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Thematic Summary: POLITICAL STABILITY

In its general assessments undertaken during the first part of 1961, INR set forth a series of judgments on the political situation to which it adhered consistently until the dramatic changes of late 1963. Basically, INR considered that Diem's earlier popularity had faded and that the veneer of unity resulting from Diem's actions against dissident power structures in the mid-1950's had worn thin. Disaffection was increasing among groups in South Vietnam, and INR observed that the tensions were heightened by the rising Communist insurgency, while at the same time, in a vicious circle, they added to the difficulties of taking effective action against the Viet Cong. Deficiencies in Diem's governing policies gave further cause for internal discontent and contributed further to the regime's manifest inability to cope with the Communist threat. Moreover, INR concluded, Diem probably would not willingly undertake what the US considered to be reforms necessary to wage the war successfully, for fear that these moves might weaken his own power position. He sought to control American aid and if need be limit it, necessary as it was to the war effort and to the prospect for political stability; to the extent that he succeeded--and that the US continued to rely most heavily on aid to achieve progress--US aid would have the effect of insulating Diem from pressure for reform.

INR also judged that Diem's personal position within the regime was not as strong as it might appear to be on the surface. In fact a major

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coup attempt occurred in November 1960, and subsequently there were numerous reports of coup plotting. In this situation, INR estimated that the primary immediate threat to his leadership was a coup by non-Communist military or mixed military and civilian leaders, who, while content with the government's commitment to the struggle against the Viet Cong, had become antagonized by Diem's personal rule and dissatisfied with his ineffective handling of the Communist insurgency. In INR's view, potentially effective alternative leadership existed. Although it was concerned over the deterioration of the security situation and the progress the Viet Cong were making, INR did not believe that the Communists were strong enough to overthrow Diem themselves or to ride to power in the wake of a non-Communist coup--a contingency that worried the policy-makers and other members of the Intelligence Community more than it did INR.

Over the next two years, INR found increasing justification for these basic assessments as the GVN grew more unstable politically and as Diem used American aid to strengthen his control. INR continued to take a gloomy view of the GVN's ability to wage an effective war effort on either the political or the military front. Nonetheless, in the course of debating a much contested Estimate in February 1963, INR attacked the implication that it would be impossible to "win with Diem." The final version in April, reflecting widespread criticism among US policy officers of the draft's extreme gloom, took a more guarded position; it noted improvements and projected the possibility of containing the

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Viet Cong--but still questioned Diem's capacity for effective action in the long run.

INR expressed particular concern that the pacification program, however valid in concept, would in execution be bent primarily to extend the régime's control over the peasantry, and be applied with excessive emphasis on the military aspects, despite lip-service, especially on the part of Nhu, to goals of socio-economic reform.

After the Buddhist crisis broke in May 1963, INR estimated that this upheaval offered Diem a threat greater than that of the Communist insurgency; if handled ineptly and arbitrarily it was likely to erode the war effort and lead to Diem's downfall at the hands of the military. With the August raid on the Xa Loi Pagoda, INR estimated that there was little chance that stability could be restored and, later, cited military statistics to show the adverse effect of the crisis on the struggle against the Viet Cong. As reports of coup plotting multiplied, INR examined the possible effects on US policy of different kinds of possible coup attempts. Discussing one potential coup group, comprised of Vice President Tho and a military junta, INR suggested that such a regime might better prosecute the war and provide a more popular administration.

In keeping with its past judgments, INR was less gloomy than some American intelligence and policy circles in its view of the three-month period following Diem's overthrow. Reasoning from the attempts of the Minh-Tho Government to consolidate its position and restructure the administrative apparatus, INR held that the government had not had a

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chance to prove itself before it was overthrown by General Khanh at the end of January 1964. During the year of Khanh's regime, INR attributed the government's weakness and instability to Khanh's attempts to perpetuate his own power under the double disadvantage of a support base that was weak and political factionalism that was increasing. At the same time, INR felt, the growing factionalism and vehement political self-expression reflected a genuine non-Communist revolution, emerging after years of repression, as Washington pressed for civilian participation in the government and as groups contested for political power and demanded more representative government. INR saw some hope that the alliance of Buddhists and military, which eventually brought about Khanh's downfall in February 1965, might result in a more effective and popular government; but INR also cautioned that the relationship between these groups was unstable because personal ambition continued to be a primary motive force.

Instability continued under the superficially civilian government of Premier Quat, who turned back the reins to the military in mid-1965, and under General Ky who then succeeded to the Premiership. Ky's government showed a capacity for survival which INR attributed to the lack of an effective challenge and to the fact that the deterioration in the security situation had been halted by the massive influx of US forces. The regime did not have much popular support, and, largely in response to American prodding, the Premier began the promised transition to constitutional government. Fear that the military would retain power, the

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slow timing of elections, and a struggle within the military, combined to produce a new Buddhist crisis which INR gauged to be more serious than any since the one that led to Diem's overthrow. In fact, Ky survived the challenge without compromising. Elections for the Constituent Assembly were held as scheduled in September 1966 with a substantial turnout owing, in INR's view, to the stabilizing impact of the US presence.

During 1967, INR had growing reservations about the military government, believing that a civilian government was preferable even at the risk of instability. In noting the US commitment to a constitutional process controlled by the military, INR argued that at the very least Washington should not support any one candidate, particularly Premier Ky, who appeared to have less support in the military establishment than did his rival, General Thieu. In this judgment INR went against prevailing American opinion, but the South Vietnamese military justified INR by backing Thieu for president on a combined ticket with Ky. Upon Thieu's election with a good turnout of voters in September 1967, INR felt that a modicum of order had been restored in Saigon and that the general security situation had again become the primary determinant of political stability. Nevertheless, political fragmentation and lack of public confidence were weaknesses that had yet to be diminished significantly.

INR's thought that the Communists aimed their Tet offensive of February 1968 in part at intensifying and exploiting these weaknesses to

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achieve a "massive deterioration in the GVN and an erosion of the political basis for a US presence in South Vietnam." The Communists were only partially successful and, as INR noted later, probably suffered politically from their failure to provoke urban uprisings as promised. INR believed that American moves toward de-escalation and negotiation after Tet would have some salutary effects on the regime but, at the same time, thought that they also might threaten to unravel the constitutional system and to disintegrate morale. On balance, INR estimated that the regime would survive the deep strain of entry into negotiations but that the Thieu government would do its utmost to stall the negotiatory process.

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