

MODERN HISTORY: *CONFLICT IN INDOCHINA*

Assess why the Diem regime was unable to maintain power in South Vietnam by 1963.

Diem's unsuccessful regime was a complete failure. His inability to reign down the powerful forces of opposition and his own flaws are elements in which are key to his downfall. Such problems consist of the poverty and injustice that were strife, the corruption in his government and Diem's inherent problem of himself helped him create an unsuccessful big to maintain power in South Vietnam by 1963.

Firstly, there is an inherent flaw in Diem that needs to be analysed in determining why his leadership was such a failure. Diem was a devout Catholic whilst the majority of the population was a blend of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. His real supporters were the Americans, his immediate family and Catholic Vietnamese, many of whom had fled Tonkin in the post Geneva period. Diem was never a man of the people like Ho Chi Ming, who was affectionately called 'Uncle Ho' by his people. Diem lacked competent leadership skills and his inheritance of South Vietnam was of low profile, resulting in an absence of national identity and a strong support base.

Unlike Ho Chi Minh who had an established image and roots of being heroic, evident in the infamous bounty of his head in the first Indo China war and his endeavors to save his country. Diem lacked this type of reputation and image and thus did not gain much support. Australian Journalist Denis Warner states that "Diem talked but never listened, looked but never saw" reflects Diem's disconnection from his people and his ignorance to their demands, especially the peasant population. Due to this. Diem did not achieve a sort of unity or cohesion that was clearly evident in North Vietnam.

Another problem was that of Diem's government, one of which was based on nepotism and cronyism. This meant that Diem appointed his immediate family and friends to positions of power rather than considering the skills and qualifications of that person. Diem's nepotism was corrupt, as can be seen in his closest brother Nhu in his pursuits of gambling and his wife Madam Xuan Le, who was equally wicked. Diem's government had only one party- the Can Lao party. It sought to replicate Ho Chi Minh's Lao Dong, however, failed miserably as it never represented the people like in the North. The Lao Dong looked after the needs of their people and in return, they would respond with absolute loyalty. The Lao Dong represented every cross-section of society, such as the youth and women, and covered even one or two people at a district level whereas the Can Lao was a major discriminator. This was the case as there was a rigid criteria that had to be fulfilled for registration. Members had to be Catholic. This is seen again in the military service of "Jobs for the boys". Entry into the service required Catholic males who were natives of Hue and who were Can Lao members. This alienated groups of society and caused resentment towards Diem.

Diem's attempts at pacification were complete failures and this ultimately led to further resentment and opposition towards the regime. Diem sought to combat the issue of National Liberation Front (NLF). Diem implemented the Agrovillage Program and later Strategic Hamlets to prevent Viet Cong infiltration and Communist influence. The Agrovillage Program was implemented to keep the Viet Cong away from the villagers and was executed through the use of booby traps, fences and grenades. This had failed as the enemy had neutralized the traps and also due to resistance from the farmers. Many villagers were contemptuous towards Diem because they had been relocated to poorer soils which meant less output and more people in poverty. Additionally, the villagers were removed from their ancestral homes and the burials of their ancestors and this further exacerbated Diem's reputation and popularity. The Strategic Hamlets were no better and the villagers did not appreciate Diem's decision to move them. In fact, Diem's programs to keep the Viet Cong away ironically increased the number of South Vietnamese villagers enlisting to the NLF and supporting North Vietnam rather than Diem's regime. The Americans estimated that the Viet Cong controlled 80% of the country side. This is a key aspect as to why Diem was unable to maintain power.

The most shocking and controversial discredit to Diem's regime lies in the event of the conflict in Hue concerning Buddhist monks. What started as an innocent event led to the death of 9 monks and 14 wounded. Diem's overreaction to the Buddhist flag which was flown higher than his own flag shows how poorly he handles situations. The Buddhist monks' refusal to lower their flag and the broadcast of their case on Radio Hue angered Diem and led him to spark conflict between his regime and the Buddhist Movement. The Buddhist Movement were growing frustrated with Diem and his unfair dealings with non-Catholics. There was an apparent realization that Diem was favouring Catholics and clearing them from tax and other obligations applicable to the Buddhist monks.

The conflict in Saigon erupted in a civil war in 10 June 1963 when Tri Quang mobilized 5000 people to Diem's presidential palace to protest. No protestors were injured but there were numerous arrests. The following day Quang Duc made the ultimate decision to set himself alight in protest. His self-immolation was filmed and gained international view and concern. It was significantly damaging to Diem's regime and himself when Madam Nhu remarked that "let them burn and we shall clap our hands" and "the government is not concerned with Buddhist barbecues". This completely discredited Diem and it is no surprise that frequent self-immolations occurred in protest to Diem. Diem's complete opposition from the Buddhist monks is also an indication of the opposition from the majority of South Vietnam who were mostly villagers and Buddhist. Thus, it is inevitable that Diem was to crumble. He had not the power to rectify his wrongs now as it was too late.

Ultimately, Diem was unable to maintain power in South Vietnam due to a number of things, including his poor leadership skills, his disregard for his people and the social issues surrounding them such as poverty. Without the support of his population, he would not have a chance of being in power. His ability of exacerbating situations was soon to the point of no rectification and thus, his regime collapsed.