Life's Many Sides

Protocol and all that

By TON THAT THIEN

I wonder how many of you have noticed some odd things on the pictures printed by the newspapers. For my part, I have noticed that when the chief of state was inspecting some place, some very subordinate officers (not only officials) stood with their legs spread and their arms akimbo in front of him as if he were some fellow of no importance! I have noticed also the ADC to the Prime Minister, a captain (he was a lieutenant some time ago) walking next to him and looking and laughing as if HE, and not the Prime Minister was on inspection, or sitting in the FRONT row ABOVE cabinet members, or walking on the same level as his chief.

I confess that I am shocked each time I see such pictures. « Learn rites first, and literature next », says Confucius. The closest equivalent saying in English is perhaps « Manners maketh the Man ». All that to convey the idea that protocol is important, and that in an organised and civilised society-be it democratic each man should have the public behaviour which conforms to his station, or stay away. Even in a democratic society like the American society, senators stopped calling President Kennedy « Jack » the moment he became the President of the United States, only addressed him as «Mr the President», and had for him the consideration due to the first dignitary of the state.

Some people would perhaps say that I am fussy, and that I pay too much attention to insignificant details. But these details tell long stories about the men who forget them. Either they are childish (in which case they should not be entrusted with the important positions they hold), or they are sloppy (in which case they should be dismissed, especially when they are supposed to belong to the most disciplined corps of the state : the army), or they have no respect at all for their chiefs (in which case we may say that Vietnam is in a very bad way.)

I am not accusing anyone in particular (I don't even know the names of those officers), but I am pointing out something important, especially as the Vietnamese society is traditionally one which has great respect for good manners.

Perhaps it would be useful to remind those who have forgotten it that when the chief of state, or the prime minister is present somewhere, then HE ALONE exists, and all the rest should keep in the background. In particular, the ministers, the interpreters, the ADCs. are supposed not to exist, however much they may be present. When the chief of state is present, then the prime minister should not be seen on the same level, of course, just as when he is present (without the chief of state) the others must stay in the background. There is only one smile : his ; one frown ; his ; one speaker : he.

So much is natural, and yet it is sad that the observance of these protocol details has not been respected, or enforced They give the impression of sloppiness all round.

The matter is