

## Staging Democracy: South Vietnam's 1955 Referendum to Depose Bao Dai\*

On 23 October 1955, South Vietnam's citizens took to the polls to choose between the country's obsolete emperor and its far-from-popular prime minister, Ngo Dinh Diem. Government propaganda told them that Emperor Bao Dai was a treacherous, slovenly womanizer who amounted to nothing more than a shackle on Vietnam's development. Diem, on the other hand, promised to usher in a new and glorious era in Vietnam's history marked by democracy, self-determination, and individual rights.

Newly available evidence from Vietnamese archives demonstrates that this referendum should be viewed as an important cultural and political moment for South Vietnam. It exerted a lasting influence on politics below the 17th parallel and on the diplomatic relationship between the United States and South Vietnam. Historians and observers to date, however, have interpreted the October 1955 vote almost exclusively from within the American lens, which has led to a series of incomplete conclusions about the nature and significance of the event. Such America-centric scholarship in the absence of similar studies on South Vietnam has prevented a thorough scholarly understanding of the complex nature of America's ally in the Vietnam War. Further research into Saigon's internal politics is therefore necessary to enable historians to conduct an informed reassessment of American officials' perceptions and policies.

Until the early 1990s, the most thorough descriptions of Diem's referendum to depose Bao Dai were penned by journalists or appeared in political memoirs, and thus cannot be considered scholarly accounts of the event.<sup>1</sup> Without

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1. See Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, vol. II, *Vietnam at War* (London, 1967), 889–93; Chester L. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York, 1970), 148–52; Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation under Stress* (Boston, 1964), 23–24; Howard R. Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam* (Washington, DC, 1972), 20–21; Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian* (New York, 1963), 86; Bernard B. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis*, 2d rev. ed. (New York, 1963), 256–59; Donald Lancaster, *The Emancipation of French Indochina* (London, 1961), 398–99; Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The Story of Twenty Years of Neglected Opportunities in Vietnam and of America's Failure to Foster Democracy There* (New

exception, these accounts conclude that the referendum, despite Diem's claims, was not a democratic exercise. Even Diem apologists like Anthony Trawick Bouscaren and American CIA officer Edward Landsdale concur with the prime minister's harshest critics on the conclusion that the South Vietnamese government was either incapable of or unwilling to hold a truly free, representative plebiscite in October 1955. Overall, these early accounts credit the referendum with cementing Diem's consolidation of authority over South Vietnam, and some identify it as the political moment that first revealed the oppressive, dictatorial nature of Diem's regime that would come back to haunt American officials in future years.

Vietnam expert Joseph Buttinger has described October 1955 as "the month when another rotten relic of Vietnam's past was thrown on the junk heap of history: the monarchy, together with its last, unworthy representative, Bao Dai."<sup>2</sup> He judges Diem's one-sided election campaign to have been outrageous and unnecessary, as "no one doubted what the outcome of the referendum would be."<sup>3</sup> He claims that Diem could afford to ignore the voices raised in Saigon against the referendum's confirmation of the existing system of one-man rule, and minimizes the lasting political effect of the vote and of Diem's campaign on the nature of South Vietnamese politics.

Correspondent Donald Lancaster, who was present in Saigon to observe the tumultuous events of 1955, records, "Whereas Bao Dai was given no opportunity to defend himself, the government-controlled press proceeded to overwhelm him with scurrilous abuse."<sup>4</sup> Lancaster notes that "Diem had chosen to defeat rather than come to terms with his adversaries," and concludes that this led in the short term to the return of peaceful conditions in the countryside. He hints, though, that Diem's oppressive behavior created a tenuous peace at best, but does not go into any detail about how this referendum affected long-term South Vietnamese politics.

American diplomat Chester Cooper notes the referendum primarily for what it revealed about Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, and journalist Robert Shaplen goes so far as to credit Nhu entirely with orchestrating the election.<sup>5</sup> Cooper recalls Diem and Nhu both permitting and encouraging flagrant electoral violations, but he remembers the United States "put[ting] the best face on the election that it could."<sup>6</sup> With American cooperation, then, Diem was able to achieve most of his objectives and consolidate power over South Vietnam by the

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York, 1965), 129–30; Anthony Trawick Bouscaren, *The Last of the Mandarins; Diem of Vietnam* (Pittsburgh, 1965), 56–57. Even Bouscaren writes, "There is no doubt that not only was South Vietnam not ready for democracy or able to adopt it, but that Ngo Dinh Diem himself was less attracted to it than he was to a vague mish-mash of ideas called personalism."

2. Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, 889.

3. *Ibid.*, 891.

4. Lancaster, *The Emancipation of French Indochina*, 398.

5. Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution*, 129–30.

6. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, 151–52.

end of 1955. According to Cooper, though, Diem's policies and programs from that point on "led to inevitable disaster."<sup>7</sup>

These works, along with several others, constitute a "first draft" of history, an effort by those Americans involved in the war in Vietnam to explain its origins. More recently, historians have revised these journalistic assessments of the referendum, drawing upon newly released U.S. government documents to generate a more scholarly interpretation of America's alliance with South Vietnam. In his path-breaking book on the Eisenhower administration in Vietnam, David Anderson clearly explicates Washington's position on the referendum to depose Bao Dai. American officials, he claims, were above all concerned with preventing Diem from losing to the Communists in the countrywide elections scheduled for the summer of 1956. To prevent such an eventuality, State Department officials sought to restructure the South Vietnamese regime as a republic, and encouraged Diem to broaden his administration and create a national assembly to promulgate a new constitution. "Although the Americans preferred the creation of an assembly before the elimination of Bao Dai," writes Anderson, "Diem had his own agenda."<sup>8</sup> American officials wary of provoking a crisis in U.S. relations with Saigon watched passively as Diem organized an ill-advised referendum and rejected American advice to avoid tampering with election results. Anderson concludes that the South Vietnamese government's lopsided victory "was not a true representation of Diem's power or popularity. The emperor's weakness, the disarray of the political opposition, and other such factors explain his triumph."<sup>9</sup>

Historian Seth Jacobs, in his recent monograph on Ngo Dinh Diem, goes one step further to condemn the referendum as an undemocratic farce. He claims that "nothing demonstrated Diem's disinterest in democratic processes more vividly than the plebiscite in October 1955."<sup>10</sup> Jacobs mistakenly asserts that Diem would have preferred to bypass the electorate entirely and entrust his future to his American patrons, but that Bao Dai forced his hand by formally dismissing Diem from his position of prime minister on 18 October. In fact, Bao Dai's pronouncement came only after Diem's formal announcement of the referendum, and after a prolonged South Vietnamese press campaign against the emperor. Nonetheless, Jacobs is not off the mark with his claim that the October referendum demonstrated the dictatorial nature of Diem's regime. His dismissal of Diem's campaign as "absurd," however, minimizes the political significance of the referendum within South Vietnam and reveals the overwhelming reliance on English-language sources that marks the existing scholarly literature on America's involvement in Vietnam.<sup>11</sup>

7. Ibid., 152.

8. David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961* (New York, 1991), 127.

9. Ibid., 128.

10. Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham, NC, 2004), 224.

11. Ibid., 225.

Edward Miller's dissertation on Ngo Dinh Diem's nation-building efforts offers a slight reassessment of the referendum based on work in Vietnamese sources. Diem, in his view, did adhere to a particular brand of illiberal democratic ideals on this occasion and throughout his tenure in office. Miller therefore argues that the referendum was not as undemocratic as scholars have previously assumed. "By structuring the plebiscite as a choice for or against a deeply unpopular absentee king," he writes, "and by linking that choice to the almost universally popular concept of republicanism, Diem cast the question in such a way that an overwhelmingly favorable response was assured."<sup>12</sup> Though he introduces little new evidence about Diem's campaign, Miller effectively challenges prior interpretations by assessing the referendum within the context of South Vietnamese politics.

All three of these authors have set the stage for a more thorough study of the referendum to depose Bao Dai. Anderson's interpretation of the U.S. side of this story has paved the way for our understanding of America's relationship with Vietnam in the 1950s, and Jacobs and Miller have contributed valuable additional insights into the nature of Diem's regime and its incompatibility with the American ideals of democracy and self-determination.<sup>13</sup> Anderson's and Jacobs's sole reliance on American documents, though, limits their ability to assess the veracity of U.S. officials' perceptions and conclusions about South Vietnamese political events in general and the October referendum in particular. Moreover, none of the historians discussed here devote considerable attention to how the election was executed and experienced within South Vietnam.

In recent years, a handful of scholars have begun to utilize Vietnamese-language materials to revise existing impressions of the Vietnam War.<sup>14</sup> This article is another effort to get past American perspectives and promote a fuller understanding of America's alliance with South Vietnam by introducing original research from newly released South Vietnamese archival holdings and from newspapers published in Saigon during the months leading up to the referendum. It employs French- and Vietnamese-language documents to explore the October referendum as an important cultural and political event in South Vietnam's history and a pivotal moment in the U.S.-South Vietnamese alliance. This approach exemplifies the trend among historians of U.S. foreign relations

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12. Edward Garvey Miller, "Grand Designs: Vision, Power and Nation Building in America's Alliance with Ngo Dinh Diem, 1954-1960" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2004), 208.

13. Miller's overall argument is that Diem's vision of nation building was incompatible with Washington's plans for modernizing South Vietnam. It was not that Diem did not believe in democracy, then, but that his definition of democracy deviated substantially from that of the United States.

14. See David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* (Armonk, NY, 2003); Robert Brigham, *Guerilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Vietnam War* (Ithaca, NY, 1998); Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS, 2002); Miller, "Grand Designs."

to diversify their focus to include cultural elements of foreign relations and to internationalize the study of diplomacy to transcend the artificial limits imposed by narratives of “state” or “nation.”<sup>15</sup> One noted historian of Vietnam, Fredrik Logevall, has recently identified a particular need for significant “ethnocentric” research on Ngo Dinh Diem’s consolidation of control in South Vietnam from 1954 to 1956 as a means of understanding America’s role in Vietnam.<sup>16</sup> This article seeks to answer this call by illuminating the complexity of this formative South Vietnamese political event.

Research in Vietnamese archives reveals several significant aspects of the 23 October 1955 referendum to depose Bao Dai that American sources obscure. Examined from within the South Vietnamese political context, the plebiscite represents far more than the simple removal of an unpopular emperor by authoritarian means. A close look at Diem’s campaign rhetoric illuminates the changing nature of South Vietnam’s political culture as Diem attempted to navigate the country’s transition from its traditional past to a modernized future<sup>17</sup> in direct competition with the Communist regime in the North.<sup>18</sup> Diem

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15. Michael J. Hogan, “The ‘Next Big Thing’: The Future of Diplomatic History in a Global Age,” *Diplomatic History* 28, no. 1 (January 2004): 1–21; Frank Ninkovitch and Liping Bu, eds., *The Cultural Turn: Essays in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations* (Chicago, 2001).

16. Fredrik Logevall, “Bringing in the ‘Other Side’: New Scholarship on the Vietnam Wars,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3 (Fall 2001): 77–93.

17. Since the emergence of modernization theory as an explanation for political and social change emerged in the 1950s, scholars have problematized the concept of tradition versus modernity. Whereas the architects of the theory saw modernization as a progressive, systematic, revolutionary process by which traditional forms would be replaced, revisionists have attacked the reductionistic equation of tradition with backwardness and modernity with economic progress and social virtue. Moreover, they have pointed out that modernity does not simply replace tradition, but combines with it to produce new political and social practices and institutions. For a thorough review of this literature see Samuel P. Huntington, “To Change to Change: Modernization, Development, and Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 3, no. 2 (April 1971): 283–322; for more recent assessments see Ronald Inglehart and Wayne E. Baker, “Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values,” *American Sociological Review* 65, no. 1 (February 2000): 19–51; David C. Engerman, Nils Gilman, Mark H. Haefele, and Michael E. Latham, eds., *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War* (Boston, 2003); see also Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York, 2004), 6–8. Chatterjee refers to the coexistence of the traditional and the modern as “dense and heterogeneous time.” In the case of South Vietnam at this time, the terms “inherited” and “borrowed” could be used to replace “traditional” and “modern” in order to avoid the impression of value judgments. I have chosen to use the terms “modern” and “traditional” because they appeared prevalently in twentieth-century Vietnamese anticolonial vocabulary, and are thus the terms that Vietnamese politicians would have used to understand their nation’s ongoing process of social and political change.

18. Struggles over modernization versus the return to traditional values and practices marked the Vietnamese anticolonial movement throughout the twentieth century. One of the most relevant examples for this study is the debate between traditionalist Phan Boi Chau and modernizer Phan Chau Trinh over the relative merits of monarchy versus democracy. See William J. Duiker, “Phan Boi Chau: Asian Revolutionary in a Changing World,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (November 1971): 77–88. Duiker demonstrates that even Phan Boi Chau, the more conservative of these two anticolonial leaders, was torn between his longing for a return to traditional forms and his understanding of the need to modernize to ensure national survival and independence in a changing world.

combined conventional Confucian notions of moral leadership with Western ideas about democracy and liberty to justify removing the emperor and replacing the 1956 countrywide elections stipulated by the Geneva accords with his own National Assembly elections to be held in early 1956. Although Diem is traditionally represented as an authoritarian leader with no real interest in democracy, he issued wide promises of democratic rights and self-determination in this campaign that would inform South Vietnam's future political conflicts. The prime minister's opponents would henceforth respond to his lofty promises of equal rights and self-rule by criticizing his regime for failing to live up to the democratic ideals that it espoused.

The referendum was, moreover, a significant event in the early days of the U.S.-South Vietnamese relationship. In keeping with the diplomatic trend Tony Smith refers to as "liberal democratic capitalism," the United States supported the election as a means of spreading democracy to Southeast Asia.<sup>19</sup> American officials from Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to Ambassador to Saigon Frederick Reinhardt, however, were more concerned with how the referendum would be perceived internationally than they were with how it would be experienced within South Vietnam. By turning a blind eye to the contradictions between Diem's democratic rhetoric and his undemocratic practices, and by discounting the breadth and endurance of his political opposition, the United States helped generate the popular discontent that would plague Diem's administration until his assassination in November 1963. Because Bao Dai's removal from power dealt the final blow to France's already diminished influence in Vietnam, the United States would reap these future consequences without support from European allies.<sup>20</sup> In short, the October referendum shaped the South Vietnamese political climate and the U.S.-South Vietnamese relationship in enduring ways. It thus merits scholarly attention as a formative event in the early history of the Republic of Vietnam and as an important moment in American foreign relations.

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19. Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), 4. Smith identifies the greatest ambition of United States foreign policy since the Spanish-American war as follows: "To promote democracy abroad as a way of enhancing the national security."

20. Kathryn Statler, "The Diem Experiment and Franco-American conflict over South Vietnam, July 1954–May 1955," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 6, 2–3 (Summer–Fall 1997); Daniel P. O'C. Greene, "John Foster Dulles and the End of Franco American Entente in Indochina," *Diplomatic History* 16, no. 4 (Fall 1992). Both Statler and Greene have demonstrated that the United States largely succeeded in eliminating the remnants of French influence in Saigon through a series of talks in mid-May 1955. Nonetheless, the French government retained an interest in influencing the political future of its former colony and especially in preventing violence and injustice toward French citizens still living in Vietnam. Indeed, it was not until after the referendum and Diem's proclamation of the Republic of Vietnam on 26 October that Diem moved to demand the immediate withdrawal of the French Expeditionary Corps from South Vietnam.

## THE PATH TO SOUTH VIETNAM'S FIRST ELECTION

Diem had been angling to liberate himself from Bao Dai's oversight since the emperor first appointed him to lead South Vietnam in June 1954. His excuse for doing so finally arrived with the "sect crisis" of March and April 1955. Diem's primary non-Communist political and military competitors, the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Binh Xuyen sects, had presented him with an ultimatum in early March demanding representation in the South Vietnamese government. Diem refused these requests, and eventually provoked the Binh Xuyen into armed conflict with his government forces. With no guarantee of loyalty from South Vietnam's national army, the prime minister briefly tottered on the brink of defeat at the hands of the Vietnamese "mafia." But Diem pulled out an eleventh hour victory against the sects which surprised even his staunchest admirers and earned him a firm commitment of future support from the United States.

This incident reinforced Diem's hatred and suspicion of the French, and cemented his resolve to depose Bao Dai, whom Diem accused of colluding with French colonialist agents and rebellious sect leaders to incite the crisis. Indeed, Bao Dai had been conspiring with the French government to replace the prime minister with an alternative nationalist regime in the throes of the standoff.<sup>21</sup> This act of subversion guaranteed that Diem would seek to depose the emperor upon regaining a modicum of control over South Vietnamese politics. Diem was by no means alone in renouncing Bao Dai, as evidenced by a 30 April 1955 demand issued by the newly formed Revolutionary Council that the Saigon government should immediately remove the emperor from power. The council, however, was only an ostensibly pro-Diem body that was in fact dominated by Cao Dai elements and angling to seize control of the government by making the prime minister dependent upon its support.<sup>22</sup> Diem therefore resisted the council's immediate pressures, but went on to unseat Bao Dai and ratify his own authority by means of a popular referendum eight months later.

Historians have offered several explanations for Diem's refusal to go along with the Revolutionary Council's plan to depose Bao Dai immediately in the spring of 1955. Some have claimed that the prime minister was making good on his pledge not to use his grant of full powers to oust the emperor arbitrarily, but to submit Bao Dai's fate to the will of the people.<sup>23</sup> Edward Miller further argues that Diem, had he bowed to the council's demands and proclaimed Bao Dai's overthrow, would have been accused by his constituents of committing an illegal

21. See Miller, "Grand Designs," 194.

22. Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, 880–84; Robert G. Scigliano, "Political Parties in South Vietnam under the Republic," *Pacific Affairs* (September 1960): 328–29; U.S. Department of State Memorandum of Conversation, "Briefing on Conditions in Vietnam," 2 May 1955, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter NARA), Record Group 59 (hereafter RG), Coo08, Reel 3, 751G.00/4-3055.

23. Robert R. Nathan, "The Consequences of Partition," in *Problems of Freedom: South Vietnam since Independence*, ed. Wesley R. Fishel (New York, 1961), 16.



coup d'état, which would have undermined his already fragile authority.<sup>24</sup> Beyond these considerations, though, Diem wanted not only to be rid of Bao Dai, but to assert himself as the one true liberator of Vietnam. He sought to validate his right to preside over the formation of a new government for the South, and could only do this by resisting the political pressure applied by the Revolutionary Council. He was determined to invest the demise of the monarchy and his own rise to power with an air of legality and legitimacy, and a popular referendum seemed the perfect means of accomplishing this.<sup>25</sup>

To regain control of South Vietnamese political momentum, Diem waited for the chaos of the sect crisis to abate before acting on the Revolutionary Council's demands for a new government. The prime minister then sought to legitimate his mission to depose the emperor by seeking a repudiation of Bao Dai and his heirs by the imperial Nguyen Phuoc family. Probably to shield itself from further defamation and to protect the sanctity of royal properties, the royal family eagerly complied on 15 June 1955.<sup>26</sup> The supreme body of the Nguyen Phuoc family denounced Bao Dai on the grounds that his decision to cede the throne to the Viet Minh in 1945 was a crime against Vietnam's citizens, and that he had plotted with French colonialists, the Binh Xuyen, and Hoa Hao generals Ba Cut and Nam Lua (Tran Van Soai) to threaten the nation's independence. The royal family thus pledged that it would no longer recognize Bao Dai's claims to rule, and formally solicited Diem to become Vietnam's provisional president. It asked him to lead the "national revolution" through the difficult upcoming phase. In return, the Nguyen Phuocs requested that Diem cease his campaign against Bao Dai's private life and continue to protect the royal mausoleums, tombs, and shrines.

Even after this royal endorsement of Diem, the Revolutionary Council hoped to use Bao Dai's ouster as an opportunity to move against the current administration. By late June, observers in the U.S. embassy noted, "Recent trends within [the] 'Revolutionary Council' indicate [a] serious cleavage between Diem and Cao Dai elements." To be sure, the two groups were united in their desire for Bao Dai's deposal, but their remaining objectives were almost diametrically opposed. Diem, on one hand, envisioned only minor postelection cabinet changes to bring in additional pro-Diem figures. And he sought to ensure his own victory in the elections by arresting pro-Bao Dai elements and keeping extremists in line through force. U.S. Ambassador Reinhardt noted that Cao Dai representatives, on the other hand, "wished to see drastic reorganization [of the] cabinet resulting in replacement [of] many if not most

24. Miller, "Grand Designs," 197.

25. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams*, 257; Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, 884.

26. "Ban Tuyen Cao cua Phu Ton Nhon Luc 15 Gio Ngay 15-6-1955," Vietnamese National Archives 2 (hereafter VNA2), Phu Tong Thong De Nhat Cong Hoa (hereafter PTTDICH), Folder 18091.



incumbents by 'revolutionary' elements."<sup>27</sup> According to Reinhardt, Cao Dai members of the Revolutionary Council continued to go along with Diem's programs in hopes of preventing him from moving against them, and as part of a larger plot eventually to seize control of the government.

On 7 July, Diem captured the initiative from the Cao Dai by announcing plans for a referendum that would remove the emperor from power and authorize Diem to found a new republic in the southern half of Vietnam. He made this announcement at least partly in response to messages from the United States that continued American support for his regime would depend upon his ability to depose Bao Dai by legal, popular means. American diplomats considered this to be an essential move to forestall future challenges from the Viet Minh and the sects.<sup>28</sup> It was not until 6 October, following what American diplomats in Saigon identified as a "three-week long government inspired press campaign against Bao Dai," that Diem set the referendum date for 23 October 1955.<sup>29</sup> This left little time for the Revolutionary Council, overall lacking in significant media channels,<sup>30</sup> to commandeer Diem's move for total authority over South Vietnam's political future. Bao Dai, living in luxury on the French Riviera, also had little time to formulate a response and initiate a campaign to defend his throne. At any rate, by this time he had minimal claim to political effectiveness or moral authority and stood virtually no chance of defeating Diem at the polls, even if given a fair chance to campaign.

The emperor responded to the referendum announcement from his home in Cannes on 13 October, accusing Diem of impeding peaceful reunification of South and North Vietnam. He implored his people not to support or encourage "a governmental activity which conforms neither to the profound sentiment of the Vietnamese people nor to the common cause of peace."<sup>31</sup> He issued his plea not to Vietnamese voters, but to French, British, and American leaders, as he had no outlet for propaganda in Saigon's tightly censored media.<sup>32</sup> Finally recognizing the inevitability of electoral defeat, Bao Dai made one last-ditch effort to salvage his authority on 18 October 1955. Accusing Diem of using the

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27. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, 27 June 1955, NARA, RG59, C0008, Reel 4, 751G.00/6-2755.

28. Telegram from Secretary of State to U.S. Embassy Saigon and U.S. Embassy Paris, 29 June 1955, NARA, RG59, C0008, Reel 4, 751G.00/6-2955.

29. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, 7 October 1955, NARA, RG59, C0008, Reel 5, 751G.00/10-755; Telegram from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Department of State, "The Government's Case against Bao Dai," 18 October 1955, NARA, RG59, C0008, Reel 5, 751G.00/10-1855.

30. See Lancaster, *The Emancipation of French Indochina*, 398.

31. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Paris to Secretary of State, 14 October 1955, NARA, RG59, C0008, Reel 5, 751G.00/10-1355; "Bao Dai Condemns Diem Referendum," *New York Times*, 14 October 1955; "Diem and Bao Dai," *New York Times*, 15 October 1955.

32. See Telegram from U.S. Embassy Paris to Secretary of State (contains text of message addressed by Bao Dai to the Vietnamese people), 19 October 1955, NARA, RG59, C0008, Reel 5, 751G.00/10-1955. Bao Dai did deliver a message to the Vietnamese people, but there is no evidence that it was broadcast widely, if at all, within the borders of South Vietnam.

referendum to reestablish his personal dictatorship and to encourage renewed conflict between France and the United States, Bao Dai revoked his appointment as prime minister.<sup>33</sup>

Though American diplomats feared that Bao Dai's messages were designed to promote national reunification under Communist leadership, his efforts to undermine the referendum registered hardly a ripple in South Vietnam's political arena.<sup>34</sup> Diem continued with a vigorous campaign against the emperor during the week prior to the vote. His tenacity, combined with more than a little bit of rancor, was rewarded with just more than a 98 percent margin of victory.<sup>35</sup> On 26 October, just moments after officially declaring triumph over Bao Dai, Diem announced the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam. "The October 23rd plebiscite," he exhorted, "in which [the people of South Vietnam] took such an enthusiastic part, constitutes an approval of the policies pursued thus far and at the same time augurs a whole new era for the future of our country."<sup>36</sup> Though this was a vast overstatement of the level of public support the prime minister enjoyed, the referendum and Diem's ensuing proclamation of the Republic of Vietnam did usher in a new era for the country. It was at this moment that South Vietnam was transformed from a temporary regroupment zone into a distinct, semipermanent political entity under Diem's control.

#### CAMPAIGNING THROUGH TRADITION AND MODERNITY

As the existing literature indicates, the public campaign leading up to the 23 October vote was almost completely one-sided, and the outcome of the referendum was hardly in doubt. It nevertheless reveals a great deal about Diem's efforts to establish a sense of nationhood in South Vietnam to rival the Communist ideal. The prime minister's campaign rhetoric in fall 1955 sheds light on the political culture of South Vietnam as Diem navigated the country's transition from its traditional past and colonial administration to independence in the midst of an ongoing quest for modernization and national reunification. Western scholars since the 1950s have identified the "mandate of heaven" (*thien menh*) as the driving force behind traditional Vietnamese political behavior. Diem and many of his opponents adhered to this concept even while attempting

33. "La Revocation de Ngo Dinh Diem Par Bao Dai—Extrait du Bulletin des Ecoutes du Haut Commissariat de la Republique Francaise au Vietnam no. 2849 du 20 Octobre 1955," VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18092; "Bao Dai 'Removes' Vietnam Premier," *New York Times*, 19 October 1955; Telegram from U.S. Embassy Paris to Secretary of State (containing text of Bao Dai's letter), 18 October 1955, NARA, RG59, C0008, Reel 5, 751G.00/10-1855.

34. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Paris to Secretary of State, 20 October 1955, NARA, RG59, C0008, Reel 5, 751G.00/10-2055.

35. *Lua Song*, 27 October 1955; "Ket Qua Cuoc Trung Cau Dan Y Ngay 23 Thang 10 Nam 1955," 26 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 639. Official election returns show 5,721,735 of 5,828,907 ballots cast in favor of removing Bao Dai from office and charging Ngo Dinh Diem with the responsibility to establish a republican government.

36. "Ban Tuyen Cao Cua Quoc Truong Viet Nam," 26 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18097.

to modernize Vietnamese politics through an emphasis on democracy and popular participation. These latter ideas were clearly borrowed from Europe and the United States by Vietnamese reformers throughout the twentieth century in a self-conscious process of civilization best described by historian Mark Bradley.<sup>37</sup>

Recent historical scholarship rooted in Vietnamese source material has illuminated Diem's melding of traditional and modern political elements to shape a distinct South Vietnamese polity. Philip Catton, in his monograph on South Vietnam's Strategic Hamlet program, claims that "Diem's thinking certainly drew deeply on older ideas and customs, but he set out in 1954 to build a version of a modern nation rather than create a copy of the precolonial past."<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Edward Miller argues that Diem was neither "a sage-like national hero who was thwarted by fickle allies," nor was he "an inflexible autocrat who was doomed by his adherence to outdated ideas about rulership."<sup>39</sup>

Catton and Miller both demonstrate that it was during the years surrounding the October referendum that Diem and his brother Nhu refined the abstract, often impenetrable, philosophy of personalism, which they borrowed from the Frenchman Emmanuel Mounier and adapted to fit the Vietnamese context. Miller points out that by 1957, Diem's regime had embraced personalism as the official state ideology through which it sought to revolutionize South Vietnamese society. Diem and Nhu, in Catton's view, employed personalism to "develop a cultural synthesis for Vietnam," by encouraging "critical attention to Asian philosophies and religions" while seeking a governmental "middle-way that would secure the common good as well as the rights of the person."<sup>40</sup> Cao Van Luan, one of Diem's former cabinet members, recalls this effort as a failure. He claims that the Ngos' brand of personalism was insufficiently grounded in traditional Vietnamese political thought, and that it therefore undermined Diem's claims of populist leadership.<sup>41</sup> But while attempting to lay the groundwork for a popular, modern government through the referendum to depose Bao Dai, Diem exemplified his simultaneous adherence to time-honored ideas by appealing to one of the fundamental tenets of traditional Vietnamese politics.

The mandate of heaven, a Confucian notion inherited from the Chinese intellectual tradition, has multiple practical applications when translated from theory into politics. It emphasizes a ruler's need to serve the people morally and ethically, but can also be used by a conqueror to validate his conquest and by a

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37. Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America*; Mark Philip Bradley, "Becoming *Van Minh*: Civilizational Discourse and Visions of the Self in Twentieth-Century Vietnam," *Journal of World History* 15, no. 1 (2004): 65–83.

38. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 37.

39. Edward Miller, "Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1945–1954," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 3 (October 2004): 433.

40. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 40–41.

41. Cao Van Luan, *Ben Giong Lich Su, 1940–1965* (Glendale, CA, 1986) 282–87.

revolutionary to justify his subversion.<sup>42</sup> Stephen Young, claiming that the mandate was the “central concept in Vietnamese life,” explains that Vietnamese believed immoral conduct in either the personal or public realms to be the primary reason for a ruler to lose his heavenly mandate.<sup>43</sup> Once a leader had abandoned the “rigorous standards of right conduct,” Young claims, the entire society was likely to suffer heaven’s wrath in the form of lost crops, wars, corruption, and a general blight upon mankind.

French sociologist Paul Mus, however, points out that Vietnamese people would not shift their allegiance lightly. On the contrary, they would wait for an unmistakable sign that heaven had either conferred or withdrawn its mandate before supporting a new leader or rebelling against an existing emperor.<sup>44</sup> Owing to their Confucian mores and cyclical view of history, Vietnamese citizens would wait patiently for proof that a revolutionary regime had the mandate of heaven, a fact that, in Mus’s view, could be demonstrated only by “the emergence of a new political system that is a complete replacement of the preceding doctrines, institutions, and men in power and that shows itself to be in complete command of society.”<sup>45</sup> Until such time, Vietnamese were likely to avoid taking sides in internal struggles, for fear of endorsing the wrong candidate and incurring heaven’s wrath.

One scholar of Confucianism claims, “The belief that life and destiny are ordained by Heaven resulted in a tendency towards fatalism.”<sup>46</sup> The requirement for an overwhelming heavenly mandate not only encouraged fence-sitting, but, according to some, obviated the possibility of compromise among political rivals in their efforts to establish authority and restore order to the world. Indeed, according to Peter J. Moody, “No country in the Confucian cultural area has shown great tolerance for competitive politics.”<sup>47</sup> Until heaven manifested its choice beyond all doubt, Confucian countries were condemned to chaos and bereft of peace.<sup>48</sup>

Although surely a powerful ideal in Vietnamese society, and one explanatory factor in the unanimous outcome of this election, the mandate of heaven is too

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42. Lee H. Yearley, “Toward a Typology of Religious Thought: A Chinese Example,” *Journal of Religion* 55, no. 4 (October 1975): 428; see also Robert Petit, *La Monarchie Annamite* (Paris, 1931), especially 37–47.

43. Stephen B. Young, “The Mandate and Politics in Vietnam,” in *Electoral Politics in South Vietnam*, eds. John C. Donnell and Charles A. Joiner (Lexington, MA, 1974), 13–34; see also Nguyen The Anh, “From Indra to Maitreya: Buddhist Influence in Vietnamese Political Thought,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, no. 2 (June 2002): 225–41. Nguyen points out that the notion of a virtuous ruler was also an important element of Vietnam’s Buddhist tradition.

44. John T. McAlister, Jr. and Paul Mus, *The Vietnamese and Their Revolution* (New York, 1970), 67–69.

45. *Ibid.*, 114.

46. D. Howard Smith, “The Significance of Confucius for Religion,” *History of Religions* 2, no. 2 (Winter 1963): 248.

47. Peter R. Moody, Jr., *Political Opposition in Post-Confucian Society* (New York, 1988), 1.

48. Young, “The Mandate and Politics in Vietnam,” 13–34.

reductionistic to explain all Vietnamese political behavior. Gerald Hickey, a member of the Michigan State University Advisory Group, notes that Vietnamese often acted in response to more practical concerns. In his view, fear of official reprisal, not divine wrath, has historically compelled Vietnamese to answer questions with an eye toward pleasing authority figures rather than providing a candid response.<sup>49</sup> This is not necessarily incompatible with Vietnam's Confucian past, as Keith Taylor claims that Vietnamese Confucianism was intentionally "put together as a form of pressure against the threat of insubordination."<sup>50</sup> Even so, according to historian R. B. Smith, the South "was never so deeply imbued with Confucian tradition as the Centre and the North."<sup>51</sup>

Additional conceptual and logistical problems complicate the mandate of heaven as a political force. It assumes that people, at least commoners if not their leaders, always act according to perceived moral imperatives rather than personal interests. And it further assumes that all Vietnamese interpret signs of morality in similar ways. Moreover, when applied to events in the post-1945 era, it supposes a uniform and concurrent awareness of national political events by all citizens throughout the country. Nonetheless, scholars persistently assert that the traditional concept of heavenly mandate motivated even the most urbanized, Western-educated Vietnamese through the 1970s and beyond.<sup>52</sup> They are correct to an extent. Vietnam's Confucian heritage surely did factor into its citizens' political behaviors, even if it cannot completely explain them.

The best way to understand the complex set of factors that motivated the Vietnamese electorate at this moment of rapid social and political change is to examine the printed records available to us. How did politicians, namely Diem in this case, utilize the concept of mandate to persuade voters to jettison the emperor and throw their support behind Diem and his new democratic form of government? Two strains of persuasion, one traditional and the other clearly inspired by the West, permeated Diem's October 1955 crusade against Bao Dai. First, the South Vietnamese government and the Saigon press went to great lengths to discredit Bao Dai's morality, presumably to make clear that heaven had stripped him and the royal family of the mandate and conferred it upon Diem, a leader of great moral fortitude.<sup>53</sup> Second, newspaper articles and government statements extolled the merits of democratic government and self-determination. Conversely, they renounced Vietnam's old system of rule as feudalistic, authoritarian, and generally harmful to the nation's spirit.

49. Gerald Cannon Hickey, *Village in Vietnam* (New Haven, CT, 1964), xv.

50. K. W. Taylor, "Vietnamese Confucian Narratives," in *Rethinking Confucianism*, eds. Benjamin Elman, John B. Duncan, and Herman Ooms (Los Angeles, 2002), 337.

51. R. B. Smith, "The Development of Opposition to French Rule in Southern Vietnam, 1880-1940," *Past and Present* 54 (February 1972): 95.

52. For one popular example of this, see Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York, 1972).

53. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams*, 237. Fall writes, "It was perhaps out of faithfulness to the *mystique* of the monarchy as such that Diem decided in 1955 to oust its unworthy representative, Bao-Dai."

## THE DEBAUCHED EMPEROR

In the first strain of this campaign, Diem and his supporters depicted Bao Dai as a debauched emperor in both the personal and political arenas. Though Bao Dai was actually a savvy politician with nationalist convictions of his own, the South Vietnamese regime reduced him to a caricature of evil and incompetence. He was, according to most accounts, a womanizer, a drunk, a glutton, and a slob. Observers viewed these attributes as contributing directly to his acquiescence with France's plots to recolonize Vietnam, his collusion with the Communists, and his support for the "degenerate," "feudalistic" sect warlords. Diem's agents and the Saigon media spared the emperor no fury in communicating these failures, and left no room for doubt that he had been stripped of heaven's mandate.

During the weeks preceding the referendum, the streets of Saigon and other provinces were littered with posters, streamers, effigies of Bao Dai, and a creative variety of other tools to denounce the emperor and encourage citizens to cast their lot with Diem (see Figures 1 and 2). Some typical campaign slogans included "Bao Dai, puppet king selling his country," "Bao Dai, master keeper of gambling dens and brothels," "Being aware of vicious Bao Dai's preference for gambling, girls, wine, milk, and butter, those who vote for him will betray their country and despoil their people." On the other hand, "To vote for the revolutionary man Ngo Dinh Diem is to build a society of welfare and justice," and "Welcome Ngo Dinh Diem, the savior of the people. To kill communists, depose the king, [and] struggle against colonialists is a citizen's duty in Free Vietnam."<sup>54</sup>

Newspapers provided an opportunity for Diem supporters to develop their condemnations of the emperor more thoroughly than they could on the aforementioned campaign posters. In August 1955 the daily paper *Thoi Dai* attacked Bao Dai's moral authority with a scathing three-week series on the emperor's sensational love life by editorialist Hong Van. He started out by condemning Bao Dai's devious attempts to depict himself as a national hero when he was in fact "a dung beetle who sold his country for personal glory."<sup>55</sup> According to this author, Bao Dai, born with the name Vinh Thuy, was not actually the legitimate son of King Khai Dinh.<sup>56</sup> Instead, he came into the royal family through a stroke of sheer luck. Khai Dinh was apparently known by many to be infertile, a fact which gravely affected his birthright to assume the throne as two others vied for control of the royal court at Hue. The author vaguely claims that the royal court might have issued an edict declaring that no childless man would be accepted as king. At any rate, Khai Dinh took a maidservant by the name of Cuc (later Hue

54. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, 21 October 1955, NARA, RG59, C0008, Reel 5, 751G.00/10-2155.

55. "Mot Tai Lieu Dac Biet Chua Bao Nao Noi Toi: Cuoc Doi cua Bao Dai," *Thoi Dai*, 4 August 1955.

56. For a brief description of Khai Dinh's apparently unremarkable and often criticized reign see Oscar Chapuis, *The Last Emperors of Vietnam: From Tu Duc to Bao Dai* (Westport, CT, 2000), 27; Bruce McFarland Lockhart, *The End of the Vietnamese Monarchy* (New Haven, CT, 1993).





## Vịnh thắng nộm Bao Đại trước Chợ Bến Thành

*Áo vàng, đai đỏ, mặt bầu bầu  
Mặt trắng, kính đen, cằm không râu...  
Gái dựa cổ tay, nhìn nhón nhác  
Tiền treo dưới mắt, giấu đi dấu...*

*Ông nghề tháng tám ? Không người đón !  
Thắng nộm vườn đưa ? Chẳng kẻ cầu !  
Thiên hạ sì sào : Kìa, Bao Đại  
Suốt đời chim gái với đi cầu !*

HÀN CÔNG KỊCH

**Figure 1:** Effigy of Bao Dai in front of Saigon's Ben Thanh Market with accompanying government campaign poem, published in *Thời Đại* (October 1955).

Phi) as his imperial concubine and Bao Dai was born a prince soon after on 22 October 1913. Though Hong Van claimed that there was some evidence to prove Bao Dai's illegitimacy, including Khai Dinh's reputed scheme to bribe the boy's real father to keep quiet, it was not enough to negate the king's own testimony and Bao Dai's claims of legitimacy went officially unchallenged.



# HỒ

## TRUẤT-PHẾ BẢO-ĐẠI

Đề nghị ngày toàn dân Việt  
truất phế bù nhìn Bảo Đại

NHẠC VÀ LỜI : *Minh Hương*

MẠNH

1 - Đồ hồ , Đồ hồ lá hồ Đồ Ta khắp nước Nam bưng tuổi  
2 - Đồ hồ , Đồ hồ lá hồ Đồ Ta khắp nước Nam bưng tuổi

sang, toàn như dân cùng tay nắm (ta) chúng ta cùng hồ. Hồ rằng: Truất phế Bảo Đại bốn nước, chỉ  
sang, toàn như dân cùng tay nắm (ta) chúng ta cùng hồ. Hồ rằng: Không cần quan thầy Thực Dân  
con

chuyên nghề bán ăn chơi cũng đừng điếm khắp nơi. Đem danh nước Việt Nam mình cho  
mong cầu thân với quốc Việt cộng chia Bắc Nam. Nhân dân nước Tự - Do mình, hiến

qua Thực Dân loài hội tanh, chỉ say cuộc đời trong đồng-xinh, ánh đèn xanh đỏ mê man bạc bẽo luôn  
ngang dọc ngoại vùng bốn ngàn, đồng tâm ủng hộ Ngô Chí Sĩ, xây đời thắm tươi quang vinh, ngày mai tôi  
toàn đất

dân Sài Hoàng phi cho sướng sướng một mình, ôi! cái thân nhưc núc! Đồ hồ lá hồ Đồ Ta.  
nước cũng vui sống trong ấm no Hoà Bình, vui ấm no Hoà - Bình. Đồ hồ lá hồ Đồ Ta.

Figure 2: Words and music to the campaign song “Depose Bao Dai,” published in *Thời Đại* (October 1955).

Hong Van described Khai Dinh and his brother Dong Khanh as feeble, thin, childless, and generally disinterested in women. Bao Dai, on the contrary, was “big like a lubber, had many children, and was very fond of women.”<sup>57</sup> On one hand, the author invoked this comparison to highlight the differences between Bao Dai and Khai Dinh that could have stemmed from their lack of a shared lineage. On the other, it implied that Bao Dai’s lascivious behavior was not becoming of royalty, and that he would better have served the country as a weakling like his father rather than as the playboy he turned out to be.

57. “Cuộc Dời Tình Ai Ly Kỳ của Bao Dai: Bao Dai là Con Mọt . . . Thang Mu An Luong của Tu Cung Thái Hậu,” *Thời Đại*, 5 August 1955.

Consistent with the anti-French feeling that quickly blossomed in South Vietnam under Diem's authority,<sup>58</sup> Hong Van blamed Bao Dai's French upbringing for his loose morality in the realm of love. He was essentially raised in Paris by the former governor general of Vietnam and his wife, and stayed there even after he ascended the Vietnamese throne on 8 January 1926 at the age of thirteen. By the time Bao Dai reached his late teens, his mother began to hear rumors that he was learning the ways of love in France, a prospect that filled her with horror. According to these articles, she fretted over who would continue to worship and leave offerings for the former kings of Vietnam if her son should marry a French woman and bear a flock of mixed-race children.<sup>59</sup> She allegedly wrote immediately to Bao Dai's guardians informing them of her wish to marry him to a Vietnamese woman, and to guard him from corrupting experiences during his stay in France. To her dismay, however, her son had apparently fallen in love with a French national by the name of Marie Jeanne Henriette Nguyen Huu Hao, who Hong Van described as "a Vietnamese girl, but like a French girl and loyal to France."<sup>60</sup> That she was a Christian made the union all the more deplorable to Bao Dai's elders in the royal court at Hue, as they were certain that he and his family would turn their attentions away from Buddhist tradition and toward the Christian church, thus shirking their duties to attend to their ancestors' needs in the afterlife.<sup>61</sup>

Despite family concerns, the two were married on 24 March 1934, and Henriette took the name Nam Phuong. She proved to be an even less filial daughter-in-law than the queen mother expected, but revenge was quick in coming. After she bore Bao Dai three sons and two daughters in quick succession, Hong Van claims that Nam Phuong's slender figure became wide and her luster dimmed considerably in her husband's eyes. After a few years, the emperor forgot his vows of everlasting love for Nam Phuong and took off to France to debauch and fulfill his lust for beautiful women, particularly French women.<sup>62</sup> He took up next with a French bar girl by the name of Evelyn Riva,

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58. Anticolonialism and anti-French sentiments were, of course, nothing new to Vietnam by this time. Up until Diem's appointment, however, leaders of the State of Vietnam had been relative Francophiles. For discussion of earlier anticolonial movements see Peter Zinnoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862–1940* (Berkeley, CA, 2001); McAlister and Mus, *The Vietnamese and Their Revolution*; David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–1945* (Berkeley, CA, 1981); Hue-Tam Ho-Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1992); William J. Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900–1941* (Ithaca, NY, 1976). For discussion of Diem's anti-French background see Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian*; Miller, "Vision, Power and Agency," 433–58.

59. "Cuộc Doi Tinh Ai Ly Ky cua Bao Dai: Tu Cung Thai Hau So Con Lau Ay Vo Dam de Con Tay Lai," *Thoi Dai*, 8 August 1955.

60. "Cuộc Doi Tinh Ai Ly Ky cua Bao Dai: Bao Dai Lay Vo voi Cai Ten Tay," *Thoi Dai*, 9 August 1955.

61. *Ibid.*

62. "Cuộc Doi Tinh Ai Ly Ky cua Bao Dai: Co Marie Jeanne Henriette la Con Nao ma Quyen Ru Noi Bao Dai," *Thoi Dai*, 11 August 1955.

after which he floated from one woman to another, taking some as mistresses and some as concubines, all the while neglecting his one legitimate wife.

Hong Van invoked the memory of former Vietnamese monarchs Le Thanh Ton and Mong Miep to assess the propriety of Bao Dai's behavior. Le Thanh Ton took a total of six concubines during his life, one of whom was Chinese. And Mong Miep had a whopping seventy-eight sons and forty-six daughters with several different women. According to Vietnamese tradition and rule of law, then, Bao Dai could not be faulted for taking multiple brides, even foreign ones. His real crime, according to Hong Van, was the mean, fickle way in which he used women and tossed them aside with no attention to his responsibilities as Vietnam's moral and political leader. Unlike Le Thanh Ton and Mong Miep, the author alleged that "Bao Dai was a depraved gambler, alcoholic, and womanizer who had a succession of fleeting love affairs that greatly damaged Vietnam's national honor."<sup>63</sup> Moreover, his penchant for French women, coupled with his lack of political acuity, made him vulnerable to manipulation by cunning French colonial officials. "You must agree with us on this point," wrote Hong Van, "Bao Dai is a playing card of the French—or more accurately—of a number of French colonists."<sup>64</sup>

Just four days prior to the referendum, the editors of *Thoi Dai* reminded their readers of Bao Dai's debauched upbringing, as it was exposed by Hong Van in August, with a cartoon rendition of his vapid youth and his consequent life of lewd and avaricious behavior (see Figure 3). Anyone who saw the cartoon would be hard pressed to forget the vivid images of the emperor gorging himself on sex, food, alcohol, and gambling. And they would certainly understand the meaning of the last panel of the cartoon which depicted a photograph of Bao Dai with a sword through his eye printed next to "23-10," the date of the referendum.

As persuasive as this assault was, painting Bao Dai as depraved was only part of Diem's programmatic campaign to defame the emperor. He was also a traitor. Above all, as Hong Van implied by calling Bao Dai a French playing card, Diem insisted that he was guilty of falling into the role of France's lackey and of enabling French colonialists to reassert their authority in Vietnam after the Second World War.<sup>65</sup> The Committee for the Popular Referendum published an announcement claiming, "Bao Dai, the puppet emperor, the chief of state who divided the people, divided the country, and sold the entire nation to France and Japan is now plotting to join hands with the colonialists and the communists to sell the country once again."<sup>66</sup> Bao Dai, in turn, blamed the Chinese, the

63. "Cai An Tinh Ai Lich Su cua Bao Dai: Vua Co The Lay Vo Ngoai Quoc co Nhieu Vo, Nhieu Con Khong?" *Thoi Dai*, 27 August 1955.

64. "Cuoc Doi Tinh Ai Cua Bao Dai: Mot Cuoc Chay Dua Chinh Tri Bang . . . Ai Tinh Giua Nam Phuong Henriette va Co Gai Hop Dem Evelyn Riva," *Thoi Dai*, 16 August 1955.

65. "Truat Phe Bao Dai la Y Nguyen cua Nhan Dan," *Thoi Dai*, 21 October 1955.

66. "Tuyen Cao cua Uy Ban Nhan Dan Trung Cau Dan Y Goi Dong Bao Toan Quoc," *Tieng Chuong*, 8 October 1955; see also "Bao Dai Con Mua Roi Den Bao Gio," *Lua Song*, 30



Figure 3: *Thoi Dai* cartoon, “The Story of Bao Dai” (19 October 1955).

Russians, and the general outcome of the Geneva conference for “selling” the northern half of the country into slavery. But his critics simply used this as evidence that he was not only an inept leader, but a leader unwilling and incapable of taking responsibility for his failures.<sup>67</sup>

September 1955; “Bao Dai: Tru Danh Bu Ninh Dang Dao Ho Chon Minh Trong Am Muu Tay Sai Cho Viet Cong,” *Lua Song*, 10 October 1955; “Bao Dai va Viet Cong,” *Dan Chu*, 26 September 1955; “La Collusion de Bao Dai avec les Communistes et les Colonialistes,” *Vietnam Presse*, 11 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18092. These are just a few examples of the barrage of articles in the South Vietnamese press in the month prior to the referendum that identified Bao Dai as a puppet emperor and accused him of colluding with the Communists and the French to sell Vietnam to outside forces.

67. “Chung Quanh Vu Bao Dai Bi Mat Lien Lac Voi Viet Cong Tron Trach Nhiem,” *Lua Song*, 30 September 1955.

As the above indictment indicates, Bao Dai's alleged transgressions against Vietnam did not cease with the Geneva accords. Individuals, soldiers, governmental agencies, and a variety of South Vietnamese political groups submitted piles of petitions imploring Diem to remove Bao Dai as chief of state of Vietnam.<sup>68</sup> Though these petitions were likely coerced, rather than spontaneous expressions of outrage, they called for Bao Dai's removal on the basis of his connection with various antigovernmental activities that had taken place throughout the preceding year. Petitioners accused him of conspiring with rogue Vietnam National Army General Nguyen Van Hinh to overthrow Diem in late 1954.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, they charged Bao Dai with supporting the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Binh Xuyen sects in their efforts to sabotage Diem's administration in March and April 1955.<sup>70</sup> Some claimed that Bao Dai joined this group of traitors simply because he did not possess the wisdom to use his power to appoint men of virtue.<sup>71</sup> Instead, he ended up filling the ranks of government with political scoundrels interested only in stuffing their pockets with money. At any rate, charges of pro-French, anti-Diem activities required little imagination, as the emperor had in fact cooperated with the French attempt to replace Diem with an alternative nationalist government in the midst of the spring sect crisis.<sup>72</sup> But it did take some revisionist thinking to represent this as treacherous behavior, and not just astute politics in the face of Diem's faltering regime.

Diem's supporters deemed Bao Dai's most unforgivable act of treason to be neither his collaboration with French colonialists nor his conspiring with sect leaders, but his collusion with northern Communists. In September 1955 he admitted in an interview with *Collier's* magazine to ongoing contact with the Viet Cong. This was widely interpreted within pro-Diem political circles as a sign of Bao Dai's impending plans to enslave the entire country once again.<sup>73</sup> The emperor had often found himself on the wrong side of South Vietnamese political conflicts, but his conspiracy with Communists was too nefarious to bear. Diem therefore insisted that he must be divested of his authority immediately.

68. For several examples of these formulaic petitions, see VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18091.

69. Hinh was the son of former State of Vietnam Prime Minister Nguyen Van Tam, and there was some speculation that he sought to overthrow Diem to make room for his father's return to power in South Vietnam.

70. For more on the roots of Bao Dai's relationship with the sects see Jayne Susan Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism: Peasant and Priest in the Cao Dai in Viet Nam* (New Haven, CT, 1981), 53; See also Archimedes A. Patti, *Why Vietnam? Prelude to America's Albatross* (Berkeley, CA, 1980), 445.

71. "Biet Xu Dung La Phieu Nghia la Biet Bao Ve Quyen Loi Cho Chinh Minh," *Lua Song*, 20 October 1955.

72. Lancaster, *The Emancipation of French Indochina*, 382–97.

73. "Chung Quang Vu Bao Dai Bi Mot Lien Lac Voi Viet Cong," *Saigon Moi*, 30 September 1955; "Bu Nhin Bao Dai Lien Lac voi Doc Tai V.C. de Du Dinh No Le Hoa Nhan Dan Viet Nam Mot Lan Nua," *Lua Song*, 1 October 1955; "Bao Dai va Viet Cong," *Dan Chu*, 26 September 1955; Petitions to depose Bao Dai, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18091.

## HERALDING DEMOCRACY

Without a doubt, Diem's assault on Bao Dai's character described above followed the model established by Confucian political thought. Bao Dai was accused of being profoundly immoral and unethical, a fact which contributed to Vietnam's weakness and enslavement. While his constituents certainly would have interpreted these assertions within the familiar Confucian framework, it appears that Diem and his allies never claimed overtly that Bao Dai had lost the mandate of heaven. As postcolonial theorist Partha Chatterjee has written, "Even the most undemocratic of modern regimes must claim its legitimacy not from divine right or dynastic succession or the right of conquest but from the will of the people."<sup>74</sup> In fact, Diem was out to prove that the responsibility for choosing a leader fell above all to the people.

Indeed, if Bao Dai as an individual had lost the mandate of heaven, then one could conclude from Diem's campaign that the institution of the monarchy had also fallen out of favor. Diem and his allies represented democracy, with himself at the helm, as the antithesis of the disgraced imperial system. While historians have traditionally claimed that Diem's democratic rhetoric was primarily directed at the United States, Vietnamese sources demonstrate that he disseminated these ideas broadly among the population below the 17th parallel.<sup>75</sup> The prime minister used the referendum as an opportunity to initiate a widespread drive to educate South Vietnamese citizens about the virtues of democracy and the malignancy of the old feudalistic imperial system.

On 6 October, when Diem announced formal plans for the referendum, he portrayed it as a response to popular outcry against Bao Dai. He referred to countless motions submitted to the government by all manner of political, religious, and popular groups imploring him to organize a referendum to depose the emperor and to stabilize South Vietnam's political situation. The prime minister therefore billed the 23 October referendum as a response to these "legitimate and democratic" motions.<sup>76</sup>

Diem, however, envisioned the referendum as much more than a simple formality. It would be the country's inauguration into the Free World. "This shall be but the first step," he claimed, "made by our people in the free use of our political rights."<sup>77</sup> A government declaration issued on 19 October 1955 passionately rallied citizens to seize these new democratic rights: "Dear

74. Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*, 27.

75. Miller, "Grand Designs," 204–10. In his dissertation, Miller uses Vietnamese sources to provide a more nuanced interpretation of Diem's goals surrounding the referendum. He notes that Diem intended the referendum to be "an initial exercise in democracy which would pave the way for the early establishment of a directly elected National-Assembly." He does not, however, delve into the details of Diem's efforts to disseminate his notions of democracy within Vietnam.

76. "Tuyen Bo Cua Ong Tong Tuong Noi Vu Phat Ngon Nhan Chinh Phu ve Trung Cau Dan Y," VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18094.

77. Ibid.



compatriots, proclaim your will forcefully! Go forward firmly in the path of Freedom, Independence and Democracy!"<sup>78</sup> And on the eve of the election Diem announced over the radio, "This 23 October, for the first time in our country's history, our men and women will exercise one of many basic civil rights of a democracy, the right to vote."<sup>79</sup>

Because Vietnam had no real tradition of electoral politics, the South Vietnamese Ministry of Information had its work cut out for it if Diem truly expected citizens to exercise their right to vote. The administration initiated its campaign with extremely basic descriptions of a democratic government and its component parts. An educational pamphlet issued by the government addressed the question of why it was necessary to organize a popular referendum to depose Bao Dai even though the people and their political parties had already demanded his abdication in April and May. "Deposing a chief-of-state is a vital act," it explained, "and must follow a democratic procedure and send a clear order to the opponent that he cannot deny."<sup>80</sup>

The rest of this pamphlet reveals just how little some Vietnamese must have understood about the democratic process and even the role of central government. "A popular referendum," it explained, "is an extremely democratic method whereby citizens can directly reveal their ideas by voting to determine the fate of many important national issues like choosing the political regime, choosing the chief-of-state, etc." It went on to describe the important stabilizing role of a chief of state, especially in Vietnam where half the country was enslaved by communism and the free half had not yet devised a constitution or elected a national assembly. Bao Dai, hated by his people and scorned abroad, could not possibly meet Vietnam's needs for a strong and able chief of state.<sup>81</sup> For that reason, according to Diem's agents, the people should take it upon themselves to remove him from power on 23 October.

In the months prior to the election, Saigon newspapers joined the Ministry of Information in broadcasting the appeal of a democratic system. "Under a dictatorial regime, communism or fascism, people don't speak of loyalty to the king or filial piety to their parents but of fidelity to the party," expounded one *Thoi Luan* editorial. "The citizens are merely the property of the party. Therefore, the people cannot speak of individual rights or demand that their basic needs be met."<sup>82</sup> The author went on to explain that, in a democracy, individual rights are exalted above all else. Democracies enjoy free elections, encourage criticism,

78. "Translation of the Governmental Declaration October 19, 1955," VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18094.

79. "Loi Tuyen Bo Truyen Thanh Cua Thu Tuong Chanh Phu," 22 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 639.

80. "Tai Lieu Hoc Tap Ve Cuoc Trung Cau Dan Y Ngay 23-10-1955," VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 639.

81. "Muc Dich va Y Nghia Truat Phe Bao Dai," VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 639. This educational pamphlet explains Diem's reasons for deposing Bao Dai at the current time and the potential benefits of doing so.

82. "Quan Niem Doc Tai va Quan Niem Dan Chu," *Thoi Luan*, 20 August 1955.



and demand sacrifice only when it benefits the citizens. Democracy, then, represented a step forward from the old imperial system, whereas communism signaled a huge step back.

Diem and his supporters always spoke of this democratic revolution as a nationwide movement. Both the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and Diem's regime claimed to be the legitimate government of all Vietnam, both above and below the 17th parallel. According to northern Communists, the southern government was nothing more than a neocolonial entity controlled by the United States.<sup>83</sup> Diem countered this argument with similar logic: communism was inherently totalitarian and unresponsive to the popular will. And to make matters worse, North Vietnam clearly rested under the thumb of Chinese and Soviet colonialists. Saigon newspapers published horror stories about Communist atrocities in the North, as told by refugees living in resettlement camps, to demonstrate the tyrannical nature of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Diem's administration, then, asserted the right to establish a government for all of Vietnam while waiting for a chance to emancipate the North and reunify the country.

Indeed, an article in the Saigon daily *Lua Song* maintained that communism posed the primary obstacle to establishing a real democratic government, one that would serve and protect the rights of the people.<sup>84</sup> Anyone, especially Bao Dai in this case, who willfully cooperated with Communists, colonialists, or feudalists was acting contrary to the interests of the nation and endangering Vietnam's future stability and happiness. The only way to rid Vietnam of its backward, corrupt regime, then, was to vote in favor of elevating the proven anti-Communist Diem to chief of state on 23 October.

Diem's rhetoric of democracy and his condemnation of communism served a purpose in the context of the referendum far greater than discrediting Bao Dai. Aside from ridding South Vietnam of French influence via the emperor, Diem envisioned the referendum as a means of legitimating his refusal to hold the 1956 countrywide elections stipulated by the Geneva accords.<sup>85</sup> By depicting the southern regime as a democracy, and condemning the northern government for its authoritarianism, Diem hoped to gain domestic and international support for his unwillingness to negotiate with the Communists.

As far back as late June, South Vietnamese Foreign Minister Vu Van Mau communicated to the United States that his government sought to unify the country through free, democratic elections. He insisted, however, that the South Vietnamese government was the "sole legal government in the country," and

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83. See Carlyle A. Thayer, *War by Other Means: National Liberation and Revolution in Viet-Nam 1954-1960* (Boston, 1989), especially 26-45.

84. "Cuoc Dau Phieu Dan Chu Nhat tu Xua Toi Nay o Viet Nam," *Lua Song*, 15 October 1955.

85. For a discussion of the international response to this see Ilya V. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954-1963* (Washington, DC, 2003), especially 69-83.

that it would pursue unification through its own National Assembly elections rather than by participating in the countrywide elections promoted by the International Control Council.<sup>86</sup> While the United States quietly supported South Vietnamese efforts to avoid reunification elections, it urged Diem to begin consultations with the North to create at least the appearance of complying with the Geneva agreements.

On 16 July 1955, though, just ten days after publicizing plans for the referendum to depose Bao Dai, Diem personally announced his refusal to negotiate with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam over countrywide elections.<sup>87</sup> "We will not be tied down," he declared, "by the [Geneva] treaty that was signed against the wishes of the Vietnamese people." He thus called for all citizens below the 17th parallel to support his mission to establish a free, independent, democratic government to rival Ho Chi Minh's regime.<sup>88</sup> The tightly controlled Saigon press consistently supported his position, referring to the accords as "the Geneva treaty to sell the country," and insisting that South Vietnam's forced participation in the scheduled elections would be a huge step backward, tantamount to national enslavement.<sup>89</sup>

According to southern anti-Communists, the very basis of communism was inherently antidemocratic, and it logically followed that the northern government was incapable of hosting a truly free election. On 15 August 1955, Nghiem Thi Xuan, the staunchly anti-Communist, pro-Diem editor of Saigon's largest weekly, *Thoi Luan*,<sup>90</sup> defended this argument in an article entitled "How to Hold a Free Election in Vietnam." He charged that Communist soldiers had visited voters' homes prior to the 1946 Viet Minh election and ordered them to cast their ballots for preselected Communist candidates. On the day of the election, these soldiers allegedly followed people to the polls and watched closely to make sure they followed instructions. Nghiem insisted that "no national government, nor any free citizen, can accept another such meaningless election."<sup>91</sup>

86. "Telegram from the Ambassador to Vietnam (Reinhardt) to the Department of State, June 29, 1955," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957* (Washington, DC, 1985), 1:470; Telegram from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, 29 June 1955, NARA, RG59, C0008, Reel 4, 751G.00/6-2955. Ambassador Reinhardt reported to Secretary Dulles that Vu Van Mau informed him in strictest confidence that Diem's cabinet was considering holding a referendum to depose Bao Dai at this time.

87. See Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 69. This announcement was a response to Pham Van Dong's June statement that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was willing to hold a consultative conference on elections. By taking this step, Diem defied American advice to pursue consultations with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in hopes the Communists would balk at numerous provisions for free elections and thus assume the blame for breaching the Geneva agreements.

88. "Loi Tuyen Bo Truyen Thanh cua Ngo Thu Tuong Ngay 16-7-55," *Thoi Dai*, 18 October 1955; Nguyen Van Minh, *Lich Su Khang Chien Chong My Cuu Nuoc, 1955-1975* (Tạp II) (Hanoi, 1996), 63; Patti, *Why Vietnam?*, 447.

89. *Ngon Luan*, 8 August 1955.

90. See Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams*, 270.

91. "Lam The Nao Mot Cuoc Tong Tuyen Cu Tu Do o Viet Nam," *Thoi Luan*, 15 August 1955.

During his October campaign, then, Diem attempted to shift the focus away from reunification elections and toward both the National Assembly elections scheduled for early 1956 and the constitution that newly elected representatives would be appointed to draft. Diem repeatedly billed the 23 October referendum as merely the first of several steps necessary to form a democratic polity. The process would only be complete once the constitution was ratified.<sup>92</sup>

American officials fully supported Diem's efforts to avoid reunification elections by establishing a popularly elected National Assembly in the South, but held some reservations about the procedures Diem set in place.<sup>93</sup> State Department official Kenneth Young claimed, "A national assembly in Free Viet-Nam is a prerequisite to any Vietnamese consideration of consultations and all-Vietnamese elections." But he was concerned about the unpredictability of democratic elections in newly independent states and the potential for undermining Diem's fragile regime. Young therefore warned, "I am reluctant for the United States and its friends to start pressing the Vietnamese down this path from which there is no return."<sup>94</sup>

Ambassador Reinhardt, moreover, expressed reservations about the public relations problem that could result from Diem's plans to remove Bao Dai and to ratify a South Vietnamese constitution by popular vote. "[The] referendum procedure," he claimed, was "clearly less democratic than having [an] elected assembly decide on questions of Bao Dai and [the] new constitution."<sup>95</sup> Reinhardt's concerns reflected the broader American preoccupation with the negative publicity the White House anticipated in response to Diem's blatantly undemocratic referendum. "Government control of [the] referendum," warned the ambassador, "and [the] absence [of] opportunity [for] opposition elements [to] obtain hearing as well as other undemocratic elements of this exercise have not been lost upon representatives [of the] foreign press [in Saigon]."<sup>96</sup> He insisted that it would be unwise for U.S. officials to imply publicly that the referendum was a free and democratic expression of the Vietnamese popular will. Reinhardt advised instead that they maintain simply that the future government of Vietnam was an internal matter that should be left to its citizens to decide. The State Department agreed and on 20 October, Dulles's press

92. "Tuyên Bo Cua Ong Tong Tuong Noi Vu Phat Ngon Nhan Chinh Phu ve Trung Cau Dan Y," VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18094.

93. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, 27 September 1955, NARA, RG59, C0008, Reel 5, 751G.00/9-2755.

94. "Vietnamese National Assembly and Other Political Reforms," Memo from Kenneth T. Young to Mr. Robertson and Mr. Sebald, 5 October 1955, NARA, RG59, C0008, Reel 5, 751G.00/10-555.

95. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, 29 September 1955, NARA, RG59, C0008, Reel 5, 751G.00/9-2955.

96. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, 17 October 1955, NARA, RG59, C0008, Reel 5, 751G.00/10-1755.

spokesman issued a public statement along these very lines.<sup>97</sup> The United States, it seems, opted to downplay the democratic nature of the referendum to avoid political embarrassment when it became clear to international observers that Diem's veil of democracy was wearing thin.

### 23 OCTOBER

By the time the South Vietnamese electorate arrived at the polls on 23 October, Diem's administration had devised a very specific mechanism by which to conduct and record the vote. Shortly after the prime minister officially announced the date of the referendum on 6 October, his government publicized important logistical information for the election. Though some of these provisions may appear mundane to twenty-first-century Western eyes, they were novel and important to Vietnamese voters in 1955.

In an effort to guarantee universal suffrage, or at least to create that appearance, all men and women over the age of eighteen who had registered in the recent census would have the right to cast a secret ballot. According to the final government count, registered voters tallied 5,335,688.<sup>98</sup> To ensure accuracy and prevent fraud, government regulations required provincial officials to organize a separate polling station for every 1,000 voters.<sup>99</sup>

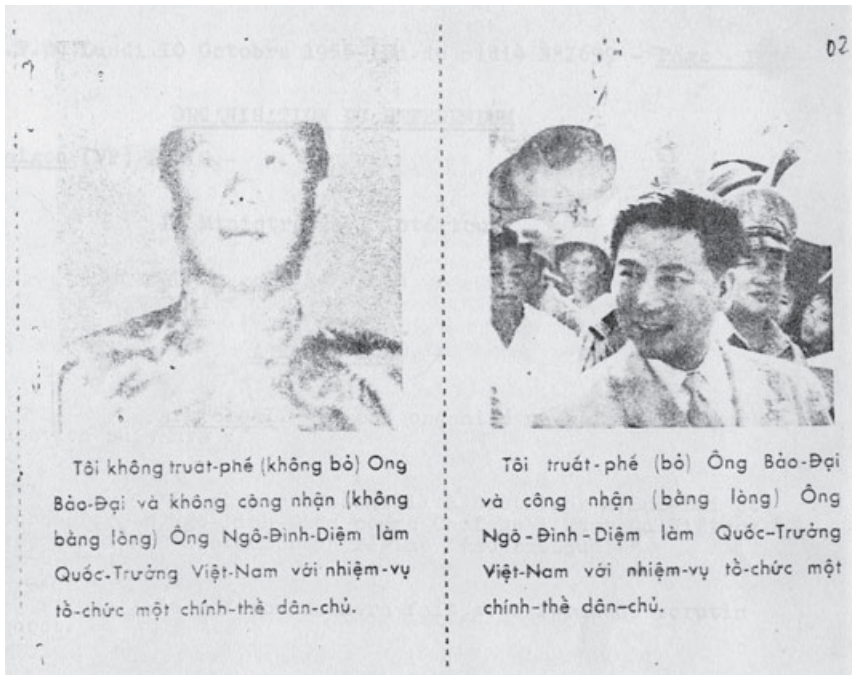
Upon entering the polls, voters would be asked to present their identity cards before receiving a ballot and an envelope. They were instructed to tear off the half representing their candidate of choice, place it in the envelope, and present it to the commission chief for inspection before inserting it into the ballot box. Voters would then discard the rejected half onto the floor or some other receptacle. Despite the appearance of impartiality generated by these electoral regulations, the ballot sent an unmistakable signal that Diem was the only real choice (see Figure 4). The left side, with an inauspicious green border, showed a bloated, somber, traditionally clad Bao Dai above the text, "I do not depose Bao Dai and do not recognize Ngo Dinh Diem as the Chief of State of Vietnam with the duty to organize a democratic government." The right side, bordered by the lucky color red, showed a smiling, vibrant, modern clad Diem making his way through an adoring throng, above the text, "I depose Bao Dai and recognize Ngo Dinh Diem as Chief of State of Vietnam with the duty to organize a democratic government."<sup>100</sup> CIA officer and Diem confidant Edward Lansdale

97. Telegram from Secretary of State to U.S. Embassy Paris, U.S. Embassy London, and U.S. Embassy Saigon, 20 October 1955, NARA, RG59, C0008, Reel 5, 751G.00/10-2055.

98. "Diem Makes Plea on Today's Vote," *New York Times*, 23 October 1955.

99. "Nhưng Dieu Quan Trong ve Viêc Trung Cau Dan Y Ngay 23-10 Tòi Day," *Tieng Chuong*, 12 October 1955; see also "Organization du Referendum," 10 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18093.

100. Ballot for 23-10-1955 referendum to depose Bao Dai, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18093; "Background of Plebiscite," *New York Times*, 23 October 1955; "Les Electeurs du Sud-Vietnam Vont Choisir sur Photographie Entre le Bon Ngo Dinh Diem el le Vilain Bao-Dai," *Liberation*, 11 October 1955; "Mr. Diem's Lucky Color," *Economist*, 29 October 1955.



**Figure 4:** Ballot for 23 October 1955 referendum (Left: Bao Dai, Right: Ngo Dinh Diem). Courtesy of the Vietnamese National Archives #2, Ho Chi Minh City.

recalls advising Diem to use color on the ballot to send a subliminal message to voters without appealing directly to superstition or custom. He claims, however, that he urged Diem to use a good photograph of Bao Dai to confirm the validity of the vote.<sup>101</sup> Beyond this, there is little evidence that the United States took significant interest in Diem's polling procedures prior to the referendum.

In any case, despite the suggestive nature of the ballot, Diem's administration represented the process of recording the vote to be impartial. Once all votes were cast, poll workers had specific instructions for counting and reporting the returns. Government regulations dictated exactly how to determine whether or not a ballot was valid, and detailed to whom returns should be reported and when. Extensive steps had been taken, at least on paper, to prevent electoral fraud. In truth, however, no amount of unilateral campaigning, anti-Bao Dai sentiment, or Confucian political restraint could explain Diem's 98 percent margin of victory in a politically heterogeneous South Vietnam. Corruption and intimidation must have played a significant role.

101. Edward Geary Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York, 1972), 333–34.

## ASSESSING THE RESULTS

A 1966 CIA review of election processes in South Vietnam concluded that the October 1955 referendum was the most heavily predetermined of the six elections held in the South since the Geneva accords. "Both the voting procedures," it claimed, "and the atmosphere in advance of the balloting, were calculated to produce the desired results."<sup>102</sup> Diem, it claimed, used the Ministry of Information's voter education campaign to publicize the government's candidates, "while seldom going so far as to explain to the people the meaning of elections or the power of the ballot." This is perhaps an unfair critique, as Diem's regime did go to some effort to illuminate the process of democracy. Granted, however, these educational efforts were always slanted heavily in favor of the prime minister. Beyond these manipulations, the CIA noted that military pressure, ballot tampering, and a lack of genuine secrecy may have contributed to Diem's overwhelming victory. The U.S. government concluded in 1955, though, that propaganda was of greater consequence than voter irregularities in determining the outcome of the referendum. "With Bao Dai in Paris and unable to plead his case," noted U.S. intelligence analysts, "the government-controlled press and radio had a monopoly on all campaigning."<sup>103</sup>

Despite this skewed campaign that had worried American officials in the days leading up to the vote, Washington welcomed Diem's victory. After the prime minister announced his triumph on 26 October, Reinhardt edged away from his earlier concerns and concluded that the "referendum proved [a] resounding success for [the] Diem government." The results, he claimed, did not prove that Diem commanded majority support in South Vietnam but that the government was able to carry out a nearly unchallenged popular referendum.<sup>104</sup> Aside from scattered attacks on Can Tho polling places by Hoa Hao soldiers, visible resistance to Diem's controlled election was nil.<sup>105</sup> In absence of a true show of democracy, American officials enthusiastically greeted Diem's ability to suppress dissent from the sects, Communists, and Bao Dai sympathizers.

Moreover, in spite of Reinhardt's preelection concerns, much of the American press hailed the vote in Vietnam as a great victory for democracy and a blow to communism worldwide. Onlookers in the Midwest interpreted the results as "an overwhelming vote of confidence" for Diem and "wholehearted backing for the democratic principles for which he is known to stand."<sup>106</sup> According to one

102. "A Review of Election Processes in South Vietnam," Directorate of Intelligence, 9 March 1966, NARA, CREST, CIA-RDP79T00826A000400010040-7.

103. "A Review of Election Processes in South Vietnam," Directorate of Intelligence, 9 March 1966, NARA, CREST, CIA-RDP79T00826A000400010040-7.

104. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, 25 October 1955, NARA, RG59, C0008, Reel 5, 751G.00/10-2555.

105. "Phieu Tin Tuc Hoat Dong Quoc Gia Hoa Hao Tran Van Soai," 4 November 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 4320.

106. "New Leader in Asia," *Missourian*, 25 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18096; "South Vietnam and the Saar," *Desert News* (Arizona), 25 October 1955, VNA2,



Ohio paper, "A people most inexperienced in the ways of democracy went to the polls Sunday and returned a verdict loaded with sound philosophical instincts."<sup>107</sup> Commentators on the East coast of the United States, however, remained more skeptical. "The heavy referendum vote throughout South Vietnam," wrote Henry Lieberman of the *New York Times*, "makes Diem's administrative control look more pervasive than is thought to be the case by a number of observers here."<sup>108</sup>

Both pessimists and optimists noted that Diem's victory in the referendum would likely preclude national reunification elections scheduled for the following spring, just as he intended. The *Los Angeles Times* pointed out on 24 October, "The overwhelming Diem victory virtually eliminated any possibility there will be a Viet-Nam unification election next July as provided by the Geneva armistice accords."<sup>109</sup> Diem verified this suspicion on 25 October when he announced that he would not proceed with negotiations in preparation for countrywide elections until "true liberty" was established in the Communist North.<sup>110</sup> This result came as a relief to Americans who, by and large, feared the cascade of red dominoes throughout Southeast Asia.

For many American journalists, though, the referendum was notable foremost for its role in solidifying South Vietnam's political move away from France and toward the United States.<sup>111</sup> Americans saw the October vote as a slap in the face and yet another deep humiliation for France. Because France had gambled on opposing Diem and promoting Bao Dai as the supreme leader of South Vietnam, the emperor's final ouster signaled the end of any lingering French efforts to assert authority in Saigon.<sup>112</sup> Though many Americans heralded this as a positive development, one which would enable the competent Diem to carry on an effective government once and for all, others were wary of the future implications.<sup>113</sup> They recognized that France's expulsion isolated the United States as the sole Western power in South Vietnam, a fact which would haunt Washington in years to come.

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PTTDICH, Folder 18096; "Diem Gives South Vietnam Rallying Point and a Chance," *Journal* (Milwaukee, WI), 26 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18096. This folder at the Vietnamese National Archives 2 (PTTDICH, Folder 18096) includes clippings from several American and French newspapers regarding the Vietnamese referendum.

107. "Vietnam Sticks with Diem," *News* (Dayton, OH), 25 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18096.

108. Henry R. Lieberman, "Diem Moves to Strengthen an Independent Vietnam," *New York Times*, 30 October 1955.

109. "South Viet-Nam Voters Repudiate Ex-Emperor," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 October 1955.

110. "Diem Sees Delay on Unity Upheld," *New York Times*, 26 October 1955.

111. Lieberman, "Diem Moves to Strengthen an Independent Vietnam."

112. "Retired by Request: Bao Dai Joins the Exes," *Item* (New Orleans), 26 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18096; "The Boot for Bao Dai," *News* (Snyder, TX), 26 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18096.

113. Assorted articles from the Luce Press Clipping Bureau, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18096.



French diplomats and journalists naturally interpreted the referendum as more than a simple slap in the face. Though France officially recognized Diem's Republic of Vietnam almost immediately, the French media betrayed the nation's unease with Diem's victory. In the days leading up to the vote, French officials in Saigon feared that Diem's administration would take the referendum as evidence that it was no longer bound to previous international agreements, thus enabling it to call for the immediate dissolution of the French High Command. Such a move, France feared, would make it impossible to implement the Geneva agreements below the 17th parallel.<sup>114</sup> Some journalists claimed that the plot to depose Bao Dai was a part of the American plan to undermine the Geneva elections by sponsoring a separate vote in the South.<sup>115</sup> They described the referendum as the first of two stages in Diem's strategy to sabotage the peaceful reestablishment of national unity, and to eliminate opposition in general and French influence in particular. The election of a national assembly for Vietnam would complete Diem's devious plan. Such a move, many French observers feared, would severely damage Franco-American relations and obviate any possibility for rapprochement between North and South Vietnam.<sup>116</sup>

Though *Le Monde* remained cautiously hopeful about the democratic potential of Diem's regime, several other French newspapers insisted that the election procedures were fundamentally undemocratic and called the election results into question. Some claimed that the lack of vocal opposition in Saigon provided evidence of oppression rather than unanimity.<sup>117</sup> Approximately 50 percent of voters abstained, according to the Paris press, thus explaining Diem's overwhelming victory. He garnered all the votes simply because none of his detractors bothered to show up at the polls.<sup>118</sup>

#### SEEDS OF DISSENT

Even more important than French and American responses to Diem's campaign were the reactions of Vietnamese opposition leaders.<sup>119</sup> Because Diem

114. U.S. Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, 20 October 1955, NARA, RG59, Coo08, Reel 5, 751G.00/10-1955.

115. "La Signification Politique du Referendum du 23 Octobre au Sud-Vietnam," *La Tribune des Nations*, 21 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18096.

116. "Les Electeurs Choissent Entre Diem et Bao Dai," *France-Soir*, 24 October 1955, VNA2, Folder 18096.

117. "Le Vietnam de M. Diem se Prononce Demain Pour ou Contre Bao Dai," *Combat*, 22 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18096; "Le Cirque Diem Organise le Referendum Anti-Bao Dai," *Le Populaire*, 22 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18096.

118. "Vietnam: Succes de Diem Assure, Mais 50% d'Abstentions," *L'Express*, 24 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18096; "Sud-Vietnam: 50% d'Abstentions au 'Referendum Diem,'" *L'Humanité*, 24 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 18096.

119. Nathan, "The Consequences of Partition," 13-14. Some historians, on the contrary, have argued against the political relevance and sincerity of Diem's critics. Nathan claims that, as a consequence of America's replacement of France as the predominant foreign influence on Vietnamese political affairs, there was "a burst of democratic and pseudo-democratic ideas and propaganda across the political spectrum. Pious democratic credos were uttered by men who

promoted the referendum as the great democratic moment in Vietnam's history, his opponents attacked him on the grounds that his commitment to democratic ideals was largely rhetorical. In fact, the election was, by design, anything but democratic. Diem's former cabinet member Cao Van Luan recalls a 1955 conversation during which Diem complained that too many seedling parties threatened to generate chaos in the South. The country, he insisted, should have but one national revolutionary movement (*Phong Trao Cach Mang Quoc Gia*) and one political party, the Personalist Labor party (*Can Lao Nhan Vi*) controlled by Ngo Dinh Nhu.<sup>120</sup> The government thus liquidated opposing parties by force and eliminated any real prospect for open political competition. According to a northern historian's statistics the *My-Diem*, or American-sponsored Diem regime, killed or imprisoned 93,362 opposition soldiers, party members, and patriots between July 1955 and February 1956 during a violent campaign to eradicate rivals.<sup>121</sup> This figure is likely exaggerated, but certainly denotes a culture of fear that would have impeded the democratic process.

There was, indeed, little public opposition to Diem prior to the referendum, especially as several powerful Cao Dai and Hoa Hao leaders were still working within the Revolutionary Council to wrest power from the government.<sup>122</sup> But disgruntled sect leaders outside this body did pose some resistance, limited by their lack of access to the press. On 22 October, Hoa Hao General Tran Van Soai announced his preference for a truly democratic regime and declared the referendum illegal, and its results null and void. He invited "friendly countries and the people of Vietnam to distrust this political maneuver."<sup>123</sup> Ba Cut's Hoa Hao forces, still engaged in battle with the National Army in the western region of South Vietnam, raised similar criticisms against Diem's intrigues. In a pamphlet dated 3 October 1955, Ba Cut charged that the referendum was a time "for Diem to gather the people from all towns and force them to demonstrate one goal: to depose Bao Dai and proclaim the puppet Diem as the chief-of-state of Vietnam."<sup>124</sup> This, he claimed, was proof of the American plot to "Catholicize" Vietnam, as Diem reportedly used not only \$2 million of American aid but also

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had till then been considered power-hungry political scoundrels." Such uses of democratic rhetoric by Cao Dai and Hoa Hao generals and their allies was, according to Nathan, insignificant because none of these men ended up rising to power.

120. Cao Van Luan, *Ben Giong Lich Su*, 282–87.

121. Nguyen Van Minh, *Lich Su Khang Chien Chong My Cuu Nuoc*, 73; see also Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York, 1985), 89. Kolko estimates that twelve thousand were killed during 1955–1957 in South Vietnam.

122. Vietnamese nationalists in France and the United States did raise some objections to Diem's handling of the elections, but they did not gain hearing in South Vietnam.

123. "Communication du General Hoa Hao Tran Van Soai au sujet des elections," 22 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 4312.

124. "Ngo Dinh Diem Dang Lam Gi???", 3 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 4321; see also "Chung Toi Phan Doi Ngo Thu Thuong," 3 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 4321. A South Vietnamese government document in this same file regarding the activities of Ba Cut's forces identifies the source of these documents as Ba Cut's Hoa Hao.

\$2 million in aid from American Catholic organizations to support the referendum. According to the Vietnamese Socialist party (also a Hoa Hao organ), Diem put this American aid money to less than honorable use. Its spokesmen claimed that he “bribed the world of laborers and young students to petition in support of Diem’s rise to chief-of-state and to petition in favor of deposing Bao Dai.”<sup>125</sup>

By the time the National Assembly elections rolled around in March 1956, these scattered criticisms would blossom into full-fledged opposition. This was due, at least in part, to Diem’s dissolution of the Revolutionary Council on 15 January 1956 by a series of police raids that forced most of its members into exile or back into the militarized jungles of southwest Vietnam.<sup>126</sup> These leaders understandably felt double-crossed and responded by joining other disenfranchised Vietnamese nationalists in vigorously denouncing Diem’s pseudo-democratic means of securing his authority. Come March, they would mimic the Communists in labeling his government *My-Diem* (America-Diem), and would add some new and enduring slurs to the political dialogue, including *Ton Giao Tri* (Religious Government) and *Gia Dinh Tri* (Family Government).

#### CONCLUSION

This reinterpretation of the 23 October referendum in light of Vietnamese-language sources reveals that Diem made sweeping promises of democracy and self-determination to his constituents throughout South Vietnam. To date, historians have overwhelmingly concluded that Diem merely paid lip service to democratic ideals in the international arena to please his American sponsors, but the campaign rhetoric discussed here demonstrates that the prime minister himself believed in the virtues of democracy, at least on an abstract level. Promoting his version of democracy, while eliminating opposition, was all a part of the Ngo brothers’ “Personalist Revolution” that Edward Miller describes as “a grand vision of how Vietnam might be transformed and modernized.”<sup>127</sup>

Moreover, the unfulfilled promises of equal rights and individual freedoms issued in this campaign can help to explain the outrage with which South Vietnamese citizens would respond to Diem’s oppressive reign in subsequent years. In October 1955, the prime minister claimed to revolutionize Vietnamese society by emancipating it from its backward imperial past and ridding it of an unethical leader. But while he failed to replace the old system with a more popular regime, his rhetoric of democracy provided his opponents with a ready vocabulary to propagandize against him. From October 1955 on, South Vietnamese opposition groups would accuse Diem not only of poor leadership, but of hypocrisy. In the short term, Diem succeeded in forestalling the 1956 unification elections and establishing South Vietnam as an autonomous state, but in

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125. Letter from the Commander of the Army of the Vietnamese Socialist Party to the various branches of the Army, 14 October 1955, VNA2, PTTDICH, Folder 4321.

126. See Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams*, 258.

127. Miller, “Grand Designs,” 10.

the process he planted some of the seeds of dissent that would ultimately lead to his downfall and to the failure of the Republic of Vietnam.

On the other side of the coin, American sources reveal that U.S. officials devoted much more attention to international public opinion in this case than they did to internal Vietnamese political affairs. Policymakers in Washington and Saigon were concerned about the undemocratic nature of this October referendum only to the extent that it would damage Diem's international reputation and tarnish America's image by extension. Dulles, Reinhardt, and their colleagues were not particularly concerned with how the referendum was experienced by South Vietnam's citizens and by the country's competing political factions like the Hoa Hao, Binh Xuyen, and Cao Dai sects. Furthermore, American officials' lack of attention to South Vietnam's domestic political environment permitted the United States to stand idly by as Diem undermined his own authority, and left Washington ill-equipped to interpret and respond to the negative fallout that would eventually result from Diem's broken promises and repressive policies.

For decades, historians have struggled to understand America's decision to support Diem despite his authoritarian methods of leadership. Michael Latham and others have suggested that the United States drew upon the false wisdom of modernization theory to justify supporting Diem's political hypocrisy.<sup>128</sup> U.S. officials, in this view, hoped that by establishing a republican government in South Vietnam and sponsoring economic development programs below the 17th parallel they could lead the South down the path to progress while the North festered under Communist oppression. David Anderson too endorses a version of this theory. "Eisenhower and his advisors," writes Anderson, "believed that time was on their side"—that North Vietnamese communism could eventually be defeated if only it could be contained long enough.<sup>129</sup> Others have argued that Diem's independent attitude left the United States with little choice in the matter. Edward Miller claims that since 1954, Diem "was neither beholden to the U.S. nor particularly inclined to follow American advice."<sup>130</sup> Documentary evidence surrounding this referendum, however, demonstrates that American officials did not make a sufficient effort to understand the complexities of South Vietnamese political life. Such an understanding would have been necessary before Washington could effectively design its policies and tailor its advice to fit South Vietnam's political and cultural nuances. The United States, then, to some degree opted for ignorance rather than influence.

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128. Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); see also Lucian W. Pye, "Political Modernization: Gaps between Theory and Reality," *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science* 442 (March 1979): 28–39.

129. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, xiii.

130. Miller, "Vision, Power and Agency," 457; Miller, "Grand Designs," 10–12.