Minister of Trần Thiện Khiêm, a well-connected former general whose family controlled Saigon's ports, signalled to advocates of the constitution that Thiệu was interested merely in building an illicit patronage network of his own. Revelations of state complicity in narcotics trafficking or the siphoning of military pension funds began to appear in local and oversees headlines. And the anti-corruption inspectorate was soon dismissed as little more than a vehicle for silencing Thiệu's critics.[44] The situation steadily deteriorated, and by the mid-1970s, as former foreign minister Trần Văn Đỗ lamented, "Corruption was rampant …the postmen were so corrupt they would steal stamps off the envelopes and resell them. The tax collectors were so corrupt you had to bribe them to accept your tax payments… even a license plate for a vehicle was unobtainable without a bribe."[45]

Thiệu's personal excesses in this regard might have been forgiven were he seen as responsive to constituents' concerns, and willing and able to rally anti-Communist Vietnam behind a constructive vision. But representatives from the newly formed post-Tet political coalitions soon complained of insufficient presidential direction much less enthusiasm, and these once-promising alliances quickly lapsed or disintegrated altogether. In fact, as one of Thiệu's closest advisors later admitted, American funds to promote the National Social Democratic Front and other multi-party networks had instead been plundered for government officials' personal use.[46] Rather than mend fences with Assembly moderates following the bruising tax and land reform confrontations, the President continued lashing out, arresting the legislature's most outspoken critics on trumped up charges in defiance of their constitutionally mandated immunity. The incarceration of Lower House representative Ngô Công Đức in May 1971 went

[43] Telegram 4512, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 31 August 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[44] Nguyễn Văn Tín, *Thiếu tướng Nguyễn Văn Hiếu, Một Viên Ngọc Quân sự Ẩn tàng* (S.i.: iUniverse, 2000).
[45] "Whitehouse to State – RVN Negotiations in Paris." 26 June 1973. National Security Files (NSF): Vietnam Central Files (VCF), box 164, folder 3, Richard Nixon Presidential Library (RNL).
[46] Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: An Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End Told by the CIA's Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam*. Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2007): 15.

too far even for reliably pro-government newspaper "Political Discussion" [Chính luận], which denounced his detention as "a black scar on our so-called legally based democracy."[47]

Quietly, Thiệu was already plotting to subvert the Assembly, opting for short-term expediency ahead of popular legitimacy and consensus. During the 1970 mid-term elections, most observers focused on the race for Senate where, by all accounts, the contest proceeded relatively free of government interference.[48] Arguably, the Senate elections represented the high-water mark for electoral integrity in Vietnam, then and since. But Thiệu and his advisors had noted that though the Senate enjoyed more prestige, it was the weaker of the two chambers in practice as its resolutions could be overturned with a two-thirds majority in the Lower House. With attention focused on the Senate, Thiệu made his move, seizing de facto control of the Lower House through a torrent of bribery and behind-the-scenes manipulation of its leadership elections. Well-regarded and generally pro-government independent Nguyễn Bá Cẩn was ousted as Lower House Chairman, replaced by Nguyễn Bá Lương, whom the U.S. Embassy described as "totally subservient to the wishes of the executive." Amidst further allegations of bribery published in the Progressive Nationalist Movement's newspaper "Progressive," Thiệu's preferred nominees in the Supreme Court also prevailed, paving his way to re-write the rules of the upcoming 1971 presidential election as he saw fit.[49] Liberal constitutionalists began to despair. In 1971, Nguyễn Văn Bông, the man who as co-founder of the Progressive Nationalist Movement was perhaps most closely associated with the aspirations of the Second Republic, updated his annotated guide to the constitution. His new preface struck an ominous tone: "The essence of the constitution has not been fostered," he warned, "and going further, democratic spirit has not become ingrained in the consciousness of our ruling class. The people's voice is critical in the struggle for a democratic environment, but our actions and thoughts have not yet transcended the childish maladies of colonial times."[50]

It was hardly a surprise then when Thiệu, brandishing control of the Lower House and the Supreme Court, imposed legislation tailor-made to deliver his re-election. Unlike the chaotic if relatively unrestricted 1967 contest, the opposition was now deemed eligible only after securing

[47] "Thêm một vết đen" *Chính Luận*, 4 June 1971.
[48] Tai Van Ta, "Democracy in Action."
[49] "Supreme Court Election of Officers," Airgram A-321 from Saigon to Department of State, 27 November 1970, POL 15-3 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; "Comment on Executive Attempts to Control the Legislature," Airgram A-308 from Saigon to Department of State, 12 November 1970, POL 14 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[50] Nguyễn Văn Bông, *Luật Hiện pháp và Chính trị Học*. 3rd ed. (S.i.: Saigon, 1971).

at least 40 or 100 endorsements respectively from Assembly representatives or province-level councillors. As Thiệu had personally appointed or purchased the loyalty of most potential signatories, the law was seen as tantamount to a presidential veto against his prospective opponents. It was met with howls of outrage, such that the "Political Discussion" newspaper speculated whether constitutionally minded Senators might demonstrate in front of their own Assembly against the "childish and despicable" bill.[51] Merely winning re-election, however, was just the first step for Thiệu and his advisors. The 1971 contest was their opportunity to radically transform South Vietnamese politics, stream-lining decision-making under the authority of a powerful executive and neutralizing the opposition's ability to interfere. The early post-Tet attempts at multilateral consensus were discarded, to be replaced by a covert network of loyalists operating from within the military bureaucracy. And the first test of their abilities and commitment was to administer for Thiệu a decisive victory. To that end, the President's team tasked rural henchmen with "mobilizing the election of the President and supporting Lower House candidates." Key to the operation were Thiệu's "submerged" partisans, encouraged to "corner and paralyse the opposition blocs by exploiting blemishes … [such as] undesirable behaviour that can be used to threaten potential recruits with prosecution." Opposition supporters were to be harassed, threatened, or even forcibly relocated away from their villages as a means of "forcing them to follow us, or at least preventing them from daring to work for the opposition." Teachers, civil servants, soldiers, and police were to be targeted, with the latter considered especially effective at "submerged activities, in particular, cornering and paralysing the opposition."[52]

But copies of Thiệu's vote-rigging instructions inevitably leaked, prompting one Province Chief to bemoan that the President had "put in writing what should have been done orally."[53] Rather than dignify a contest whose outcome was clearly pre-arranged, the two opposition candidates, Dương Văn Minh and Thiệu's long-time nemesis Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, both dropped out in protest. Thiệu was undeterred, rebranding the one-man election as a referendum on his fitness to rule. The United States Embassy howled with disapproval. Political moderates joined students and veterans on the streets to express their outrage. And some of Saigon's most

[51] "Nghị Viện sẽ biểu tình phản đối DB nếu HV làm việc 'trẻ con, hèn hạ.' *Chinh Luận*, 23 December 1970.
[52] "Tài Liệu Hướng Dẫn Các Độ, Tỉnh, Thị-Trường trong Việc Thiếp Lập Kế Hoạch Vận-Động Tranh Cử Tổng Thống và Yệm Trợ Ứng cử viên Dân biểu 1971." HS5652, PTTDIICH, VNAC2.
[53] "Bunker to State – Minh's Documentary Evidence of Election Rigging." 20 September 1971. NSF: VCF, box 157, folder 3, RNL.

committed American allies withdrew their support in disgust, including arch anti-Communist Senator Henry Jackson. In a sign of things to come, the United States Senate pointedly shot down a proposed $565 million supplemental aid bill for South Vietnam, just days after the uncontested re-election. Thiệu's ambassadors in Washington had warned for years that congressional support was conditional, and limited; now, the bill for his authoritarian turn was coming due.[54] Even the Progressive Nationalist Movement, Thiệu's scrupulously constitutional "loyal opposition," made it known to U.S. Embassy staff that they could no longer publicly endorse the government's position. Tragically, PNM leader Nguyễn Văn Bông did not survive long past the death of his cherished constitution; he was gunned down one month after the election by a Communist assassin - though tellingly, many at the time including Bông's own widow assumed the South Vietnamese military had been responsible.[55]

His re-election now inevitable, Thiệu hastened to consolidate power. Using the pretext of renewed Communist attacks in the spring of 1972, he deployed the Lower House to ram through sweeping emergency legislation, effectively proscribing independent political parties and chastening opposition newspapers with the threat of debilitating legal challenges. And all the while, he expanded his covert network of partisans within the state bureaucracy. Then, in late 1972, Thiệu's "submerged" political structure went public, formally inaugurated as the "Democracy Party" - though the descriptor was hardly apt. Critics condemned a compulsory membership scheme for government workers, and its structural similarities to the Vietnamese Communist Party were widely noted. Civil servants and soldiers who refused to participate faced dismissal if not prosecution on trumped-up charges; military conscription for civilian bureaucrats; or transfers to insecure communist-controlled areas. A wave of public officials resigned in protest including well-regarded military commander Nguyễn Bé, who excoriated the Democracy Party as "intended simply to perpetuate President Thiệu in power …[with] no greater national purpose and no independent ideology that will appeal to the Vietnamese people."[56]

Growing revulsion towards Thiêu's authoritarianism helps explain the markedly different response in urban South Vietnam to renewed communist violence in 1972. Unlike the 1968 Tet

[54] "South Vietnam Imperilled by Senate's Aid Refusal," Baltimore Sun, 31 October 1971; Nguyễn Hữu Chi, "Chủ trường của đảng Dân chủ về vấn đề Việt Nam." 2 February 1970, HS1747, PTTDIICH, VNAC2.
[55] Vũ Quang Hùng, "Tôi ám sát người sắp làm thủ tướng Sài Gòn," *Dân Việt*, 30 April 2011: http://danviet.vn/thoi-su/toi-am-sat-nguoi-sap-lam-thu-tuong-sai-gon/41332p1c24.htm
[56] "Democracy Party Development," Airgram A-236 from Saigon to Department of State, 19 December 1972, POL 12 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; "Colonel Nguyen Be Leaves the Vung Tau National Training Center," Airgram A-1 from Saigon to Department of State, 2 March 1973, POL 15 VIET S 1970-1973 CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

attacks, which, as we have seen, inspired a fleeting burst of co-operation and engagement with the state's new political institutions, North Vietnam's 1972 Offensive instead aggravated the South's internal divisions. Perhaps counterintuitively, political tensions mounted even as the South Vietnamese military performed well in isolated instances. At the town of An Lộc, situated on a strategic corridor connecting Saigon with northeastern Cambodia, ARVN forces unexpectedly held the line as overwhelming American firepower ground down the Communist advance on the capital.[57] But the government struggled to deploy An Lộc as a rallying cry, not least due to the poor quality of its public information. State censorship of ARVN setbacks such as the fall of Quảng Trị province "has become a subject of ridicule to Saigonese," the U.S. Embassy reported, and even staunch government supporters despaired as the state's credibility eroded. "No one believes government radio and TV anymore," lamented Thiệu-loyalist Phạm Anh, Chair of the Lower House Foreign Affairs Committee. "People [get] most of their news from Voice of America, BBC, and rumour."[58] Cynicism and distrust abounded, compounding Thiệu's efforts to again invoke the 1968 Tet Offensive to his advantage.

An instructive example was the city of Huế, site of the most egregious Communist violence during the 1968 Tet attacks. Hoping to leverage Huế's symbolic potency, government officials conspicuously brandished the city as an emblem of anti-Communist defiance. On April 25, General Hoàng Xuân Lãm, commander of ARVN's northern region, delivered a ninety-minute television address live from Huế where he proclaimed the "Division of Steel," an anti-Communist front of civilian volunteers to be organised and armed in the city's defense. Off camera however, the response in Huế was tepid. Nguyễn Quang Nghiêm, the Huế Chairman of the pro-government trade union, conceded that most front participants were not volunteers but union members ordered to take part. Prominent local Buddhists found themselves listed as front members without permission, then threatened by military officials lest they repudiate their unsolicited affiliation. And local Đại Việt and VNQDD activists signed up not in solidarity, but rather, seeking weapons to bolster their own partisan paramilitary cells. The front's nominal leader Lê Thanh Minh Châu, Rector at the University of Huế, endured heavy criticism from staff and students over his involvement. And no sooner had Châu joined than he was ordered by the

[57] Gregory A. Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017):189. See also Phan Nhật Nam, "An Lộc - miền Đông không bình yên" in *Mùa hè đỏ lửa* (Saigon: Sáng tạo Xuất bản, 1972) trans. John Schafer, "An Lộc: The Unquiet East,"*Crosscurrents*, 13, 2 (1999).
[58] "Increased Criticism of Thieu Administration's Leadership Following Fall of Quang Tri," Airgram A-92 from Saigon to Department of State, 15 May 1972, POL 15 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA

President's Office to secretly cease front activities, evidently prompted by Thiệu's growing fears that even a stage-managed municipal coalition with negligible independent membership posed a threat to executive authority. Less than three weeks after its grandiose televised inauguration, the Huế anti-Communist front was effectively moribund. But the worst was still to come. As in 1968, ARVN troops pouring into the city again unleashed a torrent of theft and violence, prompting civic leaders to implore the American Consulate to intercede. "Soldiers and hoodlums posing as such were literally getting away with murder, not to speak of robbery and lesser crimes," complained a delegation led by City Council Chairman Lê Huyền. A consular investigation later confirmed that during the past week alone "seven incidents involving uniformed individuals [had] resulted in deaths." Huế residents were also subject to widespread arbitrary detention in the notoriously brutal Côn Sơn island prison, largely, Lê Huyền alleged, as victims of "past political feuds or police avarice for payoffs." Indeed, of 1,226 Huế civilians held at Côn Sơn, a subsequent Embassy report conceded, only 207 cases had any grounds for conviction.[59]

Back in the capital, observers were no less distraught by the state's heavy-handed and uneven response. By now, Thiệu had few remaining civilian supporters who were not on his payroll. But what could the opposition do to enforce the capable application of executive power? Had the government's legitimacy corroded to such an extent that new leadership was needed to save the South? Or would moving against Thiệu usher even greater instability, perhaps triggering a fatal unravelling as had nearly transpired after the death of Ngô Đình Diệm? Debate in Saigon raged on whether the risks of challenging Thiệu outweighed the rewards. And the dilemma forged unlikely alliances. It was hardly surprising when, for example, Vũ Văn Mẫu, the leader of the Senate's mostly southern liberal opposition bloc, demanded Thiệu's resignation in a speech from the Senate floor. But what was unexpected were the growing number of fanatically anti-Communist northern Catholic representatives – Vũ Văn Mẫu's bitter rivals – who joined in calling for Thiệu to step aside. Long the military government's most reliable civilian supporters, the northern Catholic parties could endure autocratic rule if it meant results against the Communist side. But as the economy cratered even while inflation soared, corruption

[59] Telegram 6148, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 29 April 1972, POL 13 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; Telegram 6203, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 1 May 1972, POL 13 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; Telegram 6357, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 3 May 1972, POL 13 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA Telegram 12951, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 2 September 1972, POL 23-1 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

skyrocketed and the military faltered without waning American firepower and logistical support, Catholic hardliners increasingly doubted Thiệu's ability to deliver. By the mid-1970s they had joined students, veterans, and other dissidents on the streets in protest, though the demonstrations were inspired more by fury and frustration than any real hope of immediate change.[60] Conversely, however, some of the President's most persistent critics found conditions too volatile to countenance the risks that accompanied regime change. To the great frustration of many younger disciples, the Ấn Quang Buddhist hierarchy set aside its contempt for Thiệu and largely abstained from entering the fray. For Ấn Quang, the Saigon government's weakness was both a liability and an asset. Its leadership was certain that Thiệu's hollow authority spelled disaster for South Vietnam in the long run, yet it also facilitated relative autonomy for Ấn Quang in the present. Reasoning that its political interests were best served by refraining from political engagement altogether, Ấn Quang demurred both from denouncing the North Vietnamese invasion and demanding Thiệu's resignation. Instead, the group called only for an end to the violence, and assisted efforts to aid victims of indiscriminate Communist artillery salvos.[61] Ấn Quang's uncharacteristic restraint brought it into alignment with an unexpected match: the Senate's moderate "Lily" bloc, whose members recoiled from previous Buddhist-led radicalism and revered the constitutional system which Ấn Quang dismissed with cynical scorn. But with President Thiệu himself emerging as the constitution's most immediate threat, the Lily bloc likewise found its longstanding assumptions tested. As Lily Senator Nguyễn Tư Bản explained, "the present crisis creates a dilemma for independents who… see many shortcomings in Thiệu's leadership but realize that a change in Presidents at this time might harm the country."

Matters came to a head when the Senate moved to reign in abuses of the emergency powers that the President had proclaimed for himself following the Communist attacks. On the evening of September 23, 1972, Senators gathered at the legislature, determined to censure Thiệu's suppression of independent political parties and the press. Long since accustomed to harassment and intimidation, opposition representatives braced themselves for foul play. They were dismayed but not surprised when the power was mysteriously cut mid-way through the

[60] "Reactions in National Assembly to Senator Vu Van Mau's Proclamation," Airgram A-82 from Saigon to Department of State, 5 May 1972, POL 15-2 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; "Tuyên ngôn công bố ngày 18.6.1974 của 301 linh mục chống tham nhũng, bất công và tệ đoan xã hội" *Đứng Dậy*, 61 (September 1974), 50-54.
[61] "An Quang Unreconciled to Thieu; Struggle Prospects Remote," Airgram A-77 from Saigon to Department of State, 5 May 1972, POL 15 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; Van Nguyen-Marshall, "Appeasing the Spirits Along the 'Highway of Horror': Civic Life in Wartime Republic of Vietnam," *War & Society*, 37, 3 (2018): 11.

session. Undeterred, they resumed their deliberations by candlelight - whereupon a series of explosions suddenly rocked the chamber, and red and yellow clouds emanating from smoke grenades hurled by unidentified assailants forced the choking Senators to adjourn. They waited patiently for the smoke to clear, then appended a clause condemning "the shameful acts of those who resort to violence" to the resolution, which was approved hours later.[62] But their defiant stand against the President's childish theatrics was too little, and too late. Thiệu's control over the courts and Lower House allowed him to circumvent opposition Senators with ease, and his decrees on political parties effectively legislated the Senate's independent groups out of existence. Not even instinctively pro-government moderates like the Lily bloc were spared. An eyewitness account of the independent Senate's final session quoted a departing Senator, who remarked that:

> "the 'noble experiment' in constitutionalism launched in 1967 …was turning sour. He had been surprised in 1967, [the Senator] said, at the number of qualified people who 'engaged themselves' enthusiastically in the experiment by running for office that year. These were individuals who had earlier withdrawn from political participation in the late 1950s, when [Ngô Đình] Diệm's rule began to turn authoritarian. These 'good' people are retreating once again, the Senator commented, once more waiting for some watershed before engaging themselves."[63]

But the outmatched opposition's paralysis proved a double-edged sword. Thiệu's bid to monopolize power had prevailed, but he could never again summon anti-Communist civil society on his behalf. And with the prospect of a peace settlement looming, sacrificing popular legitimacy for the expediency of authoritarian rule left South Vietnam exposed on multiple fronts. By now American withdrawal was nearly complete, with just forty thousand U.S. military personnel on hand for the Communists' spring offensive. Political observers in Saigon looked anxiously towards Washington, anticipating a diplomatic breakthrough with Hanoi in time to secure Richard Nixon's re-election in November. Excluded from secret U.S.-North Vietnamese negotiations, the South was always vulnerable to unilateral American concessions. And sure enough, the United States blinked first, allowing North Vietnamese troops to retain their positions in South Vietnamese territory as a precursor for securing a peace deal. When, in

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[62] "Reactions in National Assembly to Senator Vu Van Mau's Proclamation," Airgram A-82; "Senate Releases Official Proclamation on Special Powers, Press Code", Airgram A-181 from Saigon to Department of State, 29 September 1972, POL 15-2 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

[63] "The Old Guard Leaves the Upper House," Airgram A-137 from Saigon to Department of State, 23 July 1973, POL 15-2 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

October 1972, Henry Kissinger arrived in Saigon to reveal the terms of the proposed agreement, Thiệu's inner circle was incensed. "I wanted to punch Kissinger in the mouth," Thiệu would later tell his aides.[64] But while the President and his entourage were taken aback by Washington's terms, they could hardly claim to have been surprised. Indeed, advisors like Hoàng Đức Nhã – at Thiệu's side during the confrontation with Kissinger - had warned for years that action on "corruption and social justice" was imperative for "improving the attitudes of the American people towards Vietnam."[65] After all, as Father Trần Hữu Thanh, the militantly anti-Communist leader of the dissident People's Anti-Corruption Movement, had warned, "Foreign aid to Vietnam is being withdrawn because the aid does not go to the people and does not truly help the nation, as it is completely siphoned off by corruption. No country wants its good will to enrich an oppressive minority, and no country is satisfied pouring money into a bottomless pit."[66] Thiệu stalled for time until after Nixon's re-election. North Vietnam feared a ruse, and withdrew from the negotiations. Nixon responded with a widely condemned American bombing campaign against Hanoi, meant to reassure Thiệu as much as punish the Communists. But he also threatened Saigon with devastating aid cuts lest Thiệu remain defiant. With little choice but to relent, South Vietnam begrudgingly submitted, to terms that scarcely differed from Kissinger's October offer. As one United States official recalled, "We bombed the North Vietnamese into accepting our concessions."[67]

The formal end of hostilities on January 27, 1973, did not significantly alter the pattern of events on the ground. The Communists and the South Vietnamese state paid little heed to the ceasefire, skirmishing against each other for control of the countryside. And overall American bombardment in the region remained consistent, with U.S. pilots redirected from Vietnam to targets in Laos and Cambodia instead. Only in June, when Congress passed the 1973 Case-Church Amendment asserting legislative control over military operations in Southeast Asia, was American engagement substantially curtailed.[68] More consequential were the sweeping Congressional cuts to military aid that followed – an explicit response to Thiệu's unopposed re-

[64] Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold L. Schecter, *The Palace File* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986): 88.
[65] Hoàng Đức Nhã. "Nhận xét về dư luận dân Mỹ," June 1968, HS1581, PTTDIICH, VNAC2.
[66] Trần Hữu Thanh, "Thư ngỏ của Linh mục Trần Hữu Thanh đặc trách liên lạc tạm thời Phong trào Nhân dân Chống Tham nhũng và Tệ đoan Xã hội phản đối chính quyền ngăn cản cuộc họp báo của các linh mục tại Tân Sa Châu," *Đứng Dậy*, 61 (September 1974): 69.
[67] Hung and Schecter, 146.
[68] Holly High, James Curran, and Gareth Robinson, "Electronic Records of the Air War over Southeast Asia: A Database Analysis," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 8, 4 (Fall 2013): 107-110.

election and moves against the legislature, judiciary, independent parties, and the press. Between fiscal years (FY) 1973 and 1974, United States military assistance to South Vietnam shrank from $3.3 billion to $941 million, a 72% reduction. Yet the scale of the cuts notwithstanding, American contributions to Saigon's war effort remained substantial; $941 million in military aid for FY1974 was still 42% more than what the United States had provided in FY1967. And if Congress was no longer willing to indulge a bloated and authoritarian military government in Saigon, it remained generous in allocating funds to causes it deemed more worthy. Non-military economic aid to South Vietnam was expanded by 23% during FY1974, including a ten-fold increase in support for internally displaced civilians. Moreover, cuts to military assistance beginning in 1973 had been preceded by equally dramatic spikes, with an overall increase of 112% from FY1970 spending levels.[69] In 1972 alone, the Nixon administration gifted some $2 billion worth of fuel, supplies, and military hardware, to compensate for looming Congressional spending cuts. Intended to coax Thiệu into accepting Nixon's peace terms, the splurge also helped him reinforce his command over the military by enabling lavish patronage distribution, tempering political fallout from the American settlement with North Vietnam. But in military terms, it was not American firepower but Vietnamese leadership that was needed. After the 1963 assassination of Ngô Đình Diệm, the United States increasingly commandeered South Vietnam's military decision-making authority. In turn, ARVN had come to function more as a political institution than an independent fighting force. Officers were often promoted for political loyalty over battlefield performance, while unglamorous but essential responsibilities like logistics and equipment maintenance had been largely left to the United States. As a result, despite now boasting the world's fourth largest army and air force, and fifth largest navy, thin leadership, poor morale, rampant desertion, and insufficient technical expertise meant that relative to the Communists, South Vietnam remained, according to one Pentagon official, "an expansion team going against the league champs."[70]

Doubling down on expensive hardware helped Thiệu placate potential challengers. But the timing of this approach in military terms could hardly have been less opportune. The nominal January peace settlement cleared the path for complete American withdrawal. And accordingly,

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[69] Dacy, *Foreign Aid, War, and Economic Development South Vietnam, 1975*, 200; Edward Block, "Dr. Dan, Successor to Thieu?" *The New York Times*, 8 November 1974.

[70] James Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost its War* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2008):173-175; "Point Paper," Section III, 13 May 1972, Department of Defense Papers Historical Project Files (C Series), Box C40, Melvin Laird Papers, Gerald Ford Presidential Library.

the dynamics of the conflict shifted yet again. Having confronted ARVN and the United States head-on with tanks, fighter jets and artillery during the 1972 Offensive, the Communists reverted seamlessly to low-level skirmishes in the southern countryside, prioritizing political organization over battlefield supremacy. Their tactical adjustment came as millions of rural constituents took the peace deal as cue to return to their villages, abandoning the squalid slums and refugee camps that ringed South Vietnam's provincial towns and cities. As the war had intensified beginning in 1965, Communist violence and especially, American and South Vietnamese bombardment and defoliation, resulted in a torrent of civilian displacement. The United States Senate estimated that over 11.6 million South Vietnamese citizens– more than half of the country's population - had at one point been forced to flee their homes.[71] Washington and Saigon endeavored to frame the hollowing of the countryside to their advantage. Unable to reliably gauge rural public opinion, they asserted the state's legitimacy instead on the basis that a majority now resided in areas it controlled.[72] After all, South Vietnamese government territory was, whatever else, perhaps the one place rural residents could expect to be spared from American air strikes.

With rural depopulation provisionally expanding the proportion of civilians subject to his control, Thiệu cultivated an image of himself as champion and protector of the countryside's beleaguered masses. Like Ngô Đình Diệm before him, he imagined rural Vietnam as the source of the country's authentic essence, a canvas upon which he could project his vision for a harmonious order which, under his tutelage, would uplift its grateful and devoted constituents. Rhetorically, Thiệu valorized the bucolic virtues of the countryside, whose inhabitants he cast as humble but earnest, noble and forthright, and uncorrupted by the squabbles and schemes of avaricious city politicians. And as his standing in urban civil society began to wane, he lashed out against decadent elites "who speak French and English very well… drink four glasses of whiskey a day, and eat only Western dishes." Conversely, he flaunted his own rustic origins. During a 1969 address to hamlet and village officials, for instance, Thiệu praised rural administrators for their "self-reliance," and reminded his audience that his own relatives "are still

[71] Humanitarian Problems in South Vietnam and Cambodia, 2223114004. *Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive*. 27 January 1975, Box 31, Folder 14, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Refugees and Civilian Casualties, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2223114004, accessed 17 January 2020.
[72] See for instance Samuel Huntington, "The Bases of Accommodation," *Foreign Affairs* 46,4 (July 1968).

living in the countryside, and, barefoot and clad in black tunics [áo bà ba], they work in the field like other farmers instead of being brought into the Palace and given important posts."[73]

Had Thiệu succeeded in assembling a mass rural organization, he might well have withstood the Communist challenge and the dissolution of his urban support base. But his assumptions about the countryside were romantic, if not grandiose, and he overestimated his influence and appeal with rural citizens. An aspiring authoritarian populist, he lacked moral authority, and was unpopular. As we have seen, the political impact of the state's much-trumpeted land reforms was tepid. By the mid-1970s, soaring fertilizer prices further immiserated the rural South. And with farmers returning to their fields after the 1973 peace settlement, the presumption that their previous spell under Saigon's jurisdiction would yield lasting loyalty to the state largely proved illusory. Thiệu's nostalgic pastoralism was paternalistic, and misjudged. But on this score, he was hardly alone. Indeed, perhaps the fatal flaw of urban Vietnamese republicanism, dating back to the colonial era, was an unwillingness to respectfully engage with rural constituents' concerns. Reminiscing after the war, for instance, two former ARVN commanders recalled a rural society that was "in general non-combative and adverse to disturbances and changes …[which] readily submitted to the authority and guidance provided by the urban class" – an astonishing conclusion to draw following the triumph of one of the century's most successful mass rural political movements.[74]

The Vietnamese Communists, on the other hand, were - whatever else - tenacious and ruthlessly effective rural organisers. With attention focused elsewhere during the 1972 Offensive, they quietly accelerated the revival of their grassroots political structures, particularly in the densely populated Mekong Delta. Following the peace settlement, they stepped up infiltration of the South and competed for control of the rice harvest. Before long, villages assumed to be safely under Saigon's control were revealed to have sustained covert Communist networks all along. One official spoke of his chilling experience waking one morning to witness the houses in every hamlet in his officially "secure" district now suddenly displaying a Communist flag.[75] Equipped for mechanized high-tech warfare, South Vietnamese forces often

[73] "President Thieu's Address to Local Officials in Vung Tau," Airgram A-234 from Saigon to Department of State, 26 April 1969, POL 15-1 VIET S 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[74] Nguyen Duy Hinh and Tran Dinh Tho, *The South Vietnamese Society*, Indochina Monographs (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980): 154-155.
[75] "Viet Cong Post-Cease Fire Political and Military Activities in An Xuyen Province," Airgram A-015 from Saigon to Department of State, 26 March 1973, POL 23 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

struggled to respond to their adversary's revised tactics. Their massive American weapons transfers were ill-suited for rural political competition, and if anything, reinforced the worst tendencies of the ARVN top brass. Where Communist cadres were nimble, calculating, and frugal, ARVN too often relied on gratuitous firepower, an approach that proved both counter-productive and wasteful. In many instances Communist forces turned their adversary's penchant for wanton artillery barrages against them. In Chương Thiện province, a vital transhipment corridor for Communist reinforcements and supplies headed to more-populated parts of the Mekong Delta, they provoked the South Vietnamese government by assassinating the military chief of Long Trị village. ARVN commanders countered over the next ten days by unleashing an estimated 17,000 artillery rounds and 164 air strikes upon the village. The results, an American witness recorded, were:

> "damage to the morale of the [ARVN] defenders… who bore almost all of the casualties; the elimination of the strongest, most anti-communist Village Chief in the province; the virtual obliteration of Long Tri village; …the looting of what was left of Long Tri by the armored cavalry unit sent in to help drive out the VC [Vietnamese Communists]; and the creation of several thousand refugees, whom VC infiltrators are now helping to rebuild their homes in the absence of such aid from the government."[76]

Yet without resorting to preponderant air and artillery support, ARVN forces elsewhere struggled to counter the Communists' political mobilization campaign. The South Vietnamese state and its military were virtually synonymous in much of the rural South. And apprehensive conscripts, often assigned to unfamiliar districts far from home, rarely made for judicious or effective rural administrators. Counterintuitively, the dramatic post-settlement combat equipment surge at times rendered rank-and-file soldiers oddly impotent in the face of non-violent Communist political agitation. In central Vietnam's Quảng Ngãi province, for instance, one rural administrator reported on Outpost One, a hilltop fortification which ARVN had inherited from departing American forces following the January 1973 peace settlement. Just fifteen kilometres from the provincial capital, the base was now supplied entirely by air. It was also "completely surrounded at a distance of several kilometres by the regular pattern made by VC farming plots. Hundreds of new thatched huts can be seen [from the base] and people go about their work in the

[76] "Security Situation in Chuong Thien Province," Airgram A-35 from Saigon to Department of State, 26 February 1973, POL 1 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

PRG[77] fields quite unconcerned by their proximity to the GVN [Government of (South) Vietnam] soldiers. Embraced in the very shadow of GVN Outpost One… is a large market supplying the VC in the area …[which] is seldom, if ever, bothered by GVN authorities."[78] Oriented and equipped for battlefield confrontation, the South Vietnamese military state too often lacked the aptitude and civic institutions required to prosper in rural political competition.

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Five years after the failure of the 1968 Communist Tet Offensive, the Saigon government's momentum had been squandered. An initial outpouring of urban resolve had long since dissipated, giving way to fury and despair over Thiệu's obliteration of the 1967 constitutional order – the basis upon which unprecedented post-Tet solidarity had been premised. Thiệu consoled himself by imagining a captive base of support in the countryside. But the political impact of his agrarian reforms was limited, and the state had made little progress building grassroots institutions with which to contest the Communists by attracting rural constituents to its side. Meanwhile, across the border, the North Vietnamese military was busy preparing yet another all-out offensive against the South. They were not expecting an easy victory. Mounting tensions with the Soviet Union and especially China meant that future military aid to Hanoi was uncertain. And despite inconsistent leadership, poor morale, chronic desertion, and the accelerating depletion of its ammunition stocks, the South Vietnamese military remained large and well-equipped, at least on paper. When the North Vietnamese Politburo met in October 1974 to plan the invasion, they anticipated that success in the South would require at least two years of intense fighting - and even this projection was based on the most favorable assumptions.[79]

What followed in the spring of 1975 was less a battlefield defeat than the disintegration of the South Vietnamese state from within. Communist forces began by probing remote South Vietnamese outposts in the central highlands, testing the Saigon government's capabilities and intentions. The ARVN defenders wilted and, no less important, there was no indication in Washington that the United States might intervene. Then, on March 11, Thiệu issued fateful orders. Reasoning that ARVN forces were overstretched, he announced a tactical withdrawal

[77] Provisional Revolutionary Government, the formal Communist political structure which claimed sole jurisdiction over South Vietnam beginning in 1969.
[78] "PRG Agricultural Settlements in the Fertile Lowlands of North Central Quang Ngai," Airgram A-21 from Saigon to Department of State, 11 May 1973, POL 18 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[79] Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018): 224-225.

from the highlands, to prioritize protecting the more densely populated central coast. But the retreat quickly deteriorated into a rout. Low on confidence and lacking faith in the government's ability to deliver, ARVN forces and their commanders panicked. Discipline broke down, prompting thousands of civilians to join the departing soldiers in their flight for the coast. Indiscriminate Communist artillery fire added to the mounting sense of terror. As news of the debacle in the highlands reached the coast, ARVN soldiers abandoned their posts, discarded their uniforms, and melted away into the convulsing civilian crowds. In Đà Nãng, the second-largest city in the South, an estimated 60,000 people perished while attempting to flee, many after drowning in the clamor to board makeshift escape boats.[80] "Da Nang was not captured," one observer recalled; "it disintegrated in its own terror."[81] Fear and anarchy cascaded south, along the coast. ARVN forces held out bravely at Xuân Lộc, along the main highway east of Saigon, but it was not enough.[82] On April 20 Thiệu himself jumped ship, resigning during a tearful televised press conference before departing to Taiwan. Ten days later, Communist tanks crashed through the gates of his palace, bringing the decades-long conflict to a dramatic end.

South Vietnam's turbulent political trajectory, from measured optimism to cynical resignation, has been largely overlooked in most early English-language accounts of the Vietnam War. Recent research has done much to illuminate the rise and fall of President Ngô Đình Diệm (1955-1963), but the post-Tet Offensive period remains overlooked and poorly understood. Yet it was during these decisive years that the political fate of the South Vietnamese state was sealed. Far from an American puppet regime, the South was led and contested by a diverse range of Vietnamese protagonists, divided by religion, ethnicity and partisan affiliation, but determined to assert themselves, often in defiance of the United States. Nor, until the final weeks, did its astonishingly abrupt collapse ever seem preordained. Far more than on the battlefield or in diplomatic negotiations, the outcome hinged on the state's failure to achieve political legitimacy, even in the eyes of its most committed anti-Communist constituents. Extravagant corruption and unwillingness to abide constitutionalist principles corroded the public trust. And when civilians and soldiers alike lost faith in Thiệu's ability to marshal the state in their defense, the ensuing nationwide erosion of political confidence precipitated Saigon's rapid military capitulation.

[80] Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*: 249-288.
[81] Arnold Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* Revised ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999): 363.
[82] George J. Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975* (New York: Encounter Books, 2013): 435-462.