THE DRAGONS LASH THEIR TAILS IN INDO-CHINA

By COLONEL MELVIN HALL, D.S.O.

THE Military and Aviation Editor of one of the more widely known and widely read of the American daily newspapers contributed a column some weeks ago on the situation in Viet Nam under the heading "Comforting Spot in Asia." I regret that I am unable to share his view. The situation in Indo-China, more particularly in Viet Nam, continues tenebrous and confused. If it is not indeed deteriorating—and in some respects it may not be—it appears to the writer of the present article singularly devoid of comfort for the anti-communist Western Powers.

The satisfaction manifested in some Western circles, especially in the United States, at the setting up of a so-called democratic Republic of South Viet Nam under the presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem, formerly Prime Minister appointed by Bao Dai while the latter was still Chief of State, would seem to have been based on certain misconceptions of the precise form this "democratic" Republic was to take. It is, in effect, an authoritarian dictatorship of Mr. Diem, the latter personally backed by the unswerving support of the United States Secretary of State, as well as to a considerable extent by the American taxpayers' money.

Opposition to President Diem's arbitrary handling of the internal and external problems of his tottering young State appears to be growing among numerous elements of Vietnamese opinion, and there is some evidence that these latter are drawing closer together in their common dislike of Diem's methods, though they have been divided in the past by conflicting interests and mutual distrust.

The so-called "referendum" of October 23, 1955, by which Bao Dai was deposed as Chief of State in favour of a Republic presided by Ngo Dinh Diem, was completely—and quite effectively—"rigged" by Diem. That some 98 per cent. of the vote was for Diem is understandable in view of the manner of presentation of the referendum. That in certain districts there were more votes for Diem than there were voters is not quite as easy to explain, but still comprehensible under the circumstances of the "vote." One may reflect on the fact that some 15,000 Vietnamese of a certain degree of influence who opposed Diem were in jail, including roughly 500 officers of the National Army. As an impartial French correspondent wrote, the vote "was as least as free as in most countries behind the Iron Curtain." Diem is in no way inadept at exiling, imprisoning or frightening into inaction those who oppose him.

Ngo Dinh Diem, who was appointed Prime Minister of South Viet Nam shortly after the Geneva "conference" had cut the young Vietnamese State in half, received his mandate from Bao Dai, with at least no

opposition from the American Department of State. He had, and still has, the reputation of being an honest and an austere patriot. This I do not challenge; yet these qualities, estimable as they may be in themselves, leave much to be desired in the Prime Minister—now Chief of State—of a country in formation under excessively difficult circumstances.

Diem, whatever his virtues and despite the energetic though sometimes unimaginative support of his premiership by the Americans, proved a disappointment as Prime Minister, and similarly as Chief of State. He has shown himself arbitrary and undiplomatic, intractable, rather stupid in certain ways and without any real gift for governing. His conception of a "democratic" administration is curiously patterned. Little has been accomplished to reconcile the divided political interests of the south. He has tried to crush his opponents rather than to bring them to conciliation. His vaunted advocacy of "total national revolution" (with himself as dictator in effect) may well be headed for total national disaster.

He established a censorship of news both in and out of Viet Nam that would not shame an iron-curtain satellite. (This, as was recently announced, has now been lifted, but one needs further evidence than the mere announcement that freedom of the press has been restored.) He threw his country into a civil war that many Vietnamese patriots regarded with regret approaching consternation. These included a considerable part of the Vietnamese National Army—other than adherents of what is sometimes called "Diem's Catholic Sect" by Vietnamese of different persuasions, plus certain elements of less precise backgrounds whose interests stem from personal rivalries in the highly confused case of the National Security Administration. In launching this civil war Diem disregarded the strongly expressed advice of General Ely, then French Commander-in-Chief in Indo-China, who subsequently requested and obtained transfer from that area and has now been appointed Chief of Staff of the French Army; and, I believe, that of American General Lawton Collins, both of whom urged that Diem try to solve his difficulties with the Sects by negotiation. (Some form of negotiation with, or integration of, the Sects appeared feasible at one time—though not 100 per cent. on Diem's terms—prior to May 29, 1955, when Diem attacked them.)

Diem is an ardent—even a fanatical—Catholic, yet he recently has been in acrid conflict with the Vatican, the latter having refused to appoint Diem's brother as Archbishop of Viet Nam despite Diem's vigorous urgings. I know little of this prelate's potential qualifications for the appointment which Diem urged; but while Diem himself may be honest and sincere, which I have not heard challenged, the same description cannot be applied to certain other members of his family and of his clan who have formed a notable part of his relation-packed cabinet and close counsellors.

In Diem's handling of the Sects, some of which have religious or semi-religious backgrounds of other beliefs, he managed to deter them from any real desire to join a nationalist front. With a truly nationalist government representative of all elements in the complex structure of South Viet Nam the Sects would have been prepared to play their part—though doubtless with certain privileges and guarantees for themselves. But to submit

gracefully to annihilation, or to be put under the rule of what they hold to be another and an unfriendly Sect—the "Catholic Sect of Ngo Dinh Diem"—is something they are not ready to stomach, and despite a modest number of successes of a military rather than a diplomatic nature—unless bribery, in a few cases, may be considered diplomatic—it seems questionable if Diem will be able to enforce their complete and lasting submission by the methods he has chosen to adopt. This, I am assured, might well take thirty years, and I have been asked whether the American taxpayer is prepared to continue that long to provide the funds to enable certain elements of South Vietnamese to slaughter other elements of South Vietnamese. Diem refers to those who oppose him as being rebels, though in the case of the Sects, as well as of others, they are rebels against his personal dictatorship rather than against the nation, and they have vigorously and successfully resisted communist penetration of the territories they controlled.

I hold no particular brief for the Sects, other than that they have constituted in a politically divided country the strongest element of resistance against communism. They are a curious and often a troublesome carry-over of feudalism and of local insecurity during the Japanese occupation of Indo-China. But they exist, and feudalism was not ruled out in Europe overnight by an edict. Also they have the oriental conception of "face" and they have been branded as bandits by Diem, which they strongly resent.

True, the origins of some of them, more particularly the Bien Xuyen, have not been untainted with piracy. The bases of others, notably of the Cao Dai Sect, stem from a religious upsurge seeking to express faith in God in a fashion of their own choosing. There are nearly two million adherents to the Cao Dai faith, which has a Pope, bishops and bishopesses, and a hierachy of saints including Victor Hugo, Jeanne d'Arc, Châteaubriand and Sun Yat Sen.

The Sects are an anachronism, with their private armies, their jealousies and rivalries, their disputes over money, arms and privileges—frequently in combat with one another as in European feudal times, and in some cases divided within themselves—and in their fiefs, where they collect taxes for their own benefit, not for the State. Yet these are matters to be corrected by integration or assimilation and not, it would seem to this writer, to be dynamited in a shaky national structure that shows too many signs of collapsing by itself. Bao Dai—of whom more hereafter—managed with considerable adroitness to keep the Sects in hand and at the same time to restrain their predatory ambitions, which Diem has conspicuously failed to do apart from slaughtering a fair number of their adherents, at the cost of substantial losses to the National Army. That Bao Dai granted them certain special privileges is not to be contested; that they returned some part of these in kind is similarly on the record. Yet by and large the Sects were more effective in thwarting communist infiltration in their areas than was the hard-put French Expeditionary Corps plus the Vietnamese Army in others. The French High Command had confidence in the anti-communism of the Sects and made full use of this by means of substantial subsidies —withdrawn after the turning over by the French of effective control to

the Vietnamese. In a military sense this is a soundly established tradition, to subsidize your friends (or allies) for doing what you are too hard pressed to do yourself on all fronts at the same time.

Numerically the organized cadres of the Sects amounted to roughly 35,000 Hoa Hao, 15,000 Cao Dai (this figure obviously does not include the close to two million non-militarized adherents to the Cao Dai faith), and 5,000 Binh Xuyen. They have recently had losses in battle with Diem's troops and have for the moment been dispersed, taking refuge in the jungle and from there conducting guerilla warfare which will be exceedingly difficult to suppress permanently, as was learned by the French Forces of the Far East, unless the large majority of the population of Cochin-China can be won over to the support of the " Diemists," which seems questionable. Their numbers remain substantial. There were also some 40,000 Viet Minh of a pretended " army of liberation " still scattered throughout the south, though I do not know—nor do I think that anyone else does with certainty—how many of these have been dispersed, recalled to the north, or " converted " to anti-communist nationalism.

The answer to it all isn't simple, nor has there been as yet a very clear approach to a workable solution. The divergent elements in the south are pretty truculent and certainly have not been brought together. There are pro-Diemists and anti-Diemists, and " revolutionaries " whose past associations and present aspect in certain cases offer scant prospect of resistance to communism. There are nearly a million refugees, mostly Catholic, from the north whose resettlement is a heavy responsibility. Not even half of these have as yet been resettled, outside of dismal refugee camps, on a permanent basis with cultivable lands allocated for their maintenance. And there are the Sects, whose eventual suppression—if they can be suppressed—will tax the resources of the National Army to an extent it may not be able to support.

The French Expeditionary Corps, already reduced to 20,000, was to be entirely withdrawn from Viet Nam by April 1 of this year, as Diem had demanded. They will serve to strengthen the French position in North Africa, leaving the eventual defence of South Viet Nam to the Vietnamese National Army of 100,000 effectives, latterly trained by Americans, with perhaps another 50,000 reserves to be called up in case of need. How long this force might prove capable of retarding a direct thrust by the Viet Minh from the north, whose army is considerably stronger and more heavily equipped, is problematical, but much of the best informed opinion holds that it would not be for more than a very few weeks at most. The Vietnamese Army has already suffered quite severe casualties in combatting the Sects, without having reduced the latter to impotence. Apart from the still extant forces of the Sects, now largely dispersed in the jungles, it seems unlikely that the bulk of the South Vietnamese populace would take any very active part in the conflict until they had decided for themselves which side would ultimately be the winner.

A somewhat curious aspect of the withdrawal of the French forces comes now from the Americans, who have not been conspicuous in their wholehearted co-operation with the French in Viet Nam but are suddenly showing concern as to the eventual security of the vast quantity of military

equipment, arms and munitions, totalling in the hundreds of millions of dollars, furnished to South Viet Nam through American aid.

In North Viet Nam, that part of the country handed over to the communists by the so-called Geneva " conference," there are serious economic problems, though the military strength of the Viet Minh is continually increasing with Chinese and Russian aid, and with Chinese military technicians who clearly have not been sent there to gratify the Western Powers. The annual deficit in rice for local consumption, of roughly 100,000 tons in a normal year, has been much increased since the war. Ho Chih Minh has been relegated to the status of an elder statesman, though his photographs still preside over all meetings. Yet he did no small job during his recent visits to Moscow and Peking: Chinese economic aid to the Viet Minh (in addition to direct military aid) estimated at £115 million; Russian aid at £35,800,000 plus 50,000 tons of rice purchased in Burma.

The agricultural crisis, however, is a continuing situation which though temporarily relieved by Russian and Chinese aid may eventually lead to the invasion of South Viet Nam from the North to get control of the rice areas there. The Viet Minh Army—much of it already battle-hardened—is clearly being trained, under its Chinese advisers and technicians, for offensive war.

The Viet Minh leaders have been insistent on the holding of the general elections, as provided in the Geneva armistice agreement of 1954, throughout Viet Nam prior to July 20, 1956. Diem, who has refused to recognize the Geneva agreement—possibly with reason—is quite adamant against the elections being held, in any event at that date. In this he is opposed by the British and the French, who hold themselves to be guarantors of the terms of the armistice agreement. The U.S., as observers merely though with a not unsubstantial delegation, were not a signatory to the agreement. How this will eventually turn out remains to be seen, but Mr. Diem is a peculiarly stubborn man. Yet his refusal to hold the elections would hardly seem to indicate an overwhelming confidence in the results of his anti-communist efforts in the south up to the present time.

On March 4 of the present year elections were held in South Viet Nam for a short-term Constituent Assembly to pass on the proposed new Constitution and prepare elections for a regular National Assembly. It need hardly be assumed that these March elections were wholly " free " in effect. They were furthermore a bit troubled by exchanges of bombs, which one might hesitate to commend as normal healthy democratic practices. Of course the Diem list succeeded handsomely.

The Emperor Bao Dai, or ex-Emperor if one prefer, is neither an enigma nor a colourless personality, nor is he the dilettante he has sometimes been made out to be by people who do not know him. He has received very bad publicity, particularly in the United States; largely ill-informed and biased, or based on catch phrases such as the " playboy Emperor " and the " absentee Chief of State." This has been unfortunate and to a large degree unmerited. He is in fact a patriot who has devoted long hours to the complex problems of his country, and who perhaps understands them better than many others who seek a viable solution. And his " absenteeism " was by means wholly of his own choice.

Bao Dai's traditions rest in those of the hereditary Emperors of Annam, an Empire that no longer exists, which formed Central Viet Nam in the short-lived Vietnamese State so soon sundered in twain by the Geneva agreement. These traditions, this prestige, still persist in the minds of many Vietnamese. This is also true of Bao Dai's own prestige, though the latter may have been tarnished in some respects by events not fully within his control. Yet it still exists to a considerable measure in his own country, notwithstanding an abortive attempt to denounce him by certain members of a self-styled Imperial Family Council, a body without legal status evidently activated by bribery or by threat, or both. It also seems clear that substantial elements of Vietnamese were in no wise fooled by the "deposition" of Bao Dai as Chief of State nor unaware of the manner in which this was staged. The paucity of Diem's accomplishments since then has doubtless substantiated their views. An increasing number of Diem's own compatriots regard his regime as corrupt and inefficient—without accusing him personally of being corrupt; while he continues with a mystical belief in his own destiny, regarding himself as the inspired saviour of his country.

While one does not maintain that Bao Dai might not perhaps have been more dominant in the struggle for self-expression of a State in formation, he accomplished considerably more than has generally been credited to him, and there is no doubt that he was blocked from numerous angles. He was named Chief of State of Viet Nam, with French support, after the collapse of the Japanese occupation in 1946. He had previously accepted for a time an attachment as Counsellor to Ho Chih Minh, when that revolutionary was wearing the colours of a nationalist patriot. Ho Chih Minh harried the Japanese, wherefore he was heartily supported by the American OSS. But when his communist affiliations came into the open, Bao Dai left him.

As Chief of State of Viet Nam Bao Dai achieved, diplomatically, far more for the prompt and total independence of his country than communist Ho Chih Minh had ever demanded. This he did with considerable dexterity, though risking—and at times incurring—the stigma of being a French puppet, while the French were still in administrative control of most parts of the country and for some time provided the only effective military forces, except for the Sects, against the Viet Minh.

Then came the great let-down of Geneva in 1954. Bao Dai was temporarily in France for a physical check-up and medical treatment, and was asked to remain for the conference. When this resulted in the severance of his country in twain he refused to sign the convention that turned over twenty-six provinces and 9,600,000 souls to the communists. In July 1954 he appointed Diem to be Prime Minister, possibly to some extent to satisfy American demands, and agreed to give Diem a free hand as Chief of Government, while continuing to exercise his own legally vested powers as Chief of State by remote control from France—which he was asked to do. Had Bao Dai returned to Viet Nam then he would have been placed in an impossible position. If he supported the Sects in any manner he would have incurred the enmity and opposition of the Americans and again have been called a French "stooge." If he backed Diem fully, and not only

against the Sects, he would have been branded an American stooge, and this by many Vietnamese. If he attempted to mediate between them on the spot, he would have been damned by both sides and certainly not have received any useful support from the Americans who were so determinedly pro-Diem. The time was inappropriate for his return; on the other hand he achieved, until Diem went full out in civil war, some fairly useful results, operating from France, in mediation. But the accomplishments of Diem's "free hand," with all its hearty support from the U.S., have proven considerably less gratifying than was hoped, nor do they seem destined to offer great promise for the happy future of free Viet Nam.

Bao Dai proposed in May of last year a concrete plan for the re-establishment of order in the rapidly disintegrating situation in Viet Nam. There is not space here to summarize what the plan comprised; but to this writer it made very good sense and offered considerable—perhaps the only—promise of restoring the situation, in a well thought-out and liberal way. The proposed plan was well received by the French but had no support from the Americans. Its definite torpedoing came from the American Secretary of State who marked this by conspicuously snubbing Bao Dai—then still Chief of State—in Paris.

In many ways it all sums up to a confused and sorrowful story, and one in which it is gravely to be feared that many millions of well-meant American dollars are being poured down the drain. Bao Dai is strongly anti-communist. The French in Indo-China have certainly not, with exceedingly few possible exceptions, been pro-communist. Diem is rabidly anti-communist. So also are the Sects. The whole basis of American policy in Indo-China is the turning back or at least the containment of the laval flow of communist encroachment in South-east Asia. And yet these various elements have not found it possible to unite in the common cause, to "play ball" with each other, and in some cases are vigorously combatting one another, either with arms or propaganda or both.

Bao Dai has accepted his "deposition" in a philosophic and dignified manner. He lives in France, going in for the physical sports he enjoys and which keep him fit. He refrains from taking part in the activities of certain prominent anti-Diem Vietnamese exiles in France, these including two former Prime Ministers and a former Chief of Staff of the Vietnamese Army. He continues to keep in close touch with the multiple problems facing his country, which he is perhaps better equipped fundamentally to comprehend than anyone else.

If Diem should fail to steer his country into calm seas, and there are, regrettably, many indications that he is failing so to do, there is a possibility that Bao Dai may eventually be recalled to Viet Nam by popular opinion to take charge of the affairs of State. I make no prediction as to such an event: it is merely a possibility. No one else has appeared so far who could command the respect of the Vietnamese should Diem be released from his functions by popular resentment against his manner of handling them.

In Cambodia and Laos, too, the situation is complicated and confused, with somewhat different local problems but basically the same background—the communist threat and the not always understanding and often un-

imaginative support of their Western allies who want so much to aid them and who are expending millions of dollars in trying to do so. Space limitations preclude my taking up in this article the immediate concerns and worries of these two lesser countries. But both are watered by the Mekong river, which flows through South Viet Nam and debouches into the South China Sea, and as we look on the turbid upper and lower reaches of this great river we may perhaps remember that its sources rise in China.