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## **Role of the Religion and Politico-Religious Organizations in the South Vietnam During Ngo Dinh Diem Period**

### ABSTRACT

After the division of Vietnam into two hostile states in 1954, religion played an important role in the southern, pro-western State of Vietnam. In 1954–56 the struggle for control over the country by politico-religious organizations, or so called Sects, defined the founding period of South Vietnam. After the victory of government under the leadership of Ngo Dinh Diem and proclamation of the Republic of Vietnam, the rivalry between Catholicism and Buddhism begun to emerge. However, for various reasons, it erupted only in year 1963, and was in fact a political struggle between different visions of South Vietnam's future, and not a Catholic president repressing his Buddhist citizens, as it is often presented, especially in American literature.

### KEYWORDS

Buddhism, Catholicism, Ngo Dinh Diem, Vietnam

### **Introduction**

The Geneva Conference of 1954 divided Vietnam into two hostile countries: the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam, ruled by the Communists, and the southern pro-western State of Vietnam. In North Vietnam the question of religion quickly became irrelevant, both because of the massive exodus of devout Catholics, and quite typical oppressive policies of the communist state. However, in the South, religion was an important issue in all aspects of life of the young state. The problem of rivalry between two great religions, Buddhism and Christianity, was not evident in 1954, however it was simmering right under the surface, and erupted violently in later years. A much more pressing issue was that of politico-religious organizations, so

called Sects, that had ambitions for country-wide power, and were hostile to any tighter control from the state.

However, before moving into the intricate reality of the forming period of South Vietnam, I would like to present a few facts about the main actors, making it easier for the reader to understand the described events.

### **Christianity**

Christianity, or more precisely, Catholicism, came to Vietnam with European explorers and traders in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Vietnam, along with other Asian countries, became the object of interest of religious orders, in particular Jesuits, who in the next decades dominated missionary activities in Indochina. The most prominent member of the Society of Jesus in Vietnam was Alexander De Rhodes, who wrote the *Dictionarium Annamiticum Lusitanum et Latinum*, a trilingual Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin dictionary, and established Quoc Ngu, the Vietnamese alphabet that uses Roman characters, which eventually became the dominant writing system for Vietnamese.

The rulers and elites of Vietnam were wary of the new faith, seeing it both as a threat to their own position, and as an instrument of unwanted European influence. On the other hand, during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries Vietnam was divided into two states deeply hostile to each other, ruled by the Nguyen and Trinh dynasties, who from time to time sought external support in their fight, be it the Dutch or the Portuguese. This in turn allowed missionary work to continue.

Catholicism became more widespread at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of the activities of the Bishop of Adran, Pierre Pigneau de Behaine. Like many before him, he came to Vietnam as a priest to proselytize. However, the Frenchman managed to befriend Nguyen Phuc Anh, a prince from the Nguyen Dynasty, and became his close advisor. Despite only a token support from the French royal court, he was able to recruit a few hundred Europeans to support Nguyen Phuc Anh's bid for power. They built modern fortresses and helped reform the army of the Vietnamese ruler, who was able to defeat his adversaries and conquer the whole country, proclaiming himself emperor in 1802.

Gia Long, as the new ruler named himself, tolerated the activities of Roman Catholic missionaries, however this was not the case under the rule of his successors. It was caused by their belief that Christianity was a danger to the state-sponsored Confucianism as a religion, and that it would cause strife and division in the society. This view was reinforced by the Catholic

participation in the failed rebellion against Gia Long's successor, Minh Mang, in year 1833. In addition, the Vietnamese authorities considered the constantly increasing number of arriving missionaries agents of influence of European countries, especially France. As the result, Minh Mang and his successors issued a number of imperial edicts aimed against missionaries. Number of them were expelled, and some were executed. Repression also fell on local converts. 117 victims of those persecutions were first baptized in few batches, to finally be Canonized by Roman Catholic Church in year 1988 as Vietnam Martyrs. Despite harassment, the religion prevailed in Vietnam.

Situation changed completely after the French conquest of Indochina (1862–1896). Christianity quite naturally took a privileged position in the colonial period, and the Catholic Church was one of the largest land-owners in Indochina. Catholic villages usually cooperated with French more willingly, and most colonial troops were recruited from Vietnamese of that faith. However, the religion itself did not become synonymous with collaboration, thanks to several high-profile cases of patriotic Vietnamese Catholics. One of them was the Mandarin Ngo Dinh Kha, who despite his faith reached high positions on Emperor's Thanh Thai's (1889–1907) court. After the French deposed the disobedient ruler and send him into exile, Kha renounced all of his official titles and French decorations in protest and moved to the countryside, becoming a Vietnamese symbol of resistance against colonizers. Around the time of Geneva Conference there were around 1,5 million Catholics in Vietnam, 2/3 of them living in the northern part of the country.

### **Buddhism**

Buddhism came to Vietnam between the 2–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC from India, via South Asia, or between the 1–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD from China, depending on the tradition.<sup>1</sup> By the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD the religion was firmly established in the country, with an important regional center of Mahayana Buddhism nearby to the present day capital city of Hanoi. It coexisted with Taoism and Chinese and Vietnamese folk religions, centered around the cult of ancestors and the forces of nature.

Buddhism grew in importance in Vietnam, first becoming the official faith in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and then becoming the state religion during the Ly dynasty reign in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It retained this privileged position until 14<sup>th</sup> century when it fell out of favor, and Confucianism took its place among

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<sup>1</sup> *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam*, ed. Nguyen Tai Thu, Washington D.C. 2008, p. 13.

ruling elites. Buddhism, however, retained its popularity among common folk, and returned briefly to prominence during the 19<sup>th</sup> century rule of the Nguyen dynasty.

In the 1920's the Buddhist Revival (Chan Hung Phat Giao) movement emerged in Vietnam, aiming to reform and strengthen the organizational structure of the religion, especially in the face of the growing influence of hierarchical and well organized Christianity, and the emergence of new religions and sects during the French rule. One of the principles propagated by the Buddhist Revival movement was the connection between their religion and the prosperity of the Vietnamese state. Its leaders believed that the golden age of Vietnam between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries was directly linked to the devout adherence of royal dynasties to the Buddhist religion, and it was the abandonment of this faith that led to a series of unfortunate events for the country, such as the invasion of the Chinese Ming dynasty at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. According to this narrative, only the return of Buddhism to its proper position in the country's power-structure could assure the prosperity of the newly formed South Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> However, in 1954 Buddhists had no unitary structure, and were divided into many sects and denominations.

### **Politico-Religious Organizations**

Under the French rule there were numerous sects and religions originating from Buddhism or folk religion. However, two of them rose to great prominence: Hoa Hao and Cao Dai. Along with the Binh Xuyen organization, they were known as politico-religious organizations or Sects, and played an important role in the birth period of South Vietnam.

Hoa Hao is a religious tradition that sprouted from Buddhism. It was founded by Huynh Phu So, commonly known as Phat Thay (Buddha Master) in year 1939. His variant of the religion was aimed at the poor peasants and was devoid of complex ceremonies and doctrines. So shunned temples, preferring to preach on street corners and canal intersections. However, his ambitions went beyond religion, and he established the Viet Nam Democratic Socialist Party in year 1946. This put him at odds with Viet Minh. Fearing his nationalistic and socialist credentials, Communists captured and killed So in April 1947, chopping his body to deprive his followers of any

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<sup>2</sup> E. Miller, *Missaliance. Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam*, Cambridge-London 2013, p. 263.

relics. After the Hoa Hao leader's death, the organization became a loose network of warlords who decided to join the French in their war against the Viet Minh to avenge their leader.

Cao Dai, or Caodaism (it means "Highest Power" in Vietnamese) is a religion established in 1926 by Ngo Van Chieu. Officially known as "Great Way of the Third Time of Redemption," it gained over a million members in few decades, especially in Cochinchina. It is a syncretic religion, with pantheon including Joan of Arc, Muhammad, Moses, Luis Pasteur and Victor Hugo, besides many Southeast Asians. It has a structure based on that of the Roman Catholic Church, with a Pope, Cardinals, Bishops, and Priests, and its own Holy See in Tay Ninh, ninety kilometers from Saigon. After WW2 and a brief period of supporting Viet Minh, Pope Pham Cong Tac decided to ally with the French. Cao Dai helped in the fight against the Communists, receiving money, arms, and semi-autonomy in large parts of South Vietnam.

Binh Xuyen did not have a spiritual side – in fact, it was a criminal organization that came into being as a coalition of river pirates from the Mekong Delta. During WW2 they allied themselves first with the Japanese secret police Kempeitai, and then the southern branch of Viet Minh. However, the leader of the organization, Bay Vien, sensed the shift of power in the South, and in the year 1948 he went over to the French side. The price paid by the colonizers was not a small one: Binh Xuyen gained exclusive rights to a territory in Saigon's Chinese district of Cholon and the direct control over the Saigon police force. By 1954 the organization was profiteering from prostitution, black market, drugs, etc. While its military force was much smaller than those of Cao Dai or Hoa Hao, Binh Xuyen's ill-gained wealth proved to be an important asset during the struggle for power in the newly established South Vietnam.

### **The Republic of Vietnam's founding myth: struggle against the Sects**

As it was mentioned in the introduction, the role of religion was quite important from the very beginning of South Vietnam's existence. The Catholic minority in Vietnam was mostly anticommunist, while at the same time being concentrated in the northern part of the country which, as agreed in Geneva Accords of 21<sup>st</sup> July 1954, was supposed to be under Communist rule. As a result, the South Vietnamese authorities, assisted by the French, the British, and the Americans, launched a massive relocation effort combined with an intense propaganda campaign to move all willing people from

the North to the South during the 300-day grace period that was guaranteed in Geneva.

In operation *Passage to Freedom* that took place between 1954–1955, almost one million people moved from North to South Vietnam. Around six hundred thousand of those were Catholics, convinced to evacuate by their own priests, their own thoughts about the prospect of communist repression, or propaganda aimed at them by the Americans and South Vietnamese authorities, with pamphlets with slogans such as “the Virgin Mary has departed from the North” or “Christ has gone south.”<sup>3</sup>

In the South, Catholics became a much desired political base for prime minister Ngo Dinh Diem. South Vietnam’s leader came from a quite extraordinary family with long traditions of serving the state, and at the same time devout Christians, tracing their conversion to Catholicism way back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Diem was a son of the mentioned earlier respected mandarin Ngo Dinh Kha. As a young man, the future leader of South Vietnam contemplated becoming a man of the cloth, however in the end he decided to devote himself to serving his country. However, for his whole life Diem remained an austere and devout man, and never renounced his vows of chastity. He had five brothers, of whom four became civil servants like Diem, and the fifth, Ngo Dinh Thuc, became the third Vietnamese priest ever raised to the rank of bishop, and later became the first Vietnamese archbishop of Hue and the head of the Catholic Church in South Vietnam.

However, in the immediate aftermath of the Geneva Conference in 1954, the solid political base of Catholics was still a long way off. The reality faced by Ngo Dinh Diem in June/July 1954 was a country devastated by years of partisan warfare, a fragmented and divided political scene, still considerable influence of the French, and hostile politico-religious organizations in form of Cao Dai, Hoa Hao and Binh Xuyen.<sup>4</sup> The latter were hostile to Diem, although not openly in the first few months. Sects hoped to take part in sharing a piece of the political pie of the government of South Vietnam, driven both by their ambitions to rule the country, and by the desire to protect their own, semi-autonomous territories from any direct government control. In addition, they were supported politically and financially by

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<sup>3</sup> Both the propaganda efforts and the logistical operation behind the population movement are described in detail in book: R. Frankum, *Operation Passage to Freedom: The United States Navy in Vietnam, 1954–55*, Lubbock 2007, p. 260.

<sup>4</sup> As it was mentioned before, Binh Xuyen was in fact a crime organization, but since political ambitions and actions tied it closely to Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, the terms “politico-religious organizations” and “Sects” in this article also refer to Binh Xuyen.

the French, who saw them as their agents of influence in the former colony, and openly despised the Vietnamese prime minister (it was a mutual feeling). Sect leaders tried to convince the Americans throughout the whole summer of 1954 that Diem was isolated and should be replaced – because he lacked political support, but also because he was a Catholic, which Sects claimed was a huge drawback in the South.

September 1954 was marked by the open eruption of the conflict between Ngo Dinh Diem and the Chief of Staff of the Vietnamese National Army, General Nguyen Van Hinh. Hinh was a pro-French officer with huge political ambitions, and saw himself as a savior of the country. During August 1954 he tried to convince the USA to topple Diem's government and set up new regime that would include representatives of the Sects with him, or his father, as the prime minister.<sup>5</sup> Hinh was supported, both covertly and openly, by the Sects leaders and the French, who lobbied for him both in Saigon and Washington. Aware of his formal subordinate's machinations, Diem ordered the General to leave the country, under the guise of six months of military training in France, thus allowing him to save face. However, Hinh rejected the order, first ostentatiously riding around Saigon with Diem's order displayed on his motorcycle, and then barricading himself in his villa protected by his troops, openly defying the prime minister's decision.<sup>6</sup>

In the end, Diem prevailed, thanks to the US support. Americans viewed the Sects as anachronistic and dangerous forces threatening the stability of the young Vietnamese state, and the State Department disagreed that any better candidate than Diem could be found. Washington also feared that if the General Hinh won this power struggle, it would have set a dangerous precedent about military-civilian relations in the new country.<sup>7</sup> American assistance allowed the Vietnamese prime minister to bribe some Sect leaders to support his government, and after Hinh started to hint that he will try to gain power by military coup in October, the United States intervened directly, threatening to cut all financial and military support to the Vietnamese National Army.<sup>8</sup> On November 8<sup>th</sup>, General Hinh boarded a French plane and left Indochina.

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<sup>5</sup> Nguyen Van Hinh was a son of former Vietnamese prime minister Nguyen Van Tam, who was again favored for this position by the French. It is worth noting, that many (if not most) of South Vietnamese coups were in fact family ventures.

<sup>6</sup> M. Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken, The Vietnam War 1954–1965*, Cambridge 2006, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> *The Ambassador at Saigon (Heath) to the Department of State*, 16 September 1954, [in:] *FRUS*, 1952–1954, vol. XIII, part 2, pp. 2030–2031.

<sup>8</sup> *Memorandum of Discussion at the 218<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, Friday, October 22, 1954*, 22 October 1954, [in:] *FRUS*, 1952–1954, vol. XIII, part 2, pp. 2153–2159.

However, the Sects remained, and after the French' favorite for ousting Diem was forced into exile, Paris envoys in Saigon diverted most of their attention and efforts into brining Cao Dai, Hoa Hao and Binh Xuyen into an open conflict with government. According to the plan of General Paul Ély, Commissioner-General of Indochina, Ngo Dinh Diem's cabinet, lacking the trust of the Vietnamese National Army or any wider popular support, would fall after direct challenge from the Sects, or at least be forced to include pro-French politicians, bringing the country back under French control, even if from the backseat.

One more factor was helping the French: in November 1954, a new American representative arrived in Vietnam. An experienced diplomat Donald R. Heath left Saigon, and General Joseph Lawton Collins arrived to take his place. Washington made this choice to strengthen the American position in dealing with the French, since Collins was not only a military officer, like Ély, but also a war hero from WW2, who took part in the liberation of Paris. However, the choice proved to be a flawed one. The new ambassador arrived directly from his earlier post of the U.S. Representative in NATO, and with political naivety treated his French partners as sincere and well-wishing allies, not understanding the serious differences between the political goals of the Americans and the French in Vietnam. While Washington sought to stabilize Diem's regime and broaden its support, Paris wanted the Vietnamese prime minister gone in any way possible. To the dismay of lower-ranking Americans in Saigon, Collins quickly adopted the French narration that Diem has to go, repeating the arguments of French officers – from his perspective sincere friends and allies, simply more knowledgeable about the internal situation of South Vietnam – in his diplomatic cables to Washington.<sup>9</sup>

By the end of January 1955, the French announced that they will stop paying their usual stipend for armed militias of politico-religious organizations. The Sects reacted exactly as the Commissioner-General expected: leaders of Cao Dai, Hoa Hao and Binh Xuyen turned to Diem, demanding incorporation of their units into Vietnamese National Army and covering their pay by the government. At the same time, Sect soldiers were supposed to remain in the politico-religious organizations territories and under their autonomous command. However, the Vietnamese prime minister managed to use this potential threat to his advantage. Using state funding as a bait, he

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<sup>9</sup> *Memorandum of Conversation, by the Acting Director of the Office of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs (Young)*, 7 December 1954, [in:] *FRUS, 1952–1954*, vol. XIII, part 2, pp. 2350–2352.



pulled several of the Sects generals to the government side, weakening the politico-religious organizations' position, and at the same time strengthening his own.<sup>10</sup>

However, this forced the Sects into action, and with the beginning of March 1955 they begun their counterattack. The leadership of Binh Xuyen, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao held a press conference, and Cao Dai's pope, Pham Cong Tac, publicly announced the formation of the United Front of the Nationalist Forces. Diem was accused of dictatorship and of being a threat to the nationalistic cause of fighting Communists, and the Sects urged the formation of a new, broad nationalistic government.<sup>11</sup>

Diem underestimated the threat presented by the United Front, and decided to ignore it completely, convinced that the lure of government funding would quickly erode the unity of the money-deprived Sects. However, on March 21st, the United Front announced its ultimatum, demanding Diem's resignation, which was also signed by the generals that were on the government payroll. This was a disaster for Vietnamese prime minister. Not only military forces at his disposal did suddenly drastically decrease, swaying the balance of power in Saigon; the Generals' betrayal also put new energy into French diplomatic efforts to present him as a weak and divisive politician. The sudden shift baffled and frustrated Americans, even the pro-French Collins, who remarked that "discussing this problem with these generals was like trying to reason with two stubborn four year old children. They were either lying very ineptly or they are alarmingly stupid considering the influence and power they wield."<sup>12</sup>

The whole situation was moving in the direction of an open confrontation, which finally erupted during the night of 29/30<sup>th</sup> March, when Binh Xuyen militia attacked policemen loyal to Diem. However, after the initial assaults failed, and Diem's troops were preparing to counterattack, French soldiers appeared on the streets of Saigon, separating the warring sides, ostensibly to protect civilians. But in the eyes of most observers, General

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<sup>10</sup> In the same month, Diem also refused to prolong Binh Xuyen's gambling license, drastically reducing the revenue of the organization. *Telegram From the Special Representative in Vietnam (Collins) to the Department of State*, 4 January 1955, [in:] *FRUS*, 1955-1957, vol. I, pp. 14-15; *Telegram From the Special Representative in Vietnam (Collins) to the Department of State*, 10 February 1955, [in:] *FRUS*, 1955-1957, vol. I, pp. 81-83.

<sup>11</sup> J. M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance. Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam*, Ithaca-London 2013, p. 91.

<sup>12</sup> *Telegram From the Special Representative in Vietnam (Collins) to the Department of State*, 23 March 1955, [in:] *FRUS*, 1955-1957, vol. I, pp. 142-143.

Ély has intervened only to protect the Sects from the government retaliation.<sup>13</sup>

To Collins, the eruption of fighting was an additional proof that Diem has lost his ability to control the situation in South Vietnam. Despite the protests from lower-ranking diplomats and officers, the American General started to collaborate with the French Commissioner-General in devising a plot to replace Diem and bring the politico-religious organizations into the reformed government.

In the second half of April, Collins flew to Washington, to personally convince American leaders about the need to get rid of the Vietnamese prime minister. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and president Eisenhower were skeptical: they saw reports from Saigon that were completely contradictory to what Collins had said, and their opinion of the French constant meddling in Indochina and the Sects was definitely unfavorable. However, they decided to trust the opinion of the man they had sent to Vietnam, and gave a green light for the Collins-Ély plan of disposing of Diem.<sup>14</sup>

But the Vietnamese prime minister had no intention of waiting for his doom with folded hands. The sympathetic Americans warned him about the purpose of Collins' Washington trip, and he sprang into action. On 28<sup>th</sup> April, Saigon erupted with clashes between Vietnamese National Army soldiers and Binh Xuyen militia.<sup>15</sup> In Washington, the start of the conflict was greeted with interest and expectations that finally, the murky situation in Vietnam would become clear. As Secretary Dulles said, "The developments of last night could either lead to Diem's utter overthrow or to his emergence from the disorder as a major hero."<sup>16</sup> One way or another, Americans would finally know who emerged successful. Despite Collins' misgivings, the plan to replace Diem was put on hold.

In Saigon, the battle quite quickly shifted in the government's favor. Contrary to the pessimistic predictions of Collins and the French, the troops of the VAN proved both loyal to Diem and able to fight. In addition, the prime minister managed to secure the support from key Cao Dai and Hoa

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<sup>13</sup> M. Moyar, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> *Memorandum of a Telephone Conversation Between the Secretary of State and the Director of Central Intelligence (Dulles)*, Washington, April 11, 1955, 11:13 a.m., [in:] *FRUS*, 1955–1957, vol. I, p. 235; *Telegram From the Secretary of State to the Embassy in France*, 27 April 1955, *FRUS*, 1955–1957, vol. I, pp. 297–298.

<sup>15</sup> Officially Binh Xuyen troops started the fighting, but most probably they were provoked by government forces. M. Moyar, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> *Memorandum of Discussion at the 246th Meeting of the National Security Council*, Washington, April 28, 1955, 28 April 1955, [in:] *FRUS*, 1955–1957, vol. I, pp. 307–312.

Hao Generals once again, thus isolating Binh Xuyen in Saigon, and quickly pushing them into their Cholon district headquarters. In a few days most of the demoralized defenders defected to the government side or laid down arms, and only a small number of survivors fled into the swamps surrounding capital. Vietnam had a new hero, just like Dulles has predicted.

With renewed American support<sup>17</sup> and the French finally pushed to the side, Diem decided to quell the Sects once and for all. After giving his soldiers a few weeks of respite, the prime minister sent VNA troops against Hoa Hao warlords, who plotted with the exiled General Hinh. Right before the start of the operation, one of the four generals went over to the government's side with all of his men. Two other soon followed, and pleaded for the government's mercy. Ba Cut, the only one remaining, was an old political enemy of Ngo Dinh Diem and refused any kind of talks. However, he was betrayed in April 1956 by his subordinates for the substantial reward offered by the government, and executed three months later. While conducting the operations against Hoa Hao warlords, the Vietnamese National Army did not forget about the remnants of Binh Xuyen, still present in the swamps near Saigon, and crushed them decisively in October 1955. At this point, Bay Vien was already living comfortably in France, with a large part of the organization's wealth.<sup>18</sup>

In the meantime, Ngo Dinh Diem's supporters inside Cao Dai led to an internal coup in the organization, forcing pope Pham Cong Tac to flee to Cambodia in February 1956, where he lived until his death in year 1959. While the army was fighting and mopping up the military remnants of the Sects, government administration moved into their former territories, ending their quasi-independence.

While the fight with the Sects was still going on, Diem finalized his seizure of power in Vietnam, organizing a state referendum that took place on October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1955. While marred by electoral fraud, the referendum was a resounding organizational success, and confirmed the prime minister's grip on power. Three days after the voting took place, Ngo Dinh Diem proclaimed the creation of the Republic of Vietnam, with him as its president. The struggle against the Sects became an important part of the new state founding story.

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<sup>17</sup> On May 13<sup>th</sup>, Secretary Dulles wrote to his subordinates in the Department of State: "You will continue to give complete, loyal and sincere support to the present government of Diem and you should deal with it as the independent and sovereign government which we believe it is and should be". *Telegram From the Secretary of State to the Department of State*, 13 May 1955, [in:] *FRUS*, 1955–1957, vol. I, pp. 406–408.

<sup>18</sup> J. M. Chapman, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

### **Religion mixed with politics: Buddhist Crisis and fall of Ngo Dinh Diem**

On the evening of November 2nd 1963, Ngo Dinh Diem, the first president of the Republic of Vietnam, was murdered along with his brother in a military coup sponsored and encouraged by the United States Embassy in Saigon. However, most historians describing his downfall point to the Buddhist Crisis from the May 1963 as a real reason behind Diem's demise.

The most common narrative of those events goes as follows: Diem, who at that point was a simple dictator, was also a fanatical Roman Catholic, favoring his co-believers and persecuting the Buddhist majority of the country. In addition, his administration was riddled with nepotism and corruption.

The conflict with the Buddhists erupted when Diem prohibited the display of religious flags on Vesak, a holiday celebrating the birth of Gautama Buddha in the city of Hue, just days after Vatican flags were displayed throughout the city on the occasion of Diem's older brother Ngo Dinh Thuc's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a bishop. Peaceful protests about these double standards ended in violence, when soldiers started shooting during the demonstration on May 8th 1963, killing several people. The protests escalated, and on June 11<sup>th</sup>, bonze Thich Quang Duc self-immolated on a busy Saigon street, which was captured on a world-famous photo. This image, along with biased reporting by several American journalists, established the world-recognized narrative of evil dictator Diem oppressing good, peaceful Buddhists. This narration was only reinforced when the Vietnamese president ordered his Special Forces to raid Xa Loi Pagoda<sup>19</sup> and many other places of worship in South Vietnam, occupied by protesters, on early morning of August 21<sup>st</sup>. First press reports claimed hundreds were killed and wounded, and despite this information quickly being proven untrue, it further poisoned Vietnamese-American relations. When Diem was killed in November, the Buddhists celebrated, and the US and global public opinion deemed this as the just end of the corrupt, brutal dictator.

However, more recent works about the topic prove that the true picture of the Buddhist Crisis was more complicated. Not only was Ngo Dinh Diem not a violent oppressor of the Buddhist majority, the government coexisted with followers of Buddha surprisingly well until 1963. It is enough to say that the Xa Loi Pagoda was funded by Diem's administration in 1956, along with tens of other temples across the country, sponsored by the state. Edward Miller argues that Vietnamese Buddhists saw their religion insepara-

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<sup>19</sup> The largest pagoda in Saigon and Buddhist center in the city.

bly connected with the fate of their nation and had their nationalistic vision of their own, making them political rivals to Diem, and this was the real reason for the 1963 confrontation. In other words, the American belief of a religious cause of the conflict is wrong, and in reality it was a clash of two competing visions of Vietnam.<sup>20</sup>

Also, the ban on public display of religious flags, which provoked the demonstrations in Hue, was in fact the example of president's Diem putting the national interest above religion – furious that his bishop-brother's ostentatious display of Vatican's flags could provoke the Buddhist majority of Hue's populace, Diem introduced the ban to prevent such events in the future. However, correct in the concept, the new law was poorly timed and gave previously mentioned impression of being aimed solely at Buddhists, while it was the other way round.

The Buddhist challenge had a religious aspect, but was in fact a political ploy for power, just like that of politico-religious organizations years earlier. Protesters very quickly turned from their purely religious demands into political ones: first against Buddhist discrimination, then against the Ngo Family, and finally, despite Diem's concessions,<sup>21</sup> they clearly articulated that their ultimate goal was to force the president to step down. Diem reacted to this challenge exactly like in year 1955: with confrontation. And just like during the Sect Crisis, the forceful solution proved effective. After Xa Loi Pagoda raids the backbone of the protesters movement had been broken and Diem re-affirmed his grip on power, and while the whole dispute was far from over, the streets of South Vietnam became much calmer.

It is also worth noting that the president had support of his military in the struggle against the Buddhists. Despite their post-coup claims that they were tricked and set up by Diem and his brother Nhu and that the pagoda raids were performed exclusively by Special Forces and not the Army, in August 1963 Vietnamese Generals pressured Diem to deal forcefully with protesters, reminding him about the similarities with the 1955 crisis, and in fact they helped to plan the raids.<sup>22</sup> They turned against the president only after they saw the negative reaction of the United States to the pagoda raids, which was completely different from the time of the Sect Crisis. This

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<sup>20</sup> E. Miller, op. cit., pp. 248–278.

<sup>21</sup> M. Moyar, op. cit., p. 228.

<sup>22</sup> *Telegram From the Central Intelligence Agency Station in Saigon to the Agency*, 24 August 1963, [in:] *FRUS*, 1961–1963, vol. III, pp. 614–620; *Telegram From the Central Intelligence Agency Station in Saigon to the Agency*, 10 September 1963, [in:] *FRUS*, 1961–1963, vol. IV, pp. 146–148.

in turn was caused by biased reporting of several American journalists who were sympathizing with protesters and were hostile against Ngo Dinh Diem.<sup>23</sup> For example, all of their articles omitted the fact that the raided pagodas were stocked with supplies and small firearms, and that some leaders of the protest movement had ties to North Vietnam, dismissing any suggestion of Communist involvement as government propaganda.

In reality, the leader of the movement, bonze Thich Tri Quang, preached that Communism and Buddhism could coexist, and his brother was an influential party member in North Vietnam, responsible for the infiltration of the South.<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that the question of communist infiltration of the Buddhist movement as something that definitely took place is raised today by the South Vietnamese Diaspora in United States.<sup>25</sup>

Beside biased reporting, another reason why the American public opinion generally supported the protesters was their idealized vision of Buddhism as a gentle, peaceful religion of self-enlightenment and wise monks studying ancient knowledge. In reality Buddhism is as fractured and violent as all other great religions like Christianity or Islam.<sup>26</sup> This was evident even during the crisis in Vietnam when the before mentioned bonze Thich Tri Quang declared, that "his intention [is] not to cease agitation until the Diem government falls. Thich Tri Quang also has indicated his intention, if necessary, to call for suicide volunteers."<sup>27</sup>

There is also a controversy about the size of the Buddhist religious majority in South Vietnam. While some authors gave number as high as 90% of the population, others argue that most of this number is made up by practitioners of Vietnamese folk religion, easily mistaken by Westerners for Bud-

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<sup>23</sup> This bias is confirmed by the personnel of American Embassy in Saigon, who themselves were not exactly the biggest fans of Ngo Dinh Diem at this period. *Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State*, 7 July 1963, [in:] *FRUS*, 1961–1963 vol. III, pp. 470–471.

<sup>24</sup> M. Moyar, *op. cit.*, pp. 217–218.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Do, the President of Vietnamese American Community of the USA, had no doubts about communist infiltration and control over Buddhist and peace movement in South Vietnam during sixties. M. Do, *The Peace Movement in South Vietnam in Mid-1960s*, paper presented at *1967: The Search for Peace Conference*, Lubbock 28–29 April 2017.

<sup>26</sup> When in 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC one of Sri Lanka Buddhist kings defeated and slaughtered his non-Buddhist opponents, and was troubled by the extensive bloodshed, monks consoled him that the slain "were like animals; you will make the Buddha's faith shine". A. Strathern, *Why Are Buddhist Monks Attacking Muslims?*, [online] <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22356306>, [accessed: 29.06.2017].

<sup>27</sup> *Central Intelligence Agency Information Report*, 8 July 1963, [in:] *FRUS*, 1961–1963, vol. III, p. 473–478.

dhism, and followers of Buddha never made up more than 20% of population, and that the a large part of Vietnamese Buddhists were actually very lax about their religion.<sup>28</sup>

Another thing that is easily forgotten in the classic narration of the Buddhist Crisis is the fact that self-immolation has a slightly different role in Southeast Asia. It was not a shocking act of utter desperation, like it was presented by the American journalists, but while indeed being a form of political protest, it had a long tradition as a religious practice in Buddhism, both as a sacrifice and a way of reaching enlightenment.

While the Vietnamese president was indeed a Roman Catholic, and he favored other Catholics on government and military positions, it wasn't actually the case of religious favoritism or discrimination. The key to understanding the South Vietnam of that time was loyalty. One of the main American charges against Diem was his nepotism and favoritism in filling state posts. The Vietnamese president favored people that were loyal to him, even if they were incompetent or corrupt. However, it was a matter of simple survival: in a country lacking democratic traditions but full of ambitious pretenders, filling important positions with your supporters was essential. And since most Catholics in the South Vietnam came from the North during the transition period after the Geneva Conference of 1954, in general they were more anti-Communist, more loyal to the government, and more effective as civil workers. In other words, being a Catholic was seen as a merit, but actually because of all other reasons than the religion itself.

In a widely circulated anecdote, Diem once told one of his Generals, supposedly forgetting that he was a Buddhist, "Put your Catholic officers in sensitive places. They can be trusted."<sup>29</sup> It is highly doubtful that Diem would have "forgotten" that one of his close subordinates is Buddhist. Besides, in that situation he was stating the truth, not a religious bias. As already mentioned, Catholics in fact tended to be more loyal and reliable. It was not a slip of the tongue from the Vietnamese president, as the General was already a member of Diem's inner circle, and his faith was irrelevant at this point. The key was loyalty to the head of state. It is also worth noting that in the period when Americans were most vocal about the Ngo family's nepotism, United States were ruled by a president from an influent political family who chose his younger brother to the position of his Attorney General.

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<sup>28</sup> M. Do, *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> M. E. Gettleman, *Vietnam: History, Documents and Opinions on a Major World Crisis*, Harmondsworth-Middlesex 1966, pp. 280-282.

After Diem's demise, Buddhists became one of the main political players in South Vietnam. This however proved fatal: the lack of Ngo Dinh Diem and the dismantling of his administration plunged the country into the state of perpetual chaos. After another coup deposed the Buddhists favorite, General Duong Van Minh, from power, monk-led protests returned to the streets of South Vietnam's cities.

### Conclusion

Religion played an important part both during birth and later years of South Vietnam's existence. Most of the time it was only a pretext and cover for political ambition, but the emotions it caused were definitely real. Even if leaders of Sects or Buddhist movement fought for their vision of the state, or their place in country's power structure, their followers treated the question of religion very seriously. It is worth to note that Cao Dai and Hoa Hao survived both the crushing of their political ambitions by Ngo Dinh Diem and later persecution by the Communists; and they are still functioning to this day.

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