

A Democratic Home **by C. Robert Dickerman**

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As in virtually all of America's wars, we claimed in South Vietnam to be defending democracy, or at least incubating it. But the Republic of Vietnam's government was in no way democratic... although it permitted, certainly, more diversity of views, and more diversity of endeavors, than did communist North Vietnam.

In any case, we needed to appear to be supporting democratic self-government in South Vietnam, and I don't doubt for a moment but that the vast majority of Vietnamese, living under any of the three regimes (Republic of Vietnam, Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front) aspired to such a state.

In 1968 it was decided (probably in Washington) that the first step toward making South Vietnam into a democratic society would be to create a Constitution. Wheels spun and papers were issued: each province was to elect citizens who would go to Saigon, form a Constitutional Convention, and draft the nation's new basic law.

In Dinh Tuong, with some 600,000 people my "big" province, seven men declared themselves candidates for the assembly. They included, as I recall, two military officers, two refugees from North Vietnam, a lawyer, a businessman and, a favorite of mine, Mr. Tuc.

Mr. Tuc was truly a "man of the people": a humble, unpretentious man—qualities which already distinguished him from the other six candidates. I had met him through my schoolteacher friend, Miss Tri. The two of them shared a commitment to bettering the lot of ordinary folk.

Mr. Tuc was an elected officer of the local union of transport workers, the men who brought produce to the market by either bicycle cart or vehicle. He was a familiar face at the My Tho peasants' market. His union was a part of the nationwide labor confederation, the CVT, La Confederation Vietnamienne du Travail.

The CVT was, I think, the single nationwide democratic institution in South Vietnam. Formed during the French colonial regime and modeled after the industrial unions of France proper, it worked hard and effectively on behalf of its some 550,000 members. From the local branches to the national confederation, its leaders were elected for set periods, and then had to stand for election again.

Mr. Tuc was thus the only candidate of the seven who had actual experience in a democratic organization.

Following rules that evidently had come down from Saigon, the seven candidates were brought together at several events where they could speak to, and be seen by, the voters. These events

had to be secured, of course, and the peasants attending them probably had little choice but to be there.

I attended one of these events, held late one afternoon in a school in a village a few kilometers from My Tho, on the highway to Saigon. The peasants, all in their “black pajamas,” sat uncomfortably in rows; the seven candidates for the Constitutional Assembly were at a table in the front. The moderator was, I believe, the deputy province chief, a civilian. My Vietnamese colleague, Mr. Hiep, gave me brief summaries of what was being said.

Eventually there was a question for Mr. Tuc. An elderly peasant woman with a deeply lined face and rounded shoulders said this, basically:

“Tuc...we know you are a very good man. You are an honest man. You do much to try to help the people. We have known you for many years. We love you.

“But Tuc, these other men are educated: they are lawyers, and professors, and learned men. You have no education, Tuc; you are like us. Why should we vote for you, Tuc, instead of these wise men?”

Mr. Tuc responded with what I have since often described as the most beautiful description of Constitutional governance that I have ever heard:

“Thank you, Madame. You are right. These honorable men are very wise. They are very educated. I am just a simple worker. I have no education.

“But when a family builds its home, it needs many different specialists.

“It needs a mason to lay the floor. It needs a carpenter to erect the building. It needs a roofer to lay the roof. It may need a plumber to bring in the pipes. It needs many specialists who have learned their trades so that they can do it well.

“Each of these is very important.

“But the most important person that the family needs is the architect. The architect must know the family. He must know the family well. Only if he knows the family well can he design the house to bring harmony and happiness to the family. That is why the architect is so important.

“My friends: the Constitution that we are going to write in Saigon will be the house of our people. It will be our home. Yes, to write it we will need experts. We will need lawyers. And professors.

“But the most important is the architect. The architects must understand the people so that the house which we design will be one in which our Vietnamese family can live in harmony and happiness.

“That is why it is very, very important that we send to Saigon, to the Constitutional Assembly, men who understand our people, who understand what we need in our new house, our new home.

“When we go to Saigon, we can call the experts. We can call the lawyers, and the professors. We will need their help. But they are perhaps not the best architects.....”

Mr. Tuc lost. Or actually, I think, he was disqualified. Mr. Tuc’s work as a produce driver took him daily from town into the outlying rural areas. Anyone who had such work had been stopped at road blocks set up by the Viet Cong/National Liberation Front. Anyone who had such work had paid the “taxes” collected at these road blocks. And anyone who was as honest as Mr. Tuc admitted this.

His admission was the grounds for his disqualification. The lawyers, the professor, the military officers who were running either had never had this basic, continuing experience of Vietnamese life... or lied about it. One or another of them was elected. The new Constitutional home of the Vietnamese people was never erected.