

Observation no: 128

Country-year: South Vietnam, 1964

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

Yes

The generals ruling the country in 1964 came to power as a result of a coup against the former president of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, in November 1963.¹

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

At this time the country was ruled by a clique of military officers known as the Young Turks.²

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

No

Under Diem there was a perception of discrimination against non-Catholics, but after his demise the officer corps was generally more open.

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

No

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.

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.

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

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

Diem used the military to put down extensive domestic unrest by armed gangs, as well as the nascent communist insurgency.⁶

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

Yes

South Vietnam was a military dictatorship in 1964. The military also had been used extensively for local and provincial governance under Diem.⁷

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

No

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 Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), pp. 74-7.

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).

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

Diem routinely purged his officer corps. The coup that removed him from power was the first of several that also resulted in subsequent reshufflings of the senior military leadership.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 exchanges or decision-making processes among the military officers running the country at the time.

⁸ Collins 1975; and Cantwell 1989.

⁹ Caitlin Talmadge, *Authoritarian Armies on the Battlefield: Explaining Fighting Power in Non-Democratic Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015, forthcoming), chapter 2.

¹⁰ Talmadge 2015, chapter 2.