THE HOA HAO SECT AND ITS SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY (DANG DAN CHU XA HOI VIET NAM)

A. Development of the Hoa Hao Church and Politico-Military Forces up to 1954

1. The Church and Its Leadership by Master Huynh Phu So

The Hoa Hao community in the western Mekong delta comprises a religious movement with important socio-political aspects which stemmed from the messianic and nationalist teachings of its founder-seer, revered as the Duc Thay, or "Master," Huynh Phu So (1919-1947?). This extraordinary charismatic leader, possessed of trances, visions and the power of faith healing and believed by many to be the reincarnation of a renowned Buddhist teacher or even Bodhisattva who had lived a century before, became the hero of the populist folk religion based on his version of regenerated Mahayana Buddhism.

Master Huynh took the Mahayana Buddhist rituals practiced in the region and simplified them to make them more comprehensible and practicable by persons of the humblest origins. Offerings to Buddha were limited to the simplest of items and the statues of Buddha were replaced by a rectangular piece of red silk (the Tran Dieu). The prayers, which had been in Pali or in Chinese transliterated into Vietnamese and learned by rote with little specific comprehension, were translated into colloquial Vietnamese.*

Similarly, Huynh introduced a new equality into the ranks of the faithful, rejecting (in theory at least) the distinction between ordinary believers on one hand and monks, priests, and those who had left their homes to devote full time to the religion. Believers could have families if they wished and could live and work however they preferred, as long as they conformed to the tenets of the faith.

2. Emergence of the Hoa Hao as a Political Force

Implicit in the socio-political mission of the Hoa Hao movement (named for Huynh's native village) were the cleansing and renewing of Vietnamese society and assisting in the liberation of the nation in the last phase of French colonial
rule in Indochina (from 1939 on), as outlined in Huynh's book of teachings known as the Sam Giang, the
Offerings of even such simple things as glutinous rice, sweet soup and fruit, as well as such votary items for the dead as artificial paper money, clear water, were banned. Articles to be placed on the altar were limited to a lamp, incense and flowers.

The prayers were silent and offered twice a day, at dawn and sunset. There also was an invitation before meals to departed ancestors to join and partake, accompanied by thanks to Heaven and the Buddha.

This simplicity of style extended into such ceremonies as weddings (only simple civil ceremonies were approved) and funerals (which featured only simple prayers).
Hoa Hao "bible". These include the Four Gratitudes (Tu An), taught by the famous monk, the Phat Thay Tay An, a century earlier, and embrace gratitude not only to the family and the Three Precious Things, consonant with more orthodox Buddhist doctrines, but also to the nation (dat nuoc) and to one's compatriots and humanity.*

There were important socialist influences on Huynh Phu So's thinking from at least 1939 on when he reportedly had close contacts with Vietnamese socialists opposing the Stalinist Communists in the South. A number of them were Trotskyites, leaders of the Vietnamese supporters of the Fourth Internationale (and all of whom eventually were liquidated by the Viet Minh).**

*Full title of the Hoa Hao bible is Sam Giang Thi Van Toan Bo cua Duc Huynh Giao-Chu (The Sam Giang Collected Poems and Other Writings of Master Huynh), no place, Central Committee for Propagation of the Faith of the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, 1970 (fourth printing)). The Four Gratitudes are discussed on pp. 146-150.

In Hoa Hao pagodas, these four elements are symbolized by four altars, the third of which stands for compatriots and humanity and the fourth, the nation.

(The letter, standing just behind the main altar, displays a map of Vietnam.)

**The Trotskyites included Ta Thu Thau, Pham Van Hum, Tran Thach, Dao Hung Long and others. This information came from interviews, conducted by the writer and Nhu Phong, of Tran Van An, Saigon, February 1972; Nguyen Huu Luong, member of the Supervisory Board of the Vinh Long Provincial Party Chapter Organization Committee of the National Progressive Movement (Phong Trao Cap Tien Quoc Gia) at Vinh Long, March, 1972; and Van Phu, Hoa Hao, Chau Doc, February, 1972. Van Phu at this time was the sole surviving socialist who had worked with Huynh. He had not been a Trotskyite, although he had been elected General Secretary of the Committee of Socialists Opposing Stalinism in 1945. He thereafter had been prominent in the Hoa Hao movement, was elected Principal Secretary of the church's Central Management Committee in 1965-1967 and in 1972 was Third Assistant Chairman of the Central Management of the church, one of the two competing Central Committees (to be described later).
Huynh's new religion, with its nationalist, anti-colonialist political message, began to attract a mass following before World War II. French suspicion of the movement brought Huynh's detention and harassment of his believers. Huynh was called by many the "mad Monk" and a famous story is told of how, during his incarceration for "observation" in a French psychiatric hospital in Cho Quan for ten months during 1940-1941, he converted the French-trained Vietnamese doctor assigned to him.*

The Japanese military occupation authorities protected Huynh from the French and sought to exploit his movement for their own purposes.** They may have given

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*The ceremonial red silk cloth aroused the suspicion of the French authorities also, not only because red was associated with the communists, but because of a patriotic maxim associated with the cloth, so they banned it. The Hoa Hao reacted by dyeing the Tran Dieu to a darker hue of brownish maroon (mau nau) associated with the Mahayana Buddhists, and called it the Tran Gia.

Sources consulted here are principally


Savani, a major in the French intelligence services in this period, expressed the French authorities' view of Huynh's movement when he wrote that "...the new religion /served/ as a cover for tendentious, clearly anti-French propaganda." op.cit., p. 87 (trans.)

** During Huynh's internment in the psychiatric hospital at Cho Quan in Saigon, his movement evidently lost considerable momentum. But then, when he was placed in a fixed residence under surveillance in Bac Lieu, new interest in him arose and Bac Lieu became "a veritable place of pilgrimage" for Vietnamese seeking
military training and some weapons to it (along with the Cao Dai sect) in the hope that it, along with other nationalist groups, would help fight a last-ditch defense of the area in case of an Allied invasion, but it appears more likely that the Hoa Hao was able to "scrounge" its own weapons in this war-time environment.* In any case, it organized/military units from early 1944 on. The French had difficulty in limiting what they considered the "excesses" of Hoa Hao local defense units (Bao An) by the time of the Japanese coup de force against the French in March 1945. And according to a French intelligence officer, even the Japanese had become uneasy about the nationalist spirit of the Hoa Hao and its possible intention to seize power, at least locally.**

After the Japanese surrender, the Hoa Hao cooperated with other nationalist groups in the anti-colonialist coalition led by the Viet Minh to set up a provisional government of independence and oppose the return of the French. However, Huynh became disillusioned with the Communists leading the Viet Minh because of their manipulation and suppression of other groups. Numerous instances of local to hear the words of the Master. The French reaction to this was a decision to deport him to Laos but they were prevented from doing this by violent Japanese intervention. Devillers, op. cit., pp. 90-91.

*John T. McAlister, Vietnam: Origins of Revolution, New York: Knopf, 1969, p. 178, notes that the Japanese did train and arm and estimated 3,000 men of the Cao Dai sect but that information on their possible arming of the Hoa Hao is much more obscure.

Bernard Fall, who had access to an apparently more extensive report on the Hoa Hao by Major A.M. Savani than appears in Savani's op. cit., writes that Huynh Phu So used his influence with the Japanese to get weapons "through them," but does not cite his specific source for this (Fall, "Religion in Politics," in his Viet-Nam Witness, 1953-1966, New York: Praeger, 1966, p. 151.

**Savani, op. cit., p. 88.
conflict between the Hoa Hao and Viet Minh were climaxxed by a bloody incident at Can Tho on September 8, 1945. A band of Hoa Hao numbering perhaps 15,000 and armed only with knives and rudimentary spears marched in protest on the Viet Minh headquarters and several thousand of them were gunned down. Among the victims were the prophet's younger brother and two other prominent men. These and other subsequent incidents ruptured relations and generated long-lasting violence and enmity between the two groups.

The returning French colonial authorities considered that the Hoa Hao were using coercive tactics in some of their religious-political proselyting including "systematic massacres" so they intervened militarily in this situation when they saw fit. The resulting Hoa Hao dissatisfaction was a factor in a successful Viet Minh bid for renewed Hoa Hao political cooperation which resulted in formation of the United National Resistance Front (Mat-Tran Quoc-Gia Lien-Hiep Khang Chien) of a variety of nationalist groups led by the Viet Minh. Huynh served as Special Commissioner in the Viet Minh's Administrative Committee of Nam-Bo (South Vietnam) beginning in 1946.

In September 1946, Huynh organized his own political party which attempted to draw in all the nationalist elements, except for the Communists, which had been active before the end of the war. This was the Vietnam Social Democratic Party (Dang Dan Chu Xa Hoi Viet Nam abbreviated "Dan Xa"), formed in the Plain of Reeds area. Indicative of a long-term political weakness of the Hoa Hao as a political force was the fact that a number of Dan Xa leaders, including Huynh's principal collaborator in the project, Nguyen Van Sam, were not even Hoa Hao.

*Ibid., p. 89.

believers but politicians and professional men from Saigon who seem to have intrigued with the potential of the Hoa Hao to offer them an existing mass political base.***

***Its leaders included Dr. Tran Van Tam (who, with Huynh, were the only two Hoa Hao believers); Nguyen Van Sam, electrical engineer, journalist and official under the French; Le Van Thu, lawyer and member of Republic governments from the late 1960's on; Nguyen Bao Toan, who remained active in the party until executed by the Diem government in about 1963; and Lam Van Tet. **Dang Den-Chu Xa-Hoi Viet-Nam** (The Vietnam Social Democratic Party), a party manual published by the Central Committee, Saigon, no date, pages unnumbered, provides the list of names.
A manifesto from the Master (now also called the "Leader Huynh"), announced the formation of the party on September 21, 1946, stated its political philosophy as it has come down to the present time. Briefly, it described the party as democratic and nationalist, fighting for independence and based on the union of various nationalist groups ("resistance, labor, religious, and political"). "A special point" in the party's program was its opposition to class struggle: "...in the present stage," the party "does not support class struggle among the Vietnamese people because after over 80 years of foreign domination of Vietnam, there now is only one class, that exploited by the capitalist imperialists." Huynh continued, "To prevent class struggle later, a new Vietnamese society must be built..."

He described the Dan Xa as a "revolutionary socialist party committed to organizing an economy based on socialist principles" but he interpreted these to stress non-exploitation by any "strong class" as well as citizens' "enjoyment of rewards commensurate with their abilities and work." In at least a preparatory stage, a part of the business sector would be nationalized while another part would remain under private ownership.*

*While rejecting class struggle, Huynh said rather vaguely that the prevention of class struggle later would require that the new society be "based on elements which do not allow the continuance of the exploiting class but support only one class, namely, the producing class."

The mixed economy would "respect the right of private property to an extent not harmful to public life" and would permit some ownership to remain in private and in foreign hands.

This Manifesto by Huynh Phu So and the party Program are published in the party manual, *ibid*. They also are reproduced, not quite so intelligibly, in Tran Nhut Thang, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-68, 105-108.
Reportedly arrested by the Viet Minh as he arrived for a parley with them in March 1947, Huynh disappeared, presumably the victim of a Viet Minh assassination, but to this day his followers never refer to him as having died but only as "absent" or "disappeared" (e.g., vang mat) and profess that he will return. The Hoa Hao by this time felt extremely bitter toward the Viet Minh and Hoa Hao military commander-in-chief Tran Van Soai ("Nam Lua") already had gone over to the French the month before.

The three military commanders theoretically subordinate to General Tran Van Soai and Soai himself ran what amounted to their own satrapies however, "subordinates" did and the three/not always follow Soai's lead. Soai ruled the Can Tho region, Lam Thanh Nguyen held sway in Chau Doc, Nguyen Giac Ngo was based in Cho Mei and Le Quang Vinh or "Ba Cut" operated in the region between the Seven Mountains (the That Son, located at the western edge of the Mekong delta, along the Cambodian border) and the Gulf of Siam. These chieftains' territories often were described also as fiefdoms in the economic sense. Soai, for example, controlled a profitable regional rice monopoly, and he and other regional commanders also were said to have made money from gambling houses or the protection of them. These commanders also levied their own taxes and Bernard Fall, reflecting the French official view of that time, writes that Ba Cut and Tran Van Soai were considered to be exploitative in this.* Ba Cut possessed a special mystique among many of the Hoa Hao, however, for his youthful daring, his swashbuckling, his Robin Hood image, and the fact that he alone, among these commanders, did not amass a sizeable personal fortune through his political activities.

By 1948, factional squabbling had resulted in the return to dissidence of these three regional commanders of Soai's but by 1950, most of the Hoa Hao leaders

*Bernard Fall, op. cit., 153-154.
were collaborating fairly consistently with the French and were dependent upon them for much of their military budgets. Ba Cut, however, rallied to the French and then defected four more times, receiving new French subventions with each return to their side.

When Ngo Dinh Diem returned to Vietnam in 1954, the Hoa Hao controlled a considerable part of the Southwest, making it the most secure against Vietminh incursion of any region in the entire country. It had some million and a half believers and ten to fifteen thousand men under arms. Its tactics against its enemies, and particularly the Viet Minh, were ruthless, giving the movement a reputation for bloodthirstiness, but its followers and others said this was blown out of proportion by Viet Minh propaganda.

*Senator Mike Gravel Edition, The Pentagon Papers, Boston: Beacon Press, 1971, Vol. 1, p. 295. Savani, writing in 1953-54, noted that in addition to the Hoa Hao's great strength in the two provinces of Long Xuyen (later An Giang) and Chau Doc, it also had strong followings in Can Tho (later Phong Dinh), Sa Dec and Vinh Long. He gave a figure of "not far from a million" the number of believers at that time. (Savani, op. cit., p. 96.)
B. The Diem Repression.

It is necessary to treat the Diem period constraints on Hoa Hao activity in some
detail because it helps to explain the disarray of its political groups and the
factionalism among its church management committees which became so trouble-
some in the post-Diem era. When Diem took power, he shared a distrust of the sects
and their "warlordism" which was prevalent in Saigon government circles
among
and his rigid posture toward the sects, other non-official political groups, contributed
to a hostility between the two sides that grew steadily.

The Hoa Hao's Social Democratic Party had received official authorization just
before Diem became premier and one of its first acts was to organize demonstrations
in some southwestern provinces on July 25, 1954 denouncing the Geneva Agreements as
thereafter
too soft on the Communists. Shortly/it closed its doors and Ba Cut's 3,000 troops,
considered "the party's military force," went into dissidence for a final time to
protest the Agreements and the alleged ineffectiveness of the new Diem government.*

When the Cao Dai, Binh Xuyen and a number of political parties and groups formed
the anti-government United Front of All Nationalist Forces (Mat-Tran Thong-Nhut
Toan-Luc Quoc-Gia) in February 1955 which presented Diem with an ultimatum demanding
more political power, Ba Cut's faction was with them.**

*Tran Nhut Thang, op. cit., 68-69.

**Diem already had ordered military operations against Ba Cut several months
earlier but with evidently little result, as he was so preoccupied with the Binh
Xuyen and other threats in Saigon. Ibid.
After Diem put down the sect rebellion in the spring of 1955, Ba Cut was pursued into the West and captured in April; eventually he was convicted of treason and guillotined. A government military campaign from June 1956 to February 1957 crushed most of the remainder of the party's military force.

A considerable number of Hoa Hao officers then were integrated into the national army, but because of Diem's distrust, they were assigned outside the Hoa Hao areas, some of them to sinecures in Saigon.

Among Ba Cut's former followers, the more conventionally organized military formations tended to rally to the government, while the more "guerrillaized" remained in the bush. Some of these retained a third-force stance, opposed to both the government and the NLF, and some of them evidently arrived at their own private understandings with the NLF in order to survive.*

One former guerrilla leader under Ba Cut who had remained in dissidence well after the latter's execution reported in 1965 that sometime evidently in the late fifties he had been invited to an NLF camp to discuss an NLF proposal for an alliance between the NLF and Hoa Hao to fight the Diem forces. The NLF contact was a former schoolteacher in Chau Doc who had become commander of the NLF Ninth Region, extending from Tay Ninh to the sea. After the 1954 Geneva Accords he had gone to Hanoi and had returned to the South at the early date of 1957. This Hoa Hao source claimed no agreement had been reached in this parley. His adopted son, however, a major in the Regional Forces of another delta province, claimed that an unspoken agreement had in fact existed, that both sides kept to their own zones without attacking the other's territory as long as both fought against Diem.**


an informal accommodation continued to be held by some observers and American officials even after the fall of Diem, as the present writer can attest from interviews in this region and elsewhere during periodic visits to Vietnam between 1964 to 1972.

Another phase of the government suppression of the Hoa Hao was the dissolution of the church's religious-administrative network of executive or "management" committees (ban tri su) extending all the way from the Central Management Committee down through the provincial, district, village and hamlet levels. The committees were elected indirectly, by the next lower echelon (except, of course, at the lowest, or hamlet, level). Although the committees were not supposed to get involved in politics, they often had found this impossible, so long had the strands of politics and religion been intertwined here. This committee system had received wide support and was a major factor in maintaining the socio-religious solidarity of the Hoa Hao rural communities which so often has been noted by observers. The national government moved into this vacuum and tightened up its own administrative control over these areas which had never come fully under its rule. Thid dealt a severe blow to Hoa Hao political, administrative and, to a lesser extent, religious influence in the region and it would take the Hoa Hao many years after 1963 to revive the committees in some places, particularly those outside its "heartland" provinces.

The Social Democratic Party went into near limbo during the Diem period. The dissident or Three Star (Ba Sao) wing, after Ba Cut's death, elected Trinh Quoc Khanh (real name: Nguyen Huu Le) its new chairman, but it remained largely inactive until 1963. Meanwhile, another faction had been designated as the legally authorized one as the government's showdown with the sects had been approaching in 1955. Hoa Hao General Nguyen Giac Ngo, Phan Ba Cam and other leaders willing to cooperate with Diem had requested authorization to reorganize the party and when this was granted
in February of that year, a new executive committee was elected, headed by Nguyen Bao Toan and including Phan Ba Cam.* Toan, one of the few higher-level Hoa Hao politicians who had worked with Huynh Phu So to organize the Dan Xa Party, would be harrassed and killed by the regime but this faction, the Chu Van (莊), led mainly by others, would be the only one to remain at all active during the Diem period.

After the Army's expulsion of the dissidents from Saigon in April 1955, Toan's faction of the Hoa Hao joined with other sect leaders and politicians to participate in a pro-government National Congress of Democratic and Revolutionary Forces. Toan and some Cao Dai leaders soon found this group too weak for their purposes however, and formed instead a National Revolutionary Committee to deal more French. But they thus crossed firmly with Emperor Bao Dai and the Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu and when the Ngos grew stronger, Toan resigned from the Committee in protest against their "dictatorial practices" and left the country.**

When the government again turned its attention to the Hoa Hao political party, it told Gen. Nguyen Giac Ngo to reorganize its leadership. However, this faction became so moribund that it could not elect a new central committee when it tried to do so two years later. Gen. Ngo then appointed Lt. Col. Pham Van Giac to prepare for a new party general convention and for some years thereafter Giac headed this ineffectual, government-authorized faction while Nguyen Bao Toan returned periodically to try to organize support for a more independent group led by himself, Phan Ba Cam and others.

*Tran Nhut Thang, op. cit., pp. 69-70.

**The history of Hoa Hao political relations with the Diem government is traced in greater detail in Tran Nhut Thang, op. cit. Relations between the Hoa Hao and other sects and that government are discussed also in the present writer's Vietnam: The Politics of Manipulation (forthcoming), esp. Chap. 7.
Toan returned from abroad to campaign for a group of Hoa Hao candidates in the Second National Assembly elections in August 1959. It seemed to have prospects of electing as many as nine candidates when the government stepped into advise Toan that the Social Democratic (Dan Xa) Party's quota would be two only—and, of course, from the pro-government faction.* The following March, the Giac faction finally put together a new executive committee for the party.

Toan continued to be prominently identified as a Diem oppositionist, trying to form a new Democratic Alliance in about June 1960. It was refused government authorization but reappeared as the supposed political vehicle of the military officers who led the abortive coup against Diem in November 1960. Actually, it seems to have had almost no role in that affair (though the survivors of the Toan group claimed much later it had played a major one). After the failure of the coup, Toan again disappeared, Phan Ba Cam and many other cadres went to jail and others fled abroad. Lt. Col. Giac's faction became more and more of a Dan Xa facade and although Nguyen Bao Toan returned clandestinely to Vietnam in 1961, he was unable to engage in any significant political activity. When the writer was able to interview him that August, he claimed that some Dan Xa cadre training was continuing on a sub-rosa basis.** He was arrested the next year and executed by government agents, evidently in January 1963.***

*They were Lt. Col. Giac himself and one of his subordinates, the acting Secretary General of his faction, Duong Trung Dng. Interview with a Toan aide, Vo Van Tan, Saigon, July 1961, as described in J.C. Donnell, *ibid.*

**J.C. Donnell, *ibid.*

***Tran Nhut Thang, op. cit., p. 79.
Although Toan appeared to many Vietnamese as a genuine oppositionist who had paid the supreme penalty for his atand, he was not viewed within the Hoa Hao movement as favorably as Trinh Quoc Khanh, who, as a member of the Ba Cut faction, had remained totally outside the orbit of Diem regime politics. (He had remained in the maguis until he was captured in 1958 and imprisoned until the fall of the regime.) And this had a bearing on the later comparative prestige of the party factions of Khanh and Phan Ba Cam, Toan's successor. Ba Cut's widow claimed disgruntledly to an interviewer in 1965 that Toan had sought and received permission from Ba Cut in 1954 to go abroad, ostensibly to raise support for the Dan Xa Party, of which he was Secretary General. She said she herself had obtained a 300,000 piastre contribution to help cover Toan's travel costs. But instead, Toan failed to go abroad, "rallied" to Ngo Dinh Diem and formed his own faction of the party, one which in her view never compared with the "orthodox" Khanh faction.*

C. Post-Diem Efforts to Restore the Movement

1. The Social Democratic Party and Its Factions

Post-Diem governments' policies toward the Hoa Hao varied but included attempts to woo it and also to manipulate it by supporting some of its faction leaders with political and financial assistance. This tended to exacerbate the factionalism plaguing both the Hoa Hao church and its political party, as we shall see presently. After the 1963 coup, those members of the church management committees at the various levles as well as cadres of the party who had been imprisoned were released and others came out of hiding. The property of the church and these leaders which had been confiscated was returned and their civil rights were restored. The job began of "restoration" of the church committees and rebuilding of the party.
Almost immediately, several factions and sub-factions of the Dan Xa Party competed for legal status. The "Three Star" faction of Trinh Quoc Khanh was the first to get tentative approval from the Ministry of Interior. When another "Three Star" group led by "General" Truong Kim Cu, a former Ba Cut battalion commander,* also sought approval, it was told it should get together with the Khanh group to thrash out the matter. The second group held a "general meeting", but limited it to its own members in an attempt to set itself up as the legitimate Dan Xa. Khanh protested this and gradually the Cu group weakened and moved over to the Chu Van faction led by Phan Ba Cam after his release from prison in November 1963.** The Diem government-favored Chu Van Group led by Lt. Col. Pham Van Giac (and Gen. Nguyen Giac Ngo) then moved out of Phan Ba Cam's way, whereupon the latter asserted his dominance of the reviving faction.

*(from preceding page)Takashi Oka, "Journey to the Hao Hao Regions: Part II," op. cit., newsletter TO-II, August 20, 1965, p. 6. This was Mrs. Tran Thi Hoa-Phan, the first of Ba Cut's three wives.

*Truong Kim Cu had fled to Cambodia after Ba Cut's capture and there affiliated with the Southern Dai Viet Party under Dr. Nguyen Ton Hoan. Hoan, Vice Premier for Pacification in the early period of Nguyen Khanhm's premiership, had claimed he could rally the Hao Hao to the government through Cu, but the latter was only a minor figure in the movement. Takashi Oka, "Journey to the Hoa Hao Regions: Part III," op. cit., newsletter TO-12, August 25, 1965, p. 3.

**Others in the Khanh group while in dissidence before Diem's fall were Pham Si Thanh (who went to Cambodia and then to Paris where he was still living in the
later 1960's) and Col. Nguyen Minh Tam. Members of his party (faction) listed in
the March 20, 1964 application approved by the government on Sept. 11, 1964 were
Phan Nguon Tuong, Nguyen Van Ca, Cao Thi Nguyet (one of Ba Cut's widows), Do Phu
Loc, Mai Huu Kinh, Do Thai Xuong and Nguyen Kim Mau.

Members of the Cu group as constituted in its "general meeting" of May
1964 were Tran Van Khuong, Nguyen Van Cua, Tran Van Hue, Huynh Tan Canh, Le
Tran Nhut Thang, op. cit., p. 75.
This three-way party split became a five-way one when two Hoa Hao veterans' groups were formed in 1964 which also had political ambitions. (Hoa Hao soldiers had considered themselves members of the Dan Xa Party since it had been founded.) Former General Lam Thanh Nguyen organized the Hoa Hao Social Democratic Veterans Group (Tap-Doan Cuu Chien-Si Hoa-Hao Dan-Xa) and Tran Duy Don founded the Hoa Hao Buddhist Veterans Association (Hoi Cuu Quan-Nhan Phat Giao Hoa Hao). The two made a limited effort to cooperate, but this was unsuccessful.*

That October, the three party branches led by Cam, Khanh and Cu held a joint meeting at Long Xuyen to discuss unification. It went so far as to set up a joint Provisional Executive Committee and even got government approval for the unified party but this attempt cooperation failed, especially after the Khanh group undertook some provocative acts including formation of a new Vietnam Social Democratic Youth Association, for which it also got government approval.** The Cam and Cu groups quit the unification effort at this point, and the joint committee gave up the attempt. It also made the following statement which subsequently was taken by many to justify a more free-for-all approach to political competition within the movement: "Any member of the organization who feels that the Vietnam Social Democratic Party must be protected and who follows correctly the path of the Master may continue to use his goodwill in its service."***

*Their leaders nominally dissolved the two groups in June and July, 1964 and set up a committee to study ways of merging them but this came to naught, so they were reconstituted as before. Information from interviews with Hoa Hao leaders in Long Xuyen Chau Doc and Saigon, February and March, 1972.

**Khanh was developing some prestige farther afield and in the spring of 1967 he would become Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu's first choice as a candidate for Vice President before Thieu and Ky got together on a single slate, Ky thus replacing Khanh.

***Tran Nhut Thang, op. cit., p. 82.
The Khanh group made one more attempt to organize a party central executive committee dominated by itself on July 20, 1965 but this merely set the stage for additional squabbling between the three main factions for another year. Then temporary unity was achieved after Lam Thanh Nguyen and Tran Duy Don, leaders of the two veterans' groups, got negotiations started and a general convention held at the Holy See on May 8, 1966. Here, a leadership committee of the Unified Vietnam Social Democratic Party was set up to include the leaders of all five factions.

As between the two factions of the Dan Xa Party, it was said by some in Long Xuyen and Chau Doc Provinces in late 1965 that the Khanh faction had mass support but few leaders, while the opposite was true of the Cam faction.*

The Cam and Cu factions' activities were attributed by that of Khanh to the government's desire to manipulate the Hoa Hao. As Ba Cut's widow put it,

Phan Ba Cam, Truong Kim Cu—all these people represent Saigon maneuvers to split the Hoa Hao. If there were no government interference, the Hoa Hao would not be so divided. The government tells us to be united. But how can we do this, when behind each Hoa Hao leader stands someone or another in the government—General Khanh or Dr. Hoan or what have you! If the government would let the Hoa Hao alone, it would be easy to settle our differences. The present Saigon regime is simply repeating the maneuvers of the Diem regime, which tried to divide and rule. **

Some of the factional competition was diverted into electoral channels after local elections were restored by the government beginning in 1966. Phan Ba Cam's faction performed best at this, gradually winning an important number of village and hamlet elections in the Hoa Hao region. The other factions, their positions weakening, considered withdrawing from the five-way committee—and the Truong Kim Cu group, one of the weakest, decided to cooperate with Cam. However, the increasing strength of the Cam faction was dealt a severe setback when Cam was defeated in his bid for a Senate seat and refused to allow his supporters to run for the Lower House in the elections.


**Ibid.
Over the next few years, Cam's faction experienced further setbacks, including a long illness of its leader. Cam's party, which he had founded after the fall of Saigon as the Vietnam People's Force (Luc Luong Dan Toc Viet Nam), was accorded provisional registration under terms of the 1969 party law but when it failed to satisfy the government that it had achieved the requisite popular support and organizational outreach within the 18-month deadline, it was dissolved in January 1972. Cam, along with numerous other politicians, complained that the government was inconsistent and unfair to many political groups in implementing the party law. It did little investigating of the strength of groups toward which it was favorable or indifferent, they charged, allowing some of these to exist even when they actually were below the legal minimum size; but towards parties it wanted to suppress, it could be c\v\ier in making negative evaluations. And it did appear to the present writer that there was no systematic government scrutiny of the actual strength of the provisionally authorized parties and indeed that many of them probably did not really qualify.

Phan Ba Cam, anticipating this unfavorable official action, had announced on November 19, 1971, to all branches that if the government persisted in its "undemocratic ways" and its hostility toward the Vietnam People's Force, that party would be obliged reluctantly to cease public activity in favor of "secret struggle."

*The Party Law, Decree 009 of June 1969, required that a party have branches in at least 15 provinces and/or autonomous cities and a membership of at least 500 in each of these or, as an alternative, branches in at least five provinces and/or autonomous cities (with the same minimum of 500 members each) plus at least 10 of its members elected to the National Assembly.

**Phuc Dap Cuoc Phong Van cua Bao Tin Lua cua Phan Ba Cam," (Questions and Answers of an Interview of Phan Ba Cam by the Newspaper Tin Lua," late 1971, exact date unknown), a typed document given the writer by Phan Ba Cam.
Then, finally, in early February, Cam sent out an order for the party to "cease all public activity."*

Trinh Quoc Khanh's faction remained the only Social Democratic Party in existence by the spring of 1972, but Lam Thanh Nguyen's Hoa Hao Social Democratic Veterans Group, described above, also had become a legally authorized party. (There was some uncertainty among its leadership in early 1972 as to whether it should continue as a party or should revert to its earlier status as a veterans association.) The other veterans association, founded in 1963, that of Tran Duy Don, still existed but was said to have a much smaller membership. And a newer veterans group, organized in 1968 by the Luong Trong Tuong faction and headed since April 1972 by Senator Le Phuoc Sang, was the Nguyen Trung Truc Security Forces Veterans Association (Hoi Cuu Chien-Sy Nguyen Truong Tuc ve Bao An Quan).**

2. The Church and Its Factions—the Rival Central Management Committees***

We will examine systematically Hoa Hao efforts in the arena of electoral competition later but first it is important to note that much of the Hoa Hao's actual political power has resided within the Central Management Committee of the church, as distinct from the Social Democratic Party. Intense struggles for power occurred in the post-Diem period between several church factions which would set up their own central committees. And believers at the lower levels would have little to say about divisive political orientations taken by

*"Quyet Dinh va Ra Linh" (Decision and Issuance of an Order) signed by Phan Ba Cam and dated February 5, 1972, a copy of which was given the writer by Phan Ba Cam.

**Interview with Senator Le Phuoc Sang, Cholon, April 1974. Nguyen Trung Truc was a 19th century nationalist (and one of four persons Huynh Phu So was believed to incarnate).

***The present writer has relied extensively on Tran Nhut Thang op. cit., pp. 60-65, for the information in this section.
some of these central committees which Huynh Phu So would have condemned most strongly.

The most powerful faction leader in the early post-Diem period was Luong Trong Tuong, who had served the church loyally during the hard days under Diem and who would align his faction toward the government, in return for which he would receive important political and financial support. From 1967 until early 1968, a faction led by Huynh Van Nhiem, supported by much of the church's working leadership including its eleven important province-level management committees, sought to oppose the increasingly manipulative tactics of Tuong. The relatives of the departed prophet were the most prestigious members of the church headquarters or "Holy See" (Thanh Dia) at Hoa Hao Village in Chau Doc Province. Popularly referred to as the To Dinh ("family temple") group, they sought to act as a balancing agent to mitigate the factional tension within the church. This group included Mrs. Huynh Cong Bo, mother of the prophet, usually referred to as "Duc Ba," or "Sainted Madame;" Huynh Van ("Chin") Quoc, a half-brother of the prophet's father and an Aspirant (provisional second lieutenant) in the Vietnamese Army; the prophet's sister (Miss Nam); and her husband, Lam Dong Thanh.* The other members of the To Dinh group deferred to Duc Ba, who was the eldest and who became progressively more senile until her death in June 1967. Aspirant Quoc was the next most important To Dinh figure in the Hoa Hao politics of that period but he often seemed to sympathize with the powerful Tuong faction. Given the respect and even reverence with which Master Huynh's mother, particularly, was regarded, the lack of political judgment and forcefulness of the To Dinh group proved a great liability in the movement's quest for unity.

Luong Trong Tuong, by an early strategem, prevailed upon Duc Ba to back him, enabling him to become chairman of the central church committee for the first term, from (November) 1964 to 1967. By the latter date, the tendency for the church

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*Huynh Cong Bo, the prophet's father, had died in 1961.
**This strategem of Tuong and his supporters is described in Ibid., pp. 52-54.
to become involved in politics had been increased by the government's promulgation of the 1966 constitution and the campaigns underway for the presidential and National Assembly elections of 1967.

Tuong's initially high prestige in the church began to tarnish as a consequence of a string of factional conflicts. Early on, he squabbled with Nguyen Ngoc To, who ranked immediately under him on this central committee, after To was named Minister of Agriculture in the Phan Huy Quat government and refused Tuong's recommendation to appoint a Tuong supporter (Le Phuoc Sang) to an important post in that ministry, giving him a lesser job. This tiff brought charges and countercharges by each side, some widely disseminated, which tended to denigrate both opponents, but mostly Tuong, it appears, and also to lessen the prestige of the church itself in the eyes of the believers.*

In another episode, Tuong tried to organize a new military force to protect security in the Hoa Hao areas, although there was no appreciable insecurity there. This project would have increased his own power in the church still further and evidently it was backed by ARVN General Nguyen Huu Co and other Army officers for their own purposes. It was opposed by Tran Duy Don, who had organized a "friendship association" attempting to unify church and party factions and hoping to found a Hoa Hao security force under its own aegis, a project in which Don seems to have been similarly motivated by prospects of political and financial gain.**

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*Ibid., p. 55. Tuong had To kidnaped at the Holy See and held until Gen. Lam Thanh Nguyen threatened to use force to secure his release.

**Ibid., p. 56. Don's short-lived organization was the Unified Hoa Hao Social Democratic Friendship Association.
This narrow factional maneuvering was deplored by many of the Hoa Hao and there were periodic efforts to reform the organization. Such an effort was led by Nguyen Van Ca, member of the Social Democratic Party's provisional executive committee who set up a Hoa Hao Buddhist Loyal Believers' Bloc in May 1966 and organized a large meeting at the Holy See to denounce Tuong's security force. His group went so far as to storm into and damage Tuong's central church office and the upshot was that Tuong dissolved the security force. Even greater violence would characterize these factional struggles later, however. Tuong was determined not to leave office at the end of his term so he first stretched it out a few months and then adopted various stratagems to prevent anyone else from succeeding him. When the delayed general meeting was held in March 1967, the members voted to delay voting for a new Central Management committee for four months and in the interim to set up a Committee on Current Affairs. The man selected to head the latter was ARVN/Col. Tran Van Tuoi, who had served as a secretary to Master Huynh and more recently been assigned as ARVN sector commander of An Giang Province. Tuong condemned this action as unlawful and withdrew from the central committee. Members of his group and others felt some real concern over whether a colonel on active duty could serve both the army and the church, but Tuong's position was believed by many to be more narrowly factional than this. By withdrawing from the committee he apparently hoped to effect an informal boycott of the church's work for a time and then send a delegation of believers, seemingly nonpartisan but actually under his orders, to Duc Ba to petition her to call him back. He then hoped to negotiate with the old lady for the conditions he desired, including appointment to the church chairmanship for life. However, this ploy failed, whereupon Tuong undertook a propaganda campaign against Col. Tuoi, with banderoles and leaflets in the Holy See area, charging that he was trying to militarize the religion.

At this point, Aspirant Huynh Van Quoc, half-brother of the prophet's father, met with the prophet's ailing mother and brought back a message ordering...
Tuong to stay in his post until the new second-term Central Management Committee could be elected. This apparent policy switch by the Duc Ba confused and disgruntled many in the leadership circles."

Furthermore, the Saigon government evidently sought to strengthen Tuong's hand in another way: the prophet's mother had requested that the army grant Lt. Col. Tuoi extended leave to serve the church, but Saigon turned this down.

The church began to pull itself together to a degree, however, and a meeting of the Current Affairs Committee on May 4, 1967, attended by representatives of the church management committees from ten provinces and the capital, voted to invest the Committee with authority to organize elections of leaders for the second term. It also voted to deny Le Phuoc Sang, one of Tuong's protégés and an ambitious young politician later to be elected to the Senate, the right to represent the church in liaison with the national government. Both Sang and Tuong had become involved in import business schemes using the church's money, apparently, including ten million piastres given by Premier Nguyen Cao Ky for the rebuilding of the church and another million and a half with which Sang was supposed to have constructed a memorial to the Hoa Hao war dead. Tuong refused to transfer his own authority to the Current Affairs Committee, provoking renewed dissatisfaction. Then Premier Ky, mending his own political fences, paid a courtesy call on the prophet's mother in An Giang in the course of which he was reported to have persuaded her to appoint Tuong as a high-ranking advisor charged with unifying the church. Tuong thereupon took a seemingly conciliatory position, admitting that the events of the past few months had been harmful to the organization. At this point Tuoi went along with Tuong and both became honorary advisors to the Current Affairs Committee.

The impending national elections of 1967 appeared to offer a range of political opportunities to the Hoa Hao but the campaign was to prove extremely divisive. Lt. Col. Tuoi convened a meeting at the Holy See to discuss Hoa Hao election campaign strategy after some of the other leaders, notably Huynh Van Nhiem, already had made
provisional selections of candidates to represent the movement. Nhiem was one of two Hoa Hao on the National Leadership Council (the formal structure of the ruling military junta) and head of the Hoa Hao representation office in Saigon. He had cooperated with a group of politicians in an ambitious effort to pull candidates from a range of sects and parties into a Toan Viet or "All Vietnam" Bloc of three slates (of 10 men each, plus alternates) for the Senate contest. At the meeting chaired by Tuoi, 12 Hoa Hao were approved as candidates on the three slates, but curiously, they did not include Luong Trong Tuong, his supporter Le Phuoc Sang, nor Tuoi himself.

From this point on, antagonism steadily grew between the Tuong-Liem faction and Huynh Van Nhiem and his supporters identified with these slates. Le Phuoc Sang and Huynh Van Lau, chairman of the church council in Chau Doc, promptly organized a church "general meeting" of their own which condemned Nhiem and the Toan Viet slates and voted to restore Luong Trong Tuong's group at the head of the church in place of Lt. Col. Tuoi's Current Affairs Committee.

These resolutions, however, were immediately countered by a group representing eleven provinces which backed Nhiem and Col. Tuoi and called for a national general meeting on September 15, 1967 to hold the overdue election for the second term Central Management Committee. But when this meeting was held, Tuong found ways to block its deliberations and manipulate the outcome, making Aspirant temporary Quoc the national committee head, assisted by Tuong and Tuoi.

*These three slates were popularly referred to as the "coconut tree slates" because that tree was featured in their emblem.

**Tuong's group came to the meeting to protest it and then, after a new chairman had been elected by (Dang Van Kinh, chairman of the church's Vinh Long Province Committee), Tuong, accompanied by Aspirant Quoc and ex-Gen. Lam
Tuong steadily enhanced his own position by undercutting the positions of Aspirant Quoc and Tuoi. Finally, after another central committee member (Van Phu) convoked another general meeting in Can Tho which was attended by a number of province representatives and ratified the original September 15 election of Dang Van Kinh as central chairman, Col. Tuoi lost even further influence, resigned his church office and returned to the Army.

Tuong now asserted his dominance over a central committee election preparation committee formed by Aspirant Quoc which set a new election date for December. Despite the protests of Lam Thanh Nguyen and most or all of the province committees against holding the election under such Tuong-dominated circumstances—plus even a formal postponement of the election by Aspirant Quoc—the Tuong group went ahead and held it anyway.

Tuong's manipulations were by now producing intense dissatisfaction among other Hoa Hao leaders. So when a Tuong delegation (which included Aspirant Quoc) called on President Thieu and other high officials in Saigon to represent the Tuong leadership as the truly legitimate one, Tuong's opponents reacted with unusual vigor. A high-level church council called Aspirant Quoc and others to account and obtained their promises to rectify their actions. Then on January 2, 1968, the representatives Thanh Nguyen, returned to the hall where further balloting was in process, declared the meeting illegal and asked everyone to leave. Further politicking that night produced a temporary agreement whereby Aspirant Quoc would be named church chairman and Tuong, Tuoi and Nguyen would serve as vice presidents. This agreement fell apart the next morning, though, and the three called another meeting for ten days to return to the old arrangement whereby Aspirant Quoc would become temporary head representative of the Holy See, assisted by Tuong and Tuoi. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
of the eleven province councils of the church held an election which replaced the Hoa Hao representation and liaison in Saigon headed by Tuong with a group headed by Huynh Van Nhiem.

At this point, Tuong's standing within the church was lower than that of Nhiem's,* since the only real grass-roots support Tuong could claim came from a part of An Giang Province in which his subordinate, Le Quang Liem, was influential. But although Huynh Van Nhiem had the internal support of the eleven provincial church committees, he did have anything like the external support which Tuong was receiving from President Thieu and Vice President Ky.

In April 1968 Tuong alienated still further the eleven provinces group,** prompting the latter to hold a new election the following month naming Huynh Van Nhiem as legitimate chairman of the church central committee in the hope that he could counter the machinations of Tuong. Nhiem, however, was less forceful and politically skillful than Tuong and the latter kept the pot of factional strife boiling.

Now Tuong claimed to represent the entire Hoa Hao movement in his own collaboration with a significant new political party founded in Saigon, in May 1968. This was the Vietnam Workers and Farmers Association (Hiep-Hoi Cong Nong Viet-Nam, predecessor of the Worker Farmer Party described in another section of this report), whose leadership included Tran Quoc Buu and his colleagues of the Confederation of Vietnamese

*This group included Le Quang Liem, Nguyen Van Ca and Aspirant Quoc's son, Senator Huynh Quang Tru.

**On April 28, 1968, Tuong warned that severe sanctions would be taken against anyone declaring himself in support of the eleven western provinces group, and then Tuong angered the provincial groups further by appearing to take lightly a statement by Foreign Minister Tran Van Do to a Swiss newspaper (Gazette de Lausanne) comparing the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects with the National Liberation of South Vietnam.
Labor. Buu and Tuong were named as honorary chairmen of the new group and Tuong's lieutenants, Liem and Sang, also became officers. Tuong claimed falsely to the government that all Hoa Hao believers automatically became members of the new association. (And a political comment attributed to Tran Quoc Buu also antagonized the Hoa Hao community, namely, his approval of the idea of a coalition government with the Communists.) Furthermore, Le Quang Liem had arranged for the new Association to use the Hoa Hao representation office in Saigon as its headquarters.

As opposition to the Tuong faction's activities again mounted among the eleven provincial committees, (Miss Nam) the prophet's sister/ and Aspirant Quoc sought to get the two sides together. Those factions plus a third group of influential, neutral personages met at the Holy See on June 16, 1968.* The upshot was that Luong Trong Tuong announced his withdrawal from the church central committee, ostensibly signifying his approval of whatever action the meeting might take. His opponent Nhiem thereupon complimented Tuong on his good will and also withdrew, unwittingly furthering Tuong's newest ploy, which soon would become evident.

*When this third group of influential personages hitherto uninvolved in the dispute arrived to request that Miss Nam and Quoc remain neutral in the deliberations, it also was invited to participate. Its presence there evidently had some bearing on Tuong's decision to declare his "resignation" in the manner described below as a means of furthering his own ends, rather than try to argue for his original position in the meeting.
The church thus was left without effective governance and those in the central remaining leadership decided to set up an interim committee for three months, to be composed of three men from each of the three groups which had come to the meeting. Tuong, however, not only stayed away from this session but shortly before it, placed announcements in the newspapers denying he had resigned and claiming he still was chairman of the Central Management Committee. At this point definitive action was taken by the Current Affairs Committee, now headed by a former Army major, Tran Van Doi, who finally ousted Tuong's staff from the church headquarters at the Holy See. Doi, regarded as upright and courageous, enjoyed significant support from the Holy See and the eleven provincial committees, so Tuong was unable to get around him as he had his earlier antagonists.

The influence of Tuong, and especially that of his lieutenant, Liem, declined steadily from this point onward, particularly after the outbreak of factional violence at the Hoa Hao office in Saigon. On July 20, 1968, when the Current Affairs Committee went there to place the office under its own authority, it was met with an exploding grenade and small arms fire which killed two men and wounded 30 others. The church authorities generally appeared to believe that Liem, in charge of the office, had given the attack order and his standing in the church sank to a new low.* Nevertheless, Tuong, Liem and their supporters were able to keep their faction active. They owed their ability to do this in large part to political support by the government; and their critics have claimed that they were motivated significantly in their refusal to give up their church posts not only by simple political ambition, but also by their desire for church protection against prosecution.

*Tran Nhut Thang reports that he heard several witnesses give testimony in the police investigation of the affair that Liem had indeed given the order for the attack. Ibid., p. 65.
of themselves and relatives on charges of draft evasion and corruption.*

A new Central Management Committee for the second term finally was elected on October 6, 1968, headed by Nguyen Duy Hinh.** In July 1971, Hinh was re-elected for the third term, and when he died in late 1971, Le Truong Sanh moved up to replace him from the rank immediately below.*** Field research in the spring of 1972, which included visits to the Holy See and Hoa Hao communities in the Provinces of Chau Doc, An Giang, Kien Phong, Phong Dinh and Vinh Long, indicated that this central committee was the effective church authority over many management committees down to the hamlet level. And a significant factor in this was the support it had received from the Holy See since October 1968.

Huynh Van Nhiem ceased to lead a church faction after the defeat of many Hoa Hao candidates in the elections of 1967 (although seven members of his own faction were elected to the Lower House) and particularly after the trauma of the

*Tran Nhut Thang, very critical of Tuong and Liem, alleges (ibid., p. 65) that Liem feared prosecution for corruption; that Sang had been paid the million and a half piastres given the Hoa Hao by the government to build the memorial to the Hoa Hao dead which was not built (and a Hoa Hao university, which only later was founded at Long Xuyen); and that two others had sons who had evaded the draft by using church connections.

**Hanh actually was elected First Deputy Chairman since the chairmanship was reserved in honorary fashion for Master Huynh.

***Church Officials under Sanh were Van Phu (Nguyen Van Chuyen) who moved up to the rank of Second (actually First) Deputy Chairman, and Thanh Nam (Nguyen Long), Secretary. Influential advisors considered prestigious because of earlier association with the prophet included Dr. Tran Ly, Truong Van Hanh and Le Van Diep.
In 1968, Nhiem devoted himself exclusively to the church network of local administrative committees and in July 1968 he even withdrew from the church's central committee.

Luong Trong Tuong continued to lead a group which now differed in title slightly from that of the Central Management Committee (called instead the Central Management "Council," or Hoi Dong Tri Su). It still was supported by a certain body of believers, enjoyed political and some financial support from the Saigon government and cooperated with the Vietnam Confederation of Labor in directing the Worker Farmer Party (Cong Nong Dang). But it no longer received the recognition of the Holy See and its authority within the church already had diminished because of its lack of middle-level management committees to furnish liaison with committees at the village and hamlet levels.

Furthermore, Le Quang Liem had split off from Tuong to form his own central committee in 1971. The principal factors in that dispute seem to have been Liem's penchant for corruption and his desire to manipulate the Tuong group.

Liem, who could quote easily passages from the Sam Gian (Hoa Hao bible) and had a persuasive way with semi-literate villagers, had been implicated earlier in serious charges of corruption. After going from the Hoa Hao armed forces into the ARVN, where he had risen to the rank of major under the Diem regime, he had served as province chief in Khanh Hoa after Diem's fall and reportedly made a fortune in that post, eventually becoming the first official to be fired publicly for corruption by the National Leadership Council (of mostly ARVN ranking officers). Then in 1971 Liem embarrassed the church and Tuong by a scandal over his alleged, large-scale selling of draft deferments to Chinese residents. However, Tuong stuck by him through that affair and delayed the army's investigation so that Liem, then running for a Lower House seat, could get elected and thereafter enjoy parliamentary immunity.*

*According to Senator Le Phuoc Sang, in an interview in Saigon of April 14, 1972, an anonymous letter to the Army Inspectorate General accused Liem of selling draft deferments to 117 Chinese whom it identified fully. The Inspectorate General asked
But then he made the unacceptable demand on Tuong that he replace two-thirds of the members of his central "council" with men of his choice. Furthermore, he refused in 1971 to turn the Saigon liaison office of the church over to the Tuong group (reminiscent of the violent 1968 incident, a similar effort by the Current Affairs Committee). The Tuong and Liem factions periodically issued statements condemning each other and Tuong on one occasion requested the police to enter and search the Hoa Hao representation office in Saigon under the control of Liem. Therefore, when serious negotiations toward unifying the church factions were undertaken after the fall 1971 elections, only the Tuong and Sanh groups were involved and not Liem's.* The first communiqué from the negotiators, on February 22, 1972, said that the two groups would merge in a new central committee limiting itself to religious affairs and leaving politics to the Unified Social Democratic Party. Welfare and mutual aid activities were to become the responsibility of the Hoa Hao veterans groups and the hope was expressed less formally that there would be a similar attempt at amalgamation among them. Tuong for permission to investigate, and he stalled as long as he dared before replying in order to give Liem as much time as possible to win his election for a Lower House seat. (By this time there was a possibility that the army could charge Tuong with obstructing justice.) The Sanh church central committee met and voted to stay out of the case, which angered Liem.

In due course, Liem won his election and evidently was grateful to Tuong. Then, however, he asked Tuong to reconstitute his central council, as described above, whereupon Tuong replied that this was unreasonable and told Liem that whatever prestige he had flowed from his membership in that council. Liem thereupon quit Tuong's group and formed his own. Sang claimed that Liem subsequently had tried to return to the Tuong fold but had been rejected.
*According to Senator Le Phuoc Sang (interview of April 1972, Cholon),
Tuong had proposed a method of electing the Central Management Committee which he
believed would be more conducive to consensus. This would be a general election
participated in by all believers, instead of just delegations elected by the lower
levels (and staged by provinces, one province per week). Sang, a member of the
Tuong faction, claimed the Sanh faction had rejected this proposal for the
(unstated) reason that it feared such elections would give clear control to
Tuong.
Geographical Distribution of the Hoa Hao Community in the Post-Diem Period

The Hoa Hao have been widely distributed throughout the provinces and towns of the Mekong Delta (significant but uncounted numbers of them being found even in NLF-controlled areas), but Hoa Hao and government figures on this population have been in considerable disagreement. Holy See records in Chau Doc are reported to have indicated that in 1947 there were 2,010,000 believers. By 1968, Tran Nhut Thang wrote that the total was close to a million and a half and his breakdown of this, including contrasting Hoa Hao and government estimates of believers and non-believers in the leading 15 provinces, is shown in Table I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Total No. of Hoa Hao Believers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>An Giang</td>
<td>491,170</td>
<td>349,607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Chau Doc</td>
<td>464,539</td>
<td>270,712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sadec</td>
<td>264,511</td>
<td>126,975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Kien Phong</td>
<td>312,960</td>
<td>112,988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Vinh Long</td>
<td>476,132</td>
<td>55,346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Phong Dinh</td>
<td>447,116</td>
<td>40,479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Chuong Thien</td>
<td>248,731</td>
<td>18,996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Rach Gia</td>
<td>378,064</td>
<td>17,432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Kien Tuong</td>
<td>56,034</td>
<td>14,408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>My Tho</td>
<td>54,146</td>
<td>7,939 (est. for whole Province)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Ba Xuyen</td>
<td>379,319</td>
<td>2,691</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Gia Dinh</td>
<td>1,099,561</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Ca Mau</td>
<td>224,000</td>
<td>512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Long An</td>
<td>334,516</td>
<td>680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Bac Lieu</td>
<td>247,469</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTALS** | **5,300,134** | **1,019,598** | **1,437,627**
Several comments on these figures are in order here. First, the Hoa Hao sought to include here all believers, regardless of whether they were listed and served by regular management committees of the church, whereas the government placed great importance on the existence or absence of these committees in a given area. Thus, the greatest discrepancy between Hoa Hao and government figures was found in those for Bac Lieu, where, according to the government, this community was almost non-existent. But, because according to Tran Nhut Thang, Master Huynh taught in Bac Lieu for a considerable period, it was believed that the Hoa Hao population there may have reached a total of 100,000. Then, because the local management committees "were insufficiently active, the security situation deteriorated," a situation contributing to the "slipshod statistics" given here.*

The fragmentation within the church leadership from the mid-sixties on made census taking difficult. The leading church faction, that of Le Truong Sanh, said that by the end of 1971 it had issued about 300,000 membership cards to believers and it maintained that the great bulk of these cards had been issued to family heads, so that each card actually accounted for four or five believers. This would bring the real total of believers, including children, in contact with the church committees to somewhere between 1.2 and 1.5 million.**

footnotes from preceding page:
* Ibid., p. 87.
** Ibid., p. 85.
*** Source: Ibid., p. 86.

* Ibid., p. 85. The table appears in this work on p. 86.
** Interviews with church officials in An Giang and Chau Doc, February and March 1972. Incidentally, older people usually have not been so eager to possess these cards as younger persons who need various kinds of identification.
in their contacts with the police, army and other government officials. This is somewhat less true now than it was when the Hoa Hao controlled vast areas and constituted the government as well as the dominant church there.
E. Hoa Hao Political Competition in the Electoral Arena

We have noted that the Hoa Hao under Diem was limited to two seats in the National Assembly. When the new provincial elections were first held in the post-Diem period on May 30, 1965, the Hoa Hao was in an incomparably stronger competitive position for several reasons. For one, the prestige of the Central Management Committee was high, the fierce factionalism that began to rend the movement later had not yet begun, and the body of believers was optimistic about the church's future. For another, many provincial and local government officials in the Hoa Hao areas were themselves Hoa Hao and they strongly encouraged their co-religionists to run in the elections. Tran Nhut Thang has written,

Now, for the first time /the Hoa Hao/ shared in the competition against other groups using all its capabilities.

In fact, after so many years of suppression and the subsequent period of reorganization (following the 1963 coup), the Hoa Hao organization and believers were vociferously eager for a "test by fire" to see just how much influence they possessed.*

For these reasons, Thang comments, these 1965 provincial election results reflected the Hoa Hao's latent political strength in a way that no others before or after it were able to do. The movement also did well in the subsequent village and hamlet elections, as will be discussed below, but as Thang also notes, these lower offices were of such limited attractiveness to Hoa Hao leaders in terms of power, influence and salary that these election results afforded only a limited perspective on the organization's political potential.**

*Ibid., p. 89. (Trans. by the present writer.)

**Ibid., p. 89-90. The period covered in Thang's study ended in 1968, but the movement's electoral fortunes from then until 1972 did not improve greatly, so that by the latter date his evaluation still had to be considered accurate.
The 1965 provincial elections brought such solid victories to the Hoa Hao as to nurture their hopes for unity during the dark years of fragmentation ahead. In An Giang, 10 out of 12 Hoa Hao candidates officially endorsed by the church won. The two other winners ran as independents but actually were Hoa Hao believers also, although they did not have the church’s formal endorsement.*

In Chau Doc Province, where Hoa Hao ex-General Lam Thanh Nguyen was headquartered, Hoa Hao voter discipline was less in evidence, and only one of three candidates of the Hoa Hao Veterans’ Rally led by Nguyen won. Still, in a competition among 27 candidates for 12 seats, 11 Hoa Hao / victorious.**

The leading Hoa Hao political influence in Kien Phong was that of Phan Ba Cam and his Social Democratic Party and the election there took on the aspect of a contest between the party and the church. Four candidates from each of these sides won and the other only winner, though an independent and non-believer, had a brother who had been a well-known Hoa Hao military officer.***

*All 22 candidates were nominees of the church, representatives of the Hoa Hao Veterans Rally, or Hoa Hao believers running as "independents." The spread between vote totals for candidates was very small. The only unsuccessful church candidate happened to be listed in thirteenth on the ballots and he failed to get the total achieved by the No. 12 candidate by a mere .5 percent of the total vote cast. Ibid., p. 90.

**Ibid., pp. 91-92. The other winner, who came in second, was a Buddhist. Along with the majority of "independents" who were Hoa Hao, there were two Buddhists and two Cao Dai. But the fact that only four of the church’s formally supported candidates won indicated/of the church to maintain voter discipline here.

***Ibid., pp. 92-93.
In the populous province of Vinh Long, which then also included present-day Sa Dec, 24 candidates ran for 12 seats. Among them were four representatives of the Hoa Hao Veterans Rally, all of whom were elected, and two candidates of the church, one of which was successful. Among the seven winning independent candidates, six were Hoa Hao believers (the last-place winner was a Catholic). In sum, then, 11 of the 12 seats were won by Hoa Hao.*

In Phong Dinh, the Hoa Hao comprised only ten to 10 to 12 percent of the population and realized the necessity for a vigorous and disciplined campaign. It achieved this by campaigning hard in the villages and organizing meetings among militia units composed of former Hoa Hao combatants. Consequently, it captured ten of the twelve council seats.**

By 1967, however, when the first Senate and Lower House elections were held, Hoa Hao fragmentation had become severe. On the church side, the Tuoi and Tuong factions contended. On the party side, there had been a successful unification effort, but had been Trinh Quoc Khanh / tapped to be Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu's running mate. Khanh later was replaced by Gen. Nguyen Cao Ky, but because of his early legislative involvement in that presidential slate, he was still off the Hoa Hao tickets for the legislative contests, depriving them of a certain degree of strength they otherwise would have had.***

*Ibid., pp. 93-94.

**One simple technique they used to facilitate voter recognition of Hoa Hao candidates was to enclose each of these men's individual election insigniae within a circle. Ibid., p. 94.

***Ibid., p. 95.
As described earlier, the church's Current Affairs Committee faction led by Dai Tran Van Tuoi had supported in the 1967 Senate campaign three Toan Viet ("All Vietnam", the "coconut tree") slates. These had been put together by politicians from a variety of groups including Huynh Van Nhiem from the Hoa Hao and they contained six Hoa Hao, including Nhiem himself.* All three were defeated.

The Luong Trang Tuong faction put up two slates which carried five Hoa Hao candidates, including Le Quang Liem and Le Phuoc Sang. These also were defeated.**

The Dan Xa dr Social Democratic Party also tried to field two slates but only one, that headed by Phan Ba Cam, finally ran.*** It also was defeated.

The only Hoa Hao elected to the Senate were two who ran without the church's or party's support. Both, however, derived political support from earlier political work in the organization.**** Two other Hoa Hao independents on two other slates were defeated.*****

*The other Hoa Hao were Lam Ngoc Thach, Thanh Nam, Nhan Duc Khuong, Quan Huu Kim and Nguyen Huu Luc.

It should be noted that the fate of the three "All Vietnam" slates was tied somewhat to the political fortunes of Gen. Nguyen Cao Ky. He showed an early interest in these slates and apparently was willing to give them some financial as well as political support. But after he decided to step down in the presidential race and take the vice-presidential slot on the ticket headed by Gen Nguyen Van Thieu, he became less directly involved in the backing of senatorial slates generally. Information obtained by the writer during field interviewing during that 1967 campaign in Vietnam.

**These slates, using the bell as their insignia, included the following additional Hoa Hao candidates: Tran Kieu (also known as Bui Van Manh), Huynh Van Lau and Nguyen Cong Minh.

***In addition to Tran Buy Don and Truong Kim Cu of the Hoa Hao, it also included representatives of the VNQDD, Dai Viet and Dai Viet Duy Dan.

****They were Le Tan Buu, on the Huynh Van Cao slate, who had been the secretary
In all, ten slates, of a total of 48 competing, listed one or more Hoa Hao candidates and in the Fourth Military Region, which included the Hoa Hao provinces, the Phan Ba Cam slate ran first (with 208,972 votes), although it was defeated nationwide. And following it in electoral support in the Fourth MR were the three "All Vietnam" slates and another led by La Thanh Nghe which also included Hoa Hao representatives. However, the two winning slates which did have some Hoa Hao candidates tallied very meager totals in Fourth MR, indicating that Hoa Hao support had been a minor factor in their success. The plethora of slates with some Hoa Hao representation on them had been confusing to Hoa Hao voters, many of whom evidently had striven to support Hoa Hao candidates as best they could. But this proliferation of slates was only a reflection of the disunity and the mutually harmful competitive campaign tactics used by the Hoa Hao groups. In general, the election was destructive to the Hoa Hao and tended to lower the prestige of its leaders in the eyes of the followers. For this reason, however, it also was seen/stimulant to new efforts toward unification.*

Various Hoa Hao candidates were more successful in the Lower House elections of that year, seven being elected from the Huynh Van Nhiem faction** and three from that of Luong Trong Tuong.***

They were Mrs. Nguyen Xuan Thiep on the Tran Van Do slate and Nguyen Van Ca on the Le Van Nghiem slate.

*Ibid., p. 97.

**Mrs. Tran Thi Hoa (nee Phan, a widow of Ba Cut), Pham Van Hoi, Bui Van Nhan Huynh Thanh Day, Nguyen Huu Trinh, Ngo Van Hieu, and Nguyen Van Hue.

***Huynh Van Lam, Dang Van Cong, Nguyen Van Tho.
In the provincial council elections of June 1970, the leading church central committee of Nguyen Duy Hinh nominated only a small number of candidates in a limited number of provinces (Chau Doc, An Giang, Kien Phong, Sa Dec, Phong Dinh and Vinh Long). Its rationale was that the church needed only one member on any given province council for the purpose of observing the work of local government and maintaining liaison with government officials.* In contrast to this modest position, there were disagreements within the Luong Trong Tuong faction between Tuong and Le Quang Liem over the selection of candidates and negotiations with government authorities for assistance.

Then in the October 1970 elections for one-half of the Senate, the Hinh central committee did not nominate a single candidate (nor did it designate any to run on other slates). And now the feuding within the Tuong faction increased. Liem announced that he wanted to represent personally the Tuong faction on the strongest slate running, that of Huynh Van Cao. Tuong disagreed and named as his candidate Le Phuoc Sang, who was elected. (Other Hoa Hao senators were Le Tan Buu, whose term ended in 1973 and Tran Duy Don whose term, like Sang's, would end in 1976).

The Tuong-Liem conflict intensified as these men quarreled over the selection of candidates for the Lower House election later that year and after they split up in August 1971, Liem and his followers constituted a third faction. Each exerted strenuous efforts to secure government backing. and the Liem group was successful at the polls, due evidently to substantial official support.

Among the defeated Hoa Hao, incidentally, was Tuong's son, Luong Le, a man over 30 and possessing no particular distinction. Senator Le Phuoc Sang, asked to assist in the son's campaign, said later that he had advised Le, who lived in Saigon, to spend at least a month campaigning in the district in An Giang for which he was

*Interviews with Thanh Nam in Saigon, Van Phu at the Holy See and Le Van My in Long Xuyen, among others, conducted by the writer and Nhu Phong.
However, Le refused to do this because his father, Tuong, evidently had assumed his son could get elected mainly on the strength of an order issued by his own church central committee/even though Le did not reside in An Giang and had never worked in the service of the church.*

Still assuming a low profile in the arena of national politics, the Hinh central committee wanted only a few former deputies who had been faithful to the church to run in the 1971 elections. But the only two in this category who did were defeated.**

Hoa Hao deputies in the Lower House following that election totalled 16. However, these included men not identified with the Hoa Hao during the campaign; and after the election, the Hoa Hao members became affiliated with various legislative blocs instead of trying to form one of their own.

Hoa Hao leaders in various provinces appeared to believe that these elections were rigged against their candidates. They did not appear to regard this a a crucially important matter, however, partly at least because they never had regarded national government elections as particularly honest and therefore did not have very high expectations of victory.

Reinforcing church leaders' apprehensions about the corrupting and alienating effect of political office-holding on its representatives was the feeling on the part of many of these leaders that Hoa Hao senators and deputies had little contact with their constituencies after they had gone to Saigon, although there were a few exceptions.***

As might be predicted, in the campaign preceding the presidential election of October 1971, the Hinh central committee remained silent during the preliminary competition between Thieu, Minh and Ky while the other two church factions were directly involved.

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*Interview with Senator Sang, Saigon, April 14, 1974.

**They were Pham Van Hoa in Phong Dinh and Buu Van Nhan in Vinh Long. Another Hoa Hao, Phan Tan Hung, was elected in Phong Dinh because he had the support of the provincial council.

***One with an exceptional reputation for maintaining contact with his constituents was a young Doctor, Ha Xai. He was one of those who had run as an independent, although he was a believer.
The Hoa Hao has never envisaged trying to use the electoral route to gain leadership of the national government. This would be most likely to succeed, as the church acknowledges, for although the body of believers is one of the largest single group of South Vietnam citizens on the government side bound together in any real cohesion, it is composed largely of farmers in population concentrations in one region of the country.

With such discord among higher-level Hoa Hao leaders, it has naturally been at the village and hamlet levels that the organization has maintained its firmest political control, informally and formally. In the provinces of highest Hoa Hao population density, such as An Giang, Chau Doc, Sa Dec, Kien Phong, and also many villages in Phong Dinh and Vinh Long, the Hoa Hao often comprise village majorities, sometimes overwhelmingly large ones. (In Phu Hoa Village, Chau Thanh District, An Giang Province, for example, which has a population of about 5,000, all but five families are Hoa Hao)* In these communities, of course, Hoa Hao candidates obviously capture all or nearly all the local government posts contested by election, provided that they have duly assigned their observers to the polls on election days.

(continuation from preceding page)

During this field research in 1972, it was observed that Senator Le Phuoc Sang made repeated visits to the town of Long Xuyen, ostensibly at least in connection with the operation of the new Hoa Hao University there. His contacts with constituents appeared to be limited to leaders in the town itself.

*All the local government positions here are of course held by Hoa Hao. The man who was village chief in 1972 first had been appointed to that post by the province chief from 1958 to 1963 and subsequently was again placed in that post or the similar one of village chairman by elections in 1964, 1967, 1970 and 1971.
The extent of upward political mobility possible in these elections was greatest from hamlet and village up to the district, which tended to be the cutoff. Thus, members of the provincial management committees usually had served only at that level and rarely had served committees below it.

There were a number of posts on these committees available to men 21 and over but others generally were occupied only by men at least 35, although this was not dictated by written regulations. And some ranks, such as that of "advisor" (co van) at the various echelons were held by men generally even older, e.g., 40 for even the village and district levels and at least 50 for the province level.*

There was a regular turnover in these posts, as the term of office was two years at the province level and only one year at levels below that. The turnover was estimated roughly by one source at about fifty percent per year at the hamlet and village levels and about twenty five percent for the district and province.**


**Ibid.
From 1967 on, one factor in the Hoa Hao's failure to demonstrate its potential strength in national and provincial elections, in the view of the leading or Hinh (later Sanh) faction, was the apparent discrimination against it by the Thieu government in favor of Tuong's group. Another factor, but a related one, was the desire of the Hinh (Sanh) central committee to assign its more capable people to church responsibilities rather than see them become involved in high-level politics since the latter activity had generated so much opportunism and corruption even among formerly respected Hoa Hao leaders. (The length of National Assembly terms—four years for Lower House deputy and six years for senator—had a bearing on this, for these church leaders evidently would have been more willing to see their good men run for these offices if the terms had been shorter.)

This leading faction did not hold rigidly against Hoa Hao participation in upper level politics, though, and in 1972 its leaders said they were regularly reviewing the church's overall political experience. However, they obviously were very sensitive to the fact that any time a Hoa Hao was named to a high post in the Saigon government or was appointed province chief in a Hoa Hao area, the church inevitably received criticism from both within and without the Hoa Hao community, even if the man were relatively honest; if he were corrupt, of course, the criticism could become quite damaging. One aspect of the policy of discouraging capable Hoa Hao from taking government positions was to recall capable men from such posts if they were not being used appropriately and to give them duties on the church's upper-level management committees. One case in point was that of Army major who had been appointed as chief of a Chau Doc district bordering on Cambodia which offered notoriously rich payoffs for the movement of contraband goods in the region. Because of the pressures on him for involvement in this corrupt trade, the major got out of the job within six months by requesting a military discharge so that he could run for the An Giang
Provincial Council (to which he was duly elected.) He thereupon became also chairman of the church's management council for the province.*

Because of their chariness about politicking within the church, Sanh faction leaders sought to limit internal political discourse in ways that would maximize its educative and minimize its divisive effects. Thanh Nam, Secretary General of the faction, commented in 1972 that the Social Democratic Party had not recovered sufficiently since the Diem repression to operate effectively as a vehicle for political discussion and decision making, and since the church was not supposed to deal with political issues, it discouraged debate on such subjects, / the most purely local. He conceded that due to the rampant factionalism within the not church, this stricture had been very effective and the Sanh faction at least was trying therefore to avoid political discussion as much as possible until such time as the Social Democratic Party could be reorganized to take over this activity.**

In church's village level management committees, members thus were forbidden to debate national and international issues, though of course they were exposed to them by such media as the radio and newspapers and talked about them among themselves as private individuals to a certain extent. They were encouraged to discuss social and local economic issues (e.g., the construction and maintenance

*This was Le Van My, who was appointed in late 1969 as chief of Tan Chau District, a gateway for contraband goods, especially from Communist China, coming into Vietnam from Cambodia. Saigon newspapers estimated that the chief of that district could make a profit in an average month of from five to ten million piastres in the period preceding the American and South Vietnamese incursion into Cambodia in May 1970. Information from interviews with Le Van My and Nhu Phong.

**Interview with Thanh Nam, Saigon, February 11, 1972.
of local schools, bridges, dispensaries and the like) but not to the point where they might seek to challenge the authority of government authorities such as district chiefs for such matters had to be referred to the next higher level church management committee. A widely distributed circular urged the disciplined use of hierarchical channels for such matters so that church responses to "external affairs" would be coordinated and constructive.*

A candid explanation of the church's view of majoritarianism and its resultant policy of occasionally stepping in to affect the outcome of elections for

*Chi-Thi, Trich-yeu: Nhac-nho le-loi sinh-hoat" (Instruction, Subject: Reminder of Procedures /to be used in church activities/), from the Central Management Committee at the Holy See, through the Liaison Offices in Long Xuyen and Saigon, NO. 162/TV-TU/CT, to all executive /management _/ committees throughout the country, dated October 10, 1971, 3pp., mimeo. "Echelons cannot be skipped in relations with outside groups," this document said, and the "village management committee deals with the village authority of the government, the district management committee with the district, and so on up the line through the province and the central levels. Infractions of this rule could bring "unfavorable consequences such as contradictions within the common direction, weaknesses to be exploited by outsiders and a reduction in the Church's prestige."

Limitations also were set on the activities of the church head in that he was not to act alone but"according to the principle of collective activity," whereby he could sign his name to any document dealing with external affairs "only in after discussions with/the /Central/ Management Committee..."