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Thieu tightens his grip

Government in South Vietnam has become in recent months more and more a one-man show — President Thieu's. Some of his decrees such as those against graft and drugs bearing the death penalty, are arguably beneficial, provided they are not used selectively. Thieu, however, has been garnering political power into his hands. Last June, through doubtful legal procedures, the Senate voted him special powers for six months. In August he moved against the newspapers. Publications now have to place crippling heavy deposits in advance with the Treasury in anticipation of censorship offences (which have also gone up in price). On August 22, without publicity and only recently revealed, Thieu abolished the election of officials at the lowest level—in the country's 10,775 hamlets.

South Vietnam as usual is living through exceptional times. The invasion in March from the North, the occupation of some provinces, and the spread of NLF influence in others are not factors conducive to normal government. But at the same time, Thieu's actions follow a pattern which began before the March invasion. In October he was re-elected President in a one-man race. The United States was displeased that he had forced his opponents out before the starting line. The message from his re-election with 94.3 per cent approval was that the United States

could not go beyond muttering its displeasure. United States funds (and therefore patronage) kept flowing. This indicated that Thieu had from then on a free hand to act in domestic politics as he liked.

Since then reports of arbitrary arrests, imprisonment and torture, and intimidation of the press have increased. Like others, the move to end six years of local elections and place the reorganisation of the 44 provinces under chiefs appointed by Thieu was under preparation before March. Thieu's objectives must be to strengthen his position to deal with the war at a time when the United States has a negligible ground rôle. At the same time, he is taking contingency measures against the possibility of a ceasefire, which would leave good many potentially disruptive and hostile energies undirected.

How necessary these moves were is open to question. The suppression of the bulk of Saigon's newspapers blocks up a safety valve for criticism and scurrilous comment. Politics become polarised. The non-Communist opposition to Thieu is hopelessly disunited. But now those who are not for Thieu are liable to be classed as enemies. They find themselves victimised both by Thieu and by the NLF. The exercise of democracy stretching out into the provinces, villages, and hamlets in recent years has been to a great extent a US-backed cosmetic exercise. In a sense now the distribution and use of power is reverting to political type. It is the logical outcome of Vietnamisation. But Thieu's version is not quite the democratic self-government that the US, with its Western preconceptions, had in mind at the start.