

Observation no: 149

Country-year: South Vietnam, 1969

1. Did the current regime come to power in a military coup?

Yes

The president of the country at the time, Nguyen Van Thieu, came to power as a result of a series of coups in the mid-1960s, beginning with the coup against the former president of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, in November 1963.¹ He was later “elected” in a 1967 referendum, but he had already been in power for two years at that point.

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

Yes

See answer to question 1.

3. Is the country’s top leader a former military officer?

Yes

Thieu was a general in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. He had been part of the Young Turks clique that overthrew Diem.²

4. Is the military officer corps largely closed to those who do not share the leader’s ethnic or sectarian background?

No

Authoritative histories give little evidence of ethnic or sectarian bias in officer selection during this period.

5. Are there strict ideological requirements for entry into the senior officer corps?

No

¹ Anthony James Joes, *The War for South Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1990).

² Nguyen Cao Ky, *How We Lost the Vietnam War* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), p. 48; and Jeffrey D. Clarke, *Advice and Support: the Final Years, 1965-1973* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1988), p. 81.

There is little evidence of an ideological focus in the South Vietnamese officer corps.³ In fact, many sources emphasize that it was a lack of nationalism or sense of unity that hindered the development of the officer corps.

6. Is party membership required for entry into the senior officer corps?

No

Under Diem, there had been some pressure for officers to belong to his brother's Can Lao party. After Diem's demise, many ARVN officers still belonged to the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD), or the Vietnamese Nationalist Party, which had its origins in the struggle against the French and which was fiercely anti-communist. However, party members were often at odds with Saigon, so party membership certainly was not a requirement for senior officership.⁴

7. Does military training involve extensive political education or ideological indoctrination?

No

There is little evidence of an ideological focus in South Vietnamese training.⁵

8. Has the military been used to repress internal dissent in the last five years?

Yes

The military was used to combat a variety of internal threats to the country, including the communist insurgency, as well as Buddhist uprisings.⁶

9. Has the military been used to govern the country in the last five years?

Yes

Despite the 1967 election, South Vietnam was still functionally a military dictatorship in 1969. All major decisions were made by a group of officers known as

³ James Lawton Collins, Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1975).

⁴ Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

⁵ Collins 1975.

⁶ Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: NYU Press, 2008).

the Directory, and military officers remained heavily involved in provincial and local government.⁷

10. Is there a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military, used to provide regime or leader security?

No

South Vietnamese leaders did rely on specialized units, such as the Airborne and Rangers, within the regular military for regime protection. However, these were not paramilitary units.⁸

11. Is there an internal intelligence apparatus dedicated to watching the regular military?

Yes

Both Diem and his successors were deeply suspicious of the officer corps, leading to extensive efforts to gather intelligence on officers' intentions and activities. Under Diem these had occurred largely through his brother's party, the Can Lao; after Diem, the Can Lao disbanded but political leaders continued to keep close tabs on officers.⁹

12. Has a purge of the officer corps occurred in the last five years?

Yes

The coup that removed Diem from power was the first of several that also resulted in subsequent reshufflings of the senior military leadership during the period 1963-1965.¹⁰

13. Is there an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchange information?

No

Civilian leadership had been overthrown in South Vietnam by this time. Furthermore, histories provide little evidence of well-institutionalized information

⁷ Thomas R. Cantwell, "The Army of South Vietnam: a Military and Political History, 1955-75," Ph.D. dissertation (Sydney, Australia: University of New South Wales, 1989); and Caitlin Talmadge, *Authoritarian Armies on the Battlefield: Explaining Fighting Power in Non-Democratic Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015, forthcoming), chapter 2.

⁸ Collins 1975; and Cantwell 1989.

⁹ Talmadge 2015, chapter 2.

¹⁰ Talmadge 2015, chapter 2.

exchanges or decision-making processes among the military officers running the country at the time.