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## VIETNAM—VILLAGERS AND VOTERS

By **Humphrey McQueen\***

Almost every proposal to end the war in Vietnam includes a call for "free elections". As both sides claim to be fighting for democracy, such elections should be an acceptable means of ending the conflict. But are free elections a possibility in Vietnam? This article argues that they are not. Firstly, because the uses to which elections have been put in the past have destroyed the credibility of the electoral process for the Vietnamese; and secondly because the infrastructure of political parties with mass organisations, free and comprehensive communications, and local self-government is almost entirely absent. These two objections will be discussed in relation to the political and social life of the villagers who make up eighty per cent of the population and whose votes would therefore determine the outcome of a free election.<sup>1</sup> So much discussion of Vietnamese politics deals with the machinations of a coterie of generals that there is a tendency to overlook the central importance of the village. If for no other reason than that the bulk of the population resides there, elections can be understood properly only if they are appraised from the standpoint of the village. Information at this level, though scarce, is revealing.

The pre-colonial Vietnamese village structure was dominated by a council-of-notables, membership of which was determined by land ownership. Control of village life was consequently in the hands of a largely self-perpetuating oligarchy, centred on the council-of-notables, which chose from its ranks an executive officer, or "huong ca": he was chosen because of his lowly status to fulfil purely administrative tasks. The French failed to realise this and imposed upon the "huong ca" the functions of a "maire". This produced a series of unanticipated consequences in that "huong ca's" power vis-a-vis the ordinary villagers was strengthened, but he was simultaneously alienated from them because he now had responsibility for implementing central demands at an individual level. This was

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<sup>1</sup> Some commentators would go further and argue that free elections are entirely unsuited to nations characterised as underdeveloped. See Emerson, Rupert "From Empire to Nation" (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1962) pp. 272-292.

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a new phenomenon. Previously the proverb "The Emperor's writ ends at the village gate" had summed up the relationship between the villagers and the central administration. Paul Mus relates that when telegraph wires were first introduced the villagers were delighted and cut them for household purposes. The "huong ca" was given the job of preventing such behaviour. In some areas these new functions were given to "huong ca" who were appointed on a basis of seniority. Because of their age such men were often incapable of fulfilling the demands made upon them.<sup>2</sup> In every case the French drove a wedge between the notables and the peasants.

The first French move to standardise the internal political structure of the villages was made in 1904 when the size of the council-of-notables was halved by the removal of those members whose functions were spiritual rather than administrative. Legislation in 1927 increased the number of people eligible for membership of the council. The French hoped that the expansion of semi-elected councils, with which the villagers could identify, would correct the collapse of the village structure which their intervention had initiated. Village regeneration did not result because those with local support were often excluded as candidates, and because the French-educated locals could not gain support. A vital fracture to the already shaken traditional structures came in 1946 when the Viet Minh set up village councils based on universal suffrage.<sup>3</sup> This experience left the young, the poor and the landless with a promise that no subsequent Saigon administration has been able to fulfil. More recently in some NLF-controlled areas there have been elections for village councils but the degree of choice has ranged from complete, to some political restriction on candidates, to direct appointment from above.<sup>4</sup> The 1953 elections were largely village affairs and even though only 2,700 out of some 20,000 villages were involved they re-enforced the principle of elective councils started by the Viet Minh. This was a somewhat negative experience however. A Vietnamese administrative expert, writing of the success of Bao Dai's regime in establishing local self-government, could justifiably state that "the achievements in that field have been insignificant". The expert's book was given a prize by the Emperor.<sup>5</sup> But the way the 1955 referendum was conducted had a lasting effect of a different kind on popular attitudes to voting. The British diplomat, Donald Lancaster, tells of "police agents and canvassers (going) from door to door explaining the unpleasant consequences which failure to

2 Mus, Paul "The Role of the Village in Vietnamese Politics", "Pacific Affairs", XXII, 3, p. 268.

3 Hickey, G. C. "Village in Vietnam" (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1964) pp. 178-9; Thompson, Virginia "French Indo-China" (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1937) pp. 30-35; 236-8 and 249-254.

4 Pike, Douglas "Viet Cong" (M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1966) pp. 227-8.

5 Cited in Fall, Bernard B. "Vietnam Witness" (Praeger, New York, 1966) p. 49.

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vote would be likely to entail".<sup>6</sup> The memory of this, and of subsequent acts of force, persists in the peasants' readiness to vote.

Remembering the patient steps being taken by the Australian Government to construct a democracy in Papua and New Guinea by building local self-government units, it is worth reflecting further on the fate of the villages in Vietnam. The faltering advances taken by the French towards the same goal stopped altogether with the coming to power of the Ngo family. For seven years local government affairs were run by Saigon officials. This break was hardly repaired when — after the attempted putsch on 11 November, 1960 — the Ngos panicked and promised wide-ranging reforms which, in the field of local government, merely re-established the structure of provincial, municipal and village councils without making them elective. A year elapsed before the relevant regulations were even published. So blatantly undemocratic and unpopular were these appointed councils that a month later, in May, 1963, they were replaced at the village level by a council of five, including three appointed from Saigon, which "gave the villages as much leeway as the Communist administration . . . And the latter had at least the tactical advantage of having been in place for ten years or more."<sup>7</sup>

As if the absence of local government formations for seven years was insufficient, the Ngos combined this with the relocation of the bulk of the rural population in Strategic Hamlets. These were preceded by Agrovilles which were launched in 1959 and implemented with much haste and to little effect until they were abandoned in 1961. During these two years, twenty-three Agrovilles, often incomplete, managed to accommodate less than 40,000 people. "It was clear at the outset that the peasant disliked the program. He was obliged . . . to till a fallow plot which he had not chosen, but was required to buy. This factor of forced indebtedness added a further burden to the strain of displacement."<sup>8</sup> Although intended as a complete solution to internal security problems, the Agrovilles proved to be little more than a pilot scheme for the Strategic Hamlet Program which followed.

The degree of uncertainty that surrounds the precise commencement date of the Strategic Hamlets, is typical of the mystery that shrouds the entire program. Officially launched in 17 April, 1962, the program met with some initial successes, but these were overwhelmed by the "too rapid expansion" which followed. After the death of its architect, Nhu, the

6 Lancaster, Donald "The Emancipation of French Indo-China" (O.U.P., London, 1961) pp. 398-9.

7 Fall, Bernard B. "Two Vietnams" (Praeger, New York, 1967) pp. 273-4.

8 Zasloff, Joseph J., "Rural Resettlement in South Viet Nam: The Agrovillage Program", "Pacific Affairs, XXXV, 4, p. 338.

program was halted, and finally disbanded in March, 1964. Before this most peasants had voted with their feet and returned to their dinhs. But even the earliest stages were beset with difficulties. In the area around Ben-Cat, for example, homes were destroyed and the compensation included a copy of a U.S.I.S. brochure *Towards the Good Life*. General Khanh's judgment, though biased, is accurate: "This program has created many injustices and corrupted low level cadres." Weakened by these administrative dysfunctions, the scheme was further destroyed by the resistance of the villagers who objected to having to walk up to three miles to and from their paddy-fields.<sup>9</sup> Most of all they objected to the landlords who returned in the program's baggage train. Having been freed from rents by the NLF, the peasants were less terrified of future collectivisation than they were of immediate payments of back rent. Ten years of Diem largely destroyed the credibility of elections along with the social structure of the villages. The succeeding five years have done nothing but intensify this process.

The significance of village life in determining the outcome of any activity in Vietnam has been stressed, but it remains to examine how it applied in the 1967 elections. Article 104 of the Constitution provided that the Constituent Assembly should become a provisional Legislative Assembly with power to pass laws dealing with the conduct of the coming elections, the lifting of press censorship and the establishment of political parties. As the local government elections commenced the day after the Constitution was promulgated they were conducted without the benefit of the three laws which the new constitution held to be necessary for conduct of a free election. This is typical of the lack of concern shown by the urban elite for village affairs.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Article 71, paragraph 1, provided for "local administrative unit chiefs and members to be elected by universal suffrage in a direct and secret ballot". This popular control was undermined by Article 74 which reads:

The government shall appoint two officials who have the responsibility to assist Mayors, Province Chiefs and Village Chiefs in administrative and security matters, as well as other administrative personnel.

While such an arrangement is unavoidable it cannot be said to make for local self-government. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the outside appointees will be any more efficient or less corrupt than the locals they are supposed to assist. Indeed the scheme probably results in the worst of both worlds. In addition, Article 75 says that all elected local government

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<sup>9</sup> Osborne, Milton E. "Strategic Hamlets in South Viet Nam" (Cornell S-E Asia Program, New York, 1965) Data Paper: Number 55.

<sup>10</sup> Ton That Thien, "Vietnam: A Case of Social Alienation", "Internation Affairs", Volume 43, Number 3, p. 456.

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officials "may be dismissed by the President if they violate the Constitution, laws of the nation or national policy". These regulations apply only at the hamlet, village and district level since "during the first Presidential term the President shall appoint Province Chiefs" (Article 114).<sup>11</sup>

Bearing in mind the full ramifications of the situation described above, it was not surprising that there was little enthusiasm on 2 April, 1967, when voting commenced for about 10,000 village councilmen. These elections were held in 984 "secure villages", that is, in two-fifths of South Vietnam's local communities. The elections for 4,176 hamlet chiefs took place on five Sundays in May and June. In the 7,000 remaining hamlets, that is, a majority, "the provincial authorities appointed members of the temporary councils".<sup>12</sup>

A journalist, in Vietnam for the elections, noting the lack of spirit for voting amongst the peasants, wrote:

A Vietnamese government does not have to rig ballot boxes. The peasants will naturally look to the men most likely to affect their daily lives—in other words the provincial, district and village heads, who, of course, are all army officers. With the best will in the world these men want to see their generals re-elected, and their peasants know it.<sup>13</sup>

While true in substance the reality is far more complex since not all the military owe allegiance to Thieu or Ky. In Chuchi district some officers support the Tan Dai Viet to which Truong Dinh Dzu belongs, and this helps explain the 700,000 votes he received.<sup>14</sup> It also highlights another major problem that would have to be overcome before free elections could be conducted. Since Vietnamese politics are not bipolar, the electors' first choice might not give a majority to either the present Saigon regime or the National Liberation Front. At the very least this would necessitate reducing any election to a plebiscite between two hastily constructed blocs. A result so obtained would merely paper over real conflicts. If a genuine choice produced a fractious Assembly no government could acquire a stable majority. A limited choice would exclude some groups who would feel justified in resorting to armed struggle, or at least to non-electoral means of achieving their objectives.

While the fact of military control in South Vietnam is one that would have to be overcome before "free elections" could be guaranteed, it is necessary to realise that this control is more complex than brute force. The destruction caused by the war has increased the dependence of large

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11 Complete text of Constitution in "Vietnam News Bulletin" (Canberra) May, 1967.

12 A village usually comprises more than one hamlet. "Vietnam News Bulletin", April, 1967; "Current Notes on International Affairs" (Department of External Affairs, Canberra) November, 1967, p. 476.

13 "The Observer", 20 August, 1967; also "New York Times", 21 August, 1966.

14 "New York Times" (Weekly Review) 29 November, 1967.

sections of the population upon the military, especially at the village level, and in refugee camps and replacement centres. It is impossible to say how many refugees there are in South Vietnam partly because once a refugee has been resettled for six months he is taken off the refugee list. Before the Tet Offensive official figures indicated at least 1,000,000 refugees. To these must be added the thousands who are dependent upon the Government for rice handouts because their crops have been destroyed or confiscated. From this it is clear that there exists a reservoir of very pliable voters. This in turn leads to the recognition that, to a sizeable extent, the validity of any election would be dependent upon the success of a rehabilitation campaign. Ever-present corruption and inflation of fifty per cent per annum also contribute to a situation in which honesty in any transaction is at a premium. If one is forced to lie, steal and beg in order to eat, the sale of one's vote should not be a difficult matter.

None of these problems can be overcome by the presence of a United Nations Observer team. The problem of holding a free election is more than an administrative one, difficult and important though such a consideration may be. The central problem arises from the total historic experience of the Vietnamese. The case against "free elections" in Vietnam in the foreseeable future is not based on induction. It is not argued that because the last ten elections have been rigged the next one will be the same. Elections are not scientific experiments to be repeated until successful, with each failure bringing success that much closer. Indeed the reverse is true. The failure of previous elections is a cumulative experience. For elections to work, the U.N. team would not simply have to supervise them, but to remove the last twenty, perhaps even the last hundred years of Vietnamese history.

But the greatest problem is presented by the totally militarised nature of Vietnamese society. Would the National Liberation Front allow the Saigon Government to participate in an election if they (the NLF) were in a position to conduct one? On the other hand, the usual offer from Saigon to the NLF is "Lay down your arms and we will give you political freedom". In 1946, Chiang Kai-shek made a similar offer to Mao Tse-tung who rejected it by arguing that political freedom grew out of the barrel of a gun:

These people tell the communists, "Hand over your troops and we will grant you freedom". According to their theory, a political party that does not have any army should enjoy freedom . . . the Chinese Democratic League and the democrats within the Kuomintang who have no armed forces, have no freedom either. . . . Can it be that all these democratic parties and people have been denied freedom because they organised armies, perpetrated "feudal seperatism", created "traitor areas" and violated "government and military orders"? Not in the least. On

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the contrary, they have been denied freedom precisely because they have done none of these things. ("Selected Military Writings", p. 303.)

Presumably the NLF will adopt the same approach, particularly in light of the failure to hold the elections proposed by the Geneva Agreements. In 1954 the Viet Minh gave up a quarter of Vietnam on the understanding that they would gain all if it after the elections.<sup>15</sup> It's unlikely to be a case of "Once Bitten, Twice Bitten".

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15 Weinstein, F. B. "Vietnam's Unheld Elections" (Cornell S-E Asia Program, New York, 1966) Data Paper: Number 60.

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