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DIST 4 MAY 1967

COUNTRY SOUTH VIETNAM 4 19 29 Z

DOI

SUBJECT SITUATION APPRAISAL OF BUDDHISM AS A POLITICAL  
FORCE DURING CURRENT ELECTION PERIOD EXTENDING  
THROUGH SEPTEMBER 1967

ACQ VIETNAM, SAIGON

SOURCE

THIS

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APPRAISAL OF THE MILITANT AND MODERATE  
BUDDHIST FORCES, THEIR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES,  
AND THEIR PLANS AND INTENTIONS DURING THE FORTH-  
COMING ELECTION PERIOD IS NOT AN OFFICIAL  
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REPRESENTS THE INTERPRETATIONS  
OF STAFF OFFICERS BASED ON INFORMATION  
AVAILABLE TO THEM AT THE TIME OF ITS PREPARATION.

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1. SUMMARY THE BUDDHIST DISSIDENT MOVEMENT AT PRESENT

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POSES LESS THREAT TO POLITICAL STABILITY IN SOUTH VIETNAM THAN AT ANY TIME SINCE EARLY 1963. THE GOVERNMENT OF VIETNAM (GVN) HAS HAD GOOD INTELLIGENCE ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE MILITANT BUDDHISTS, AND THEIR CONTROL MEASURES HAVE BEEN CALCULATED TO CONTROL THE SITUATION WITHOUT OVER-REACTING, WHICH MIGHT HAVE PRECIPITATED SERIOUS DISTURBANCES. THICH TRI QUANG IS AT PRESENT THE SOLE LEADER OF THE MILITANT FACTION AND THE ONLY PERSON SUFFICIENTLY MOTIVATED AND CAPABLE TO DIRECT ANTI-GVN ACTIVITIES. THE PERSONAL POWER STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE MILITANT FACTION AND THE MODERATES LED BY THICH TAM CHAU IS LIKELY TO CONTINUE. IT IS ESTIMATED THAT TRI QUANG MIGHT BE ABLE TO CONTROL ONLY ABOUT 180,000 VOTES IN HIS AREAS OF GREATEST STRENGTH--CENTRAL VIETNAM AND SAIGON. HE IS CAPABLE OF STIMULATING AND INSPIRING OTHERS TO ACTION, HOWEVER, AND HIS FOLLOWERS IN THE BUDDHIST HIERARCHY APPEAR TO BE LBYAL AND DISCIPLINED AND CENTERED AROUND A HARD CORE OF APPROXIMATELY 600 MONKS AND NUNS. TAM CHAU IS SUPPORTED BY THE NORTHERN REFUGEE BUDDHIST GROUPS, ALTHOUGH MUCH OF THIS SUPPDRT IS PROBABLY A REACTION AGAINST THE EXTREMIST POLITICAL ACTIVITY UNDERTAKEN BY THE MILITANTS. TAM CHAU IS WEAK

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IN ORGANIZATIONAL ABILITY AND HAS NO RESERVOIR OF DEVOTED CADRES. ALTHOUGH MOST BUDDHISTS PROBABLY OPPOSE THE CURRENT MILITARY REGIME, BOTH THE TAM CHAU AND TRI QUANG FACTIONS WILL PROBABLY NOT OPPOSE THE PRESIDENTIAL AND NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS BUT RATHER QUIETLY SUPPORT THE ELECTION AND TRY TO SEE THAT AS MANY OF THEIR FOLLOWERS AS POSSIBLE ARE ELECTED. TAM CHAU WILL PROBABLY SUPPORT PRIME MINISTER NGUYEN CAO KY AND THICH TRI QUANG MAY ANNOUNCE FOR TRAN VAN HUONG. WHILE THE BUDDHISTS IN THEIR POLITICAL ROLE ARE UNDOUBTEDLY PENETRATED BY VIET CONG (VC) THERE IS NO HARD EVIDENCE THAT THE BUDDHISTS ARE DOMINATED OR CONTROLLED BY THEM, DESPITE THE FACT THAT THEY FREQUENTLY PLAY INTO THE HAND OF THE VC. THE GVN APPEARS TO BE WELL IN CONTROL OF THE SITUATION, AND WHILE TRI QUANG WILL CONTINUE TO EMBARRASS THE GVN WHENEVER POSSIBLE, THERE ARE INDICATIONS THAT BUDDHIST LEADERS DISAPPROVE OF A CONTINUED STRUGGLE OUTSIDE THE LAW. IN SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER THE BUDDHISTS, BOTH MILITANTS AND MODERATES, WILL VERY LIKELY FLOCK TO THE POLLS INSTEAD OF TO THE BARRICADES.)

2. THE BUDDHIST DISSIDENT MOVEMENT AT PRESENT POSES CONSIDERABLY LESS OF AN ACTIVE THREAT TO POLITICAL STABILITY

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IN SOUTH VIETNAM THAN AT ANY TIME SINCE BEFORE MID-1963. HOWEVER, THE LOSS OF POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE BY THE MILITANT BUDDHISTS IS ESSENTIALLY THE RESULT OF THE POLICIES AND STABILITY OF THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT OF VIETNAM (GVN). HOWEVER, AS THE TENURE OF THIS GOVERNMENT GROWS SHORTER AND WITH THE APPROACH OF THE DELICATE PERIOD OF PRESIDENTIAL AND LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS IN THE FALL OF 1967, THE BUDDHISTS WILL WARRANT CLOSE SCRUTINY.

3. DURING THE PAST YEAR, RELATIONS BETWEEN THE GVN AND THE BUDDHISTS HAVE BEEN CHARACTERIZED BY VARYING DEGREES OF BUDDHIST PRESSURE ON THE GVN AND THE LATTER'S CALCULATED RESPONSE. THIS RESPONSE HAS RANGED FROM ALL-OUT FORCE, INVOLVING THE DISPATCH OF TROOPS TO SUPPRESS UPRISINGS IN EYE CORPS IN THE SPRING OF 1966, TO APPARENT TOLERANCE ON OTHER OCCASIONS, WHEN DEMONSTRATIONS HAVE BEEN PERMITTED. THE FINESSE WITH WHICH PRIME MINISTER NGUYEN CAO KY HAS HANDLED THE MILITANT BUDDHIST PROBLEM IS ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE DEGREE OF POLITICAL ACUMEN HE HAS ACQUIRED SINCE TAKING OFFICE. THE GVN HAS HAD GOOD INTELLIGENCE ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE TRI QUANG FACTION, AND ITS CONTROL MEASURES HAVE BEEN CALCULATED MERELY TO CONTROL THE SITUATION WITHOUT RESPORING TO OVER-

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REACTION WHICH MIGHT HAVE PRECIPITATED SERIOUS DISTURBANCES.

4. CONTROL OF THE BUDDHIST DISSIDENT MOVEMENT AS A POLITICAL FORCE CONTINUES TO REST IN THE HANDS OF A VERY SMALL NUMBER OF BUDDHIST MONKS: THICH TRI QUANG, THICH HUYEN QUANG, THICH THIEN HOA, THICH PHAP TRI, THICH PHAP SIEU, THICH TRI THU, THICH THANH VAN, THICH MINH CHAU, THICH HO GIAC, THICH DON HAU, THICH THIEU MINH, AND THICH NHAT HANH. WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THICH NHAT HANH WHO IS ABROAD, THEY MEET REGULARLY DURING THE FIRST WEEK OF EACH MONTH BUT ALSO IN THE INTERIM WHEN NECESSARY. UNTIL THICH THIEN MINH WAS WOUNDED BY AN UNIDENTIFIED ASSAILANT IN 1966, HE WAS THE SECOND MOST INFLUENTIAL OF THE MILITANT BONZES, AFTER TRI QUANG. TRI QUANG CAPTURED THE PUBLIC EYE, BUT THIEN MINH CONTROLLED ALL MILITANT FORCES AND DEMONSTRATIONS THROUGH THE BUDDHIST YOUTH AND THE ASSOCIATION OF BUDDHIST FAMILY FOLLOWERS. THIEN MINH'S POOR HEALTH HAS SEVERELY RESTRICTED HIS ACTIVITIES, RESULTING IN CONSIDERABLE LOSS OF POWER AND INFLUENCE AND LEAVING TRI QUANG AS UNDISPUTED LEADER OF THE MILITANTS. WITH THE DECLINE OF THIEN MINH, IT IS UNLIKELY THAT ANYONE OTHER THAN TRI QUANG WOULD BE EITHER MOTIVATED TO UNDERTAKE ANTI-GVN ACTIVITIES OR CAPABLE OF DIRECTING THEM EFFECTIVELY.

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5. THE UNIFIED BUDDHIST CHURCH OF VIETNAM (ALSO KNOWN AS THE UNIFIED BUDDHIST ASSOCIATION) (UBCVN), WHICH IS THE ONLY EXISTING NATIONAL BUDDHIST ORGANIZATION, HAS, SINCE ITS INCEPTION IN LATE 1964, SUFFERED INTERNAL DISSENSION. THIS DISSENSION IS THE RESULT OF AN INTENSE PERSONAL RIVALRY BETWEEN THICH TRI QUANG AND NORTHERN REFUGEE MODERATE BUDDHIST LEADER THICH TAM CHAU. IN LATE OCTOBER 1966, A FORMAL SPLIT DEVELOPED IN THE UBCVN WHEN SUPPORTERS OF TRI QUANG MET IN A "RUMP SESSION" OF AN EXTRAORDINARY NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF THE UBCVN TO ELECT THIC THIEN HOA CHAIRMAN OF THE UBCVN'S KEY INSTITUTE FOR SECULAR AFFAIRS (BUDDHIST INSTITUTE), REPLACING THICH TAM CHAU IN THAT POSITION. SINCE THAT TIME, THE MILITANTS HAVE ESTABLISHED A HEADQUARTERS FOR THE BUDDHIST INSTITUTE AT THE AN QUANG PAGODA IN SAIGON AND HAVE REFUSED TO RECOGNIZE THE CLAIM OF THICH TAM CHAU TO THE CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE BUDDHIST INSTITUTE. AT THE SAME TIME TAM CHAU AND HIS SUPPORTERS REFUSE TO RECOGNIZE THE LEGALITY OF THE "RUMP SESSION" ELECTION. THIS POWER CONFLICT WITHIN THE BUDDHIST HIERARCHY IS PRINCIPALLY AMONG MEMBERS OF THE MAHAYANA SECT. THE THERAVADA SECT,

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WHICH REPRESENTS ROUGHLY ONE-THIRD OF VIETNAMESE BUDDHISTS, HAS BEEN A SIDE-LINE WATCHER. THIS SECT INCLUDES THOUSANDS OF VIETNAMESE CITIZENS OF CAMBODIAN ORIGIN.

6. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TAM CHAU AND TRI QUANG, WHICH ARE UNLIKELY TO BE RECONCILED IN THE NEAR FUTURE, ARE NOT CONCERNED WITH THE FREEDOM OF BUDDHISTS TO PRACTICE THEIR RELIGION, OR WITH BUDDHIST PRACTICES OR DOCTRINE. TRI QUANG STRIVES FOR POWER, WITH HIS ULTIMATE GOAL BEING THE TEMPORAL AND SPIRITUAL MANIPULATION OF A THEOCRATIC STATE IN ALL OR PART OF VIETNAM. THIS IS BORNE OUT IN HIS WRITINGS WHICH POINT OUT THE

INSEPARABLE AND NATURAL RELATIONSHIP OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL AREA OF VIETNAM, THE PEOPLE WHO INHABIT THE AREA, AND THE BUDDHIST RELIGION. TAM CHAU SEEMS TO BE MORE CONCERNED WITH GAINING PRESTIGE THAN HE IS WITH GAINING POWER. HE STRIVES FOR A UNIFIED BUDDHIST MOVEMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA OF WHICH HE WOULD LIKE TO BECOME THE SENIOR HIERARCHICAL LEADER. EVIDENCE OF TAM CHAU'S AMBITION IS SEEN IN HIS ACTIVITY AS VICE PRESIDENT OF THE WORLD SANGHA (BUDDHIST CLERGY) COUNCIL, SENIOR DELEGATE TO THE WORLD FELLOWSHIP OF BUDDHISTS AND FREQUENT CORRESPONDENT OF LEADING BUDDHISTS IN A VARIETY OF ASIAN NATIONS.

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7. LITTLE BASIS EXISTS FOR A MEANINGFUL EVALUATION OF THE DEGREE OF "MASS SUPPORT" FOR EITHER TAM CHAU OR TRI QUANG. TRI QUANG'S STRENGTH LIES PRIMARILY IN CENTRAL VIETNAM AND IN THE SAIGON AREA AND IS TRACEABLE TO HIS DEMAGOGIC APPEAL, HIS ORGANIZATIONAL ABILITY AND HIS CONTROL OF UNIVERSITY-LEVEL STUDENTS IN SAIGON AND ELSEWHERE. THREE SEPARATE SOURCES HAVE ESTIMATED THE NUMBER OF VOTES WHICH TRI QUANG MIGHT CONTROL IN THE FORTHCOMING NATIONAL ELECTIONS AT APPROXIMATELY 180,000, ALTHOUGH SIGNIFICANT NEUTRALIST AND PRO-VIET CONG VOTES MIGHT ALSO FOLLOW THE TRI QUANG LEAD. TRI QUANG IS APPARENTLY CAPABLE OF STIMULATING AND INSPIRING OTHERS, AND HIS SUPPORTERS WITHIN THE BUDDHIST HIERARCHY APPEAR TO BE FIERCELY LOYAL TO HIM, WHICH ALLOWS FOR RELATIVELY DISCIPLINED ACTION, IT HAS BEEN ESTIMATED THAT HE HAS APPROXIMATELY 600 HARD-CORE CADRES IN THE FORM OF FANATIC MONKS AND NUNS WHO FOLLOW HIS DESIRES WITHOUT QUESTION. HIS PRINCIPAL WEAKNESSES ARE HIS UNCOMPROMISING ATTITUDE AND HIS POWER-SEEKING MOTIVATION, HIS DESIRE TO OBLITERATE OTHER BUDDHIST FACTIONS, AND HIS OPPOSITION TO THE GROWTH OF CATHOLIC FORCES. (TO TRI QUANG, BUDDHISM IS THE NATURAL RELIGION OF THE VIETNAMESE PEOPLE AND CATHOLICISM

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A FOREIGN IMPORT BROUGHT IN BY THE COLONIALISTS.) HIS STATED ANTI-AMERICANISM AND NEUTRALISM HAVE ALSO ALIENATED A LARGE NUMBER OF ANTI-COMMUNIST NATIONALISTS.

8. TAM CHAU IS SUPPORTED BY THE NORTHERN REFUGEE BUDDHIST COMMUNITY AND HIS IS ALSO TACITLY SUPPORTED BY CERTAIN OTHER BUDDHIST GROUPS, INCLUDING A LARGE PORTION OF THE THERAVADA AND OTHER SOUTHERN BUDDHIST GROUPS. HOWEVER, MUCH OF THE SUPPORT FOR TAM CHAU IS PROBABLY MORE A REFLECTION OF DISTASTE FOR THE EXTREMIST POLITICAL ACTIVITY UNDERTAKEN IN THE PAST BY THE MILITANT BUDDHISTS THAN AN INDICATION OF READINESS TO SUPPORT TAM CHAU ACTIVELY. TAM CHAU IS EXTREMELY WEAK IN ORGANIZATIONAL ABILITY AND HAS NO COMPETENT CORE OF CADRES TO ORGANIZE AND AGITATE IN HIS INTERESTS. TAM CHAU REPORTEDLY HAS LOST MANY ADHERENTS WHO DISAPPROVED OF HIS CLOSE ASSOCIATION WITH THE GVN. TAM CHAU HAS BEEN STRENGTHENED IN HIS STRUGGLE WITH TRI QUANG FOR CONTROL OF THE ORGANIZED NATIONAL BUDDHIST MOVEMENT BY THE ACTIONS OF THE GVN, WHICH CLEARLY HAS CHOSEN TO NEUTRALIZE THE OVERALL BUDDHIST MOVEMENT THROUGH SUPPORT TO THE MORE CONTROLLABLE OF THE TWO PRINCIPAL FACTIONS.

9. SINCE 1963, THE BUDDHISTS MILITANTS HAVE CONSISTENTLY

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OPPOSED THE EXISTING ORDER IN SOUTH VIETNAM, APPARENTLY WITHOUT REGARD FOR THE PERSONALITIES OR ISSUES INVOLVED. MOST BUDDHISTS PROBABLY OPPOSE THE CURRENT MILITARY REGIME. (EVEN THE MORE MODERATE BUDDHISTS DO NOT ACCEPT THE CURRENT REGIME WITHOUT RESERVATIONS. THE ALLIANCE BETWEEN TAM CHAU AND THE GVN IS STRICTLY ONE OF CONVENIENCE.) HOWEVER, BOTH THE TAM CHAU AND TRI QUANG FACTIONS PROBABLY WILL NOT OPPOSE THE NATIONAL ELECTIONS THIS FALL. THEIR OPEN AND INEFFECTIVE BOYCOTT OF THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS IN SEPTEMBER 1966 RESULTED IN SEVERE LOSS OF FACE AND IN THEIR HAVING VERY LITTLE VOICE IN THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY, A SITUATION WHICH THEY WILL ATTEMPT TO CORRECT. NEITHER THE MODERATES NOR THE MILITANTS HAVE PUBLICLY ADOPTED A FAVORITE CANDIDATE FOR THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, ALTHOUGH THERE ARE INDICATIONS THAT TAM CHAU WILL ENCOURAGE BUDDHISTS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ELECTIONS AND WILL, AT LEAST PRIVATELY, SUPPORT PRIME MINISTER KY IF HE RUNS. SEVERAL RECENT REPORTS INDICATE THAT TRI QUANG ALSO WILL SUPPORT THE NATIONAL ELECTIONS. AT A MEETING OF THE TRI QUANG "BRAIN TRUST" AT THE AN QUANG PAGODA EARLY IN APRIL, TRI QUANG DECIDED TO SUPPORT TRAN VAN HUONG PUBLICLY AS A

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PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE, AND TO SUPPORT CANDIDATES FOR THE UPPER AND LOWER HOUSES, ALTHOUGH THE SUPPORT FOR THESE CANDIDATES WILL NOT BE PUBLICLY ANNOUNCED. THIS SAME REPORT REFERRED TO SECRET MEETINGS BETWEEN HUONG AND A TRI QUANG REPRESENTATIVE DURING WHICH TRI QUANG WAS NEGOTIATING TO NAME THE VICE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE ON THIS TICKET. IN PRIVATE CONVERSATIONS, HUONG REPORTEDLY HAS LAUDED TRI QUANG AND CONDEMNED TAM CHAU. REPORTS FROM THE CENTRAL PROVINCES ALREADY INDICATE A NUMBER OF PRESPECTIVE CANDIDATES ARE TRI QUANG FOLLOWERS.

10. WHILE IT CAN BE ASSUMED THAT THE BUDDHIST CHURCH LIKE MANY OTHER SOUTH VIETNAMESE INSTITUTIONS IS PENETRATED BY THE VC, THERE IS NO HARD EVIDENCE THAT THE BUDDHISTS ARE DOMINATED OR CONTROLLED BY THEM. YET, IT IS TRUE THAT THE BUDDHISTS' ATTITUDE TOWARD THE EXISTING ORDER, AS MANIFESTED IN THEIR ELECTION BOYCOTT FROM JULY TO SEPTEMBER 1966, OFTEN HAS BEEN CONSISTENT WITH VC POLICIES. THE FACT THAT THE RADICAL BUDDHISTS, IN THEIR OPPOSITION TO THE GVN, SEEM AT TIMES TO PLAY RIGHT INTO THE HANDS OF THE VC STRENGTHENS THE SUSPICION OF VC PENETRATION OR CONTROL. NEUTRALIST SPEECHES BY SUCH TRI QUANG "BRAIN TRUSTERS" AS THICH NHAT HANH ADD

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TO THIS SUSPICION. SO TOO DOES THE FACT THAT "BRAIN TRUSTER" THICH THIEN HOA'S TRA VINH PAGODA IS LOCATED IN VINH BINH PROVINCE, IN VC TERRITORY. ALTHOUGH HOA LIVES IN SAIGON EVERY MONTH HE TRAVELS TO HIS PAGODA AND REPORTEDLY HAS MESSENGERS TRAVELING BACK AND FORTH AT OTHER TIMES. THIEN HOA IS ALSO REPUTEDLY A PERSONAL FRIEND OF NGUYEN HUU THO, CHAIRMAN OF THE NATIONAL FRONT FOR THE LIBERATION OF SOUTH VIETNAM. HOWEVER, TO SUPPORT THE HYPOTHESIS THAT THE BUDDHISTS ARE NOT DOMINATED BY THE VC, THERE IS SOME EVIDENCE IN THE FORM OF CAPTURED VC DOCUMENTS THAT THE VC THEMSELVES VIEW THE BUDDHIST MOVEMENT, INCLUDING BOTH MILITANT AND MODERATE FACTIONS, AS A TRAGET FOR INFILTRATION RATHER THAN AS AN ESTABLISHED OPERATIONAL ASSET. PROBABLY ANTI-GVN ACTIVITIES CAN BE VIEWED MORE ACCURATELY IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE BUDDHISTS' TRADITIONAL OPPOSITION RATHER THAN AS A CONSCIOUS EFFORT TO SUPPORT VC POLITICES.

1. CENTRAL VIETNAM AND, MORE SPECIFICALLY, THE CITY OF HUE HAS BEEN THE CENTER OF BUDDHIST POLITICAL ACTIVITY SINCE MID-1963. EVEN NOW, THE LEVEL AND NATURE OF THE BUDDHIST ACTIVITY IN THIS AREA CAN BE VIEWED AS A FAIRLY RELIABLE INDICATOR OF THE STATUS OF BUDDHISTS INTENTIONS REGARDING ORGANIZED

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OPEN STRUGGLE AGAINST THE GVN. WHILE THERE ARE OCCASIONAL REPORTS OF BUDDHIST PLOTTING SESSIONS IN HUE OR OTHER PLACES IN CENTRAL VIETNAM, IT APPEARS THAT THE GVN IS CURRENTLY WELL IN CONTROL OF THE SITUATION IN HUE AND ELSEWHERE IN VIETNAM. UNDOUBTEDLY TRI QUANG WILL CONTINUE TO BE A THORN IN THE GVN SIDE, AND WHENEVER HE CONVENIENTLY CAN DO SO HE WILL EMBARRASS THE GVN. BUT THERE ARE INDICATIONS THAT CERTAIN BUDDHIST LEADERS, WHO WERE POLITICALLY ACTIVE IN THE PAST, HAVE EXPRESSED DISAPPROVAL OF A CONTINUED STRUGGLE MOVEMENT OUTSIDE THE LAW. AS THE ELECTIONS DRAW NEARER, THERE APPEARS TO BE LITTLE LIKELIHOOD OF RECONCILIATION BETWEEN THE TRI QUANG AND TAM CHAU FACTIONS. IT IS PROBABLY THAT THE GVN WILL REMAIN IN FULL CONTROL, AND THAT THERE WILL BE GREATER PARTICIPATION OF THE BUDDHISTS IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES AND A STEADY PROGRESSION OF BUDDHISTS TOWARD THE ASSEMBLY HALL TO SOLVE THEIR PROBLEMS. DURING THE SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER 1967 ELECTIONS THE BUDDHISTS, BOTH MILITANT AND MODERATE, WILL PROBABLY FLOCK TO THE POLLS INSTEAD OF TO THE BARRICADES.

12. THIS REPORT WAS COORDINATED WITH THE EMBASSY IN SAIGON.

13. FIELD DISSEM: STATE USMACV (GENERAL WESTMORELAND, CHIEF OF STAFF, J-2) CINCPAC (ADMIRAL SHARP AND POLAD).

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