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By

Ryan Nelson

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
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in the

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Peter Zinoman, Chair

Professor Daniel Sargent

Professor Penny Edwards

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## Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Peter Zinoman, Chair

This dissertation explores the putative autocratic legacy of President Ngô Đình Diệm among South Vietnamese and the dynamic nature of South Vietnam's social, cultural, and political development during the so-called interregnum period, 1963 to 1967. The years between President Ngô Đình Diệm's First Republic government, from 1955 to 1963, and President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's Second Republic government, from 1967 to 1975, demarcate this distinct but misunderstood period of national development. Previously, under the leadership of President Ngô Đình Diệm and his family, domineering conservative Catholics who exhibited much enmity for Western influence amid an escalating civil war, South Vietnam experienced better security conditions, but its citizens enjoyed fewer personal freedoms and had less civic independence. The overthrow of Ngô Đình Diệm's government engendered watershed changes. South Vietnam experienced deteriorating security conditions, but citizens enjoyed more individual freedoms and had greater civic independence. Driven by elite and non-elite domestic actors, this shift impacted various aspects of society, from sports and female gender norms to politics and the performing arts. Whereas most literature portrays the 1963 coup against Ngô Đình Diệm as throwing the country into complete chaos and engendering widespread failure for multiple years, this work highlights the coup as a point of departure for a new and creative phase of national innovation, reinventing the mid-1960s as a creative and generative phase of South Vietnamese history. An overwhelming majority of extant South Vietnamese press materials published between November 1963 and September 1967 support this study.

For my mother Janice Conway,  
a constant pillar of support,  
and my best friend Bryce Baker,  
who passed away too soon.

## Acknowledgments

Six years of research on South Vietnamese society through various local print media lie at the heart of this study. Years of language training, interlibrary loan borrowing, and digitizing print and microfilm materials made this close examination of media possible. The author wishes to thank various people for their assistance along the way. The efforts of UC-Berkeley librarian and curator Virginia Shih afforded me easy access to comprehensive records of important media like *Liberty (Tự Do)*, *Political Discussion (Chính Luận)*, *Encyclopedia (Bách Khoa)*, and the *Saigon Daily News*. UC-Berkeley's interlibrary loan department filled hundreds of requests for South Vietnamese publications held at other institutions, always in a timely fashion. Rebecca Darby, Paul Lynch, and the staff managing UC-Berkeley's microfilm room accommodated my every need, making the research process easier and more enjoyable. From Vietnam, Nguyễn Đình Hiền transcribed many newspaper articles I digitized from microfilm that proved difficult to read. The collective tutelage of several Vietnamese-language instructors over my career helped me navigate all these Vietnamese-language materials, including Nguyễn Đình Hiền in Nha Trang, Hong Thi Dinh at UW-Madison, Bac Hoai Tran at the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute, Nguyen Nguyet Cam and Hanh Tran at UC-Berkeley, and Phạm Thị Ngọc Phúc and Lê Thị Khánh Hoà at the Vietnamese Language Studies Institute in Hồ Chí Minh City. Lê Thị Khánh Hoà in particular answered and provided context to many language questions that popped up during the research process, for which I am eternally grateful. I am indebted to my dissertation committee at UC-Berkeley, composed of Professors Peter Zinoman, Daniel Sargent, and Penny Edwards. The dissertation greatly benefited from their various comments and constructive criticisms. Hanh Tran made various insightful observations about the first chapter. Of course, the author takes full responsibility for any mistakes found in this work.

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# Introduction

This dissertation explores the putative autocratic legacy of President Ngô Đình Diệm among South Vietnamese and the dynamic nature of South Vietnam's social, cultural, and political development during the so-called interregnum period, from 1963 to 1967. The years between President Ngô Đình Diệm's First Republic government, from 1955 to 1963, and President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's Second Republic government, from 1967 to 1975, demarcate this distinct, often misunderstood period of national development. Previously, under the leadership of President Ngô Đình Diệm and his family, domineering conservative Catholics who exhibited much enmity for Western influence amid an escalating civil war, South Vietnam experienced better security conditions, but citizens enjoyed fewer individual freedoms and had less civic independence. The impact and scope of the Ngô family's authoritarian rule over society manifested clearly after the President's 1963 overthrow. With Ngô Đình Diệm out of power, citizens, for the first time in a decade, had the ability to speak freely and critically about the Ngô family without fear of punishment from authorities. A close analysis of interregnum-era public sources reveals much about the First Republic years and their autocratic legacy. Democratically-elected leaders within the executive and legislative branches increasingly failed to respect public opinion. Censorship silenced almost all opposition and calls for governmental reform. Religious zealotry, cultural conservatism, and nativism propagated. Obtaining a divorce became nearly impossible. Authorities criminalized beauty pageants, abortion, and birth control pills. Conservative fashion trends and gender norms dominated female society. Night clubs and foreign dance crazes virtually disappeared. Government-sponsored radio stations embraced propaganda music to such a degree that love songs nearly ceased to exist. The state of sports declined significantly because of growing government control and poor leadership at the private federation level. In the Central Highlands, upland minorities endured racism, oppression, and forced assimilation. Once South Vietnam gained its freedom from the Ngô family dictatorship, an empowered, more vocal citizenry and new, generally more receptive political leaders across multiple civilian and military administrations emerged, allowing for widespread changes to take place. South Vietnam experienced deteriorating security conditions, but citizens enjoyed more individual freedoms and had greater civic independence. This post-1963 dynamic made the interregnum years one of the country's most important and exciting periods of cultural, social, and political development. Stimulated by elite and non-elite forces, these dramatic changes impacted everything from popular culture and national politics to legal rights and social behavior. Whereas most literature portrays the 1963 coup against Ngô Đình Diệm as throwing the country into complete chaos and engendering widespread failure for multiple years, this work depicts the coup as a point of departure for a new and creative phase of national innovation, reinventing the mid-1960s as a creative and generative phase of South Vietnamese history.

Few historians have explored the history of South Vietnam and the Vietnam War through South Vietnamese press materials and the lens of public opinion. Most of what the world knows about South Vietnam comes from studies framing the country and its development through the lens of American foreign policy and American political and military elites. Notable examples include *The Pentagon Papers*, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*; *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of war in Vietnam*, and *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War*.<sup>1</sup> Recently, some scholars of American foreign policy have exhibited an interest in

1 Neil Sheehan, et. al., *The Pentagon Papers as Published by the New York Times* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971); Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988); Robert McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996); Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A Personal History of America's involvement in the Extraction from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

studying the American nation building project in South Vietnam. In 2016, Jessica Elkind wrote *Aid Under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War*, a social history of American aid workers responsible for implementing the US nation building project from the mid-1950s to the early-1960s.<sup>2</sup> Two years later, Andrew Gawthorpe wrote *To Build As Well As Destroy: American Nation Building in South Vietnam*, a diplomatic history of America's failed nation building efforts in South Vietnam from the 1960s to the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> While important to the study of American foreign policy and the Vietnam War, each of the aforementioned works de-emphasized or completely discounted the South Vietnamese perspective, particularly the views of non-elite actors. Moving away from this common approach, this monograph's novel favoring of South Vietnamese press materials and public perspectives provides much-needed depth to the study of South Vietnam while de-centering the conventional concerns of American foreign policy.

This research project adds to a small but growing body of scholarship on South Vietnamese social or cultural history supported predominantly by South Vietnamese sources. As previously noted, most studies related to South Vietnam have concentrated on American foreign policy and neglected especially the social and cultural history of South Vietnam. In response to this historical oversight, a handful of researchers with Vietnamese-language training eager to know more about the history and character of South Vietnamese society undertook social and cultural research on South Vietnam through local sources. Alec Woodside wrote the first social or non-elite history of South Vietnam. In 1968, this scholar of pre-modern Vietnam wrote "Some southern Vietnamese writers look at the war," a brief examination of South Vietnamese criticism of the American mission, with an emphasis on the late-1960s. Published in the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, this article engaged a handful of Vietnamese-language print materials to highlight local animosities towards America and the Vietnam War. Woodside recognized that his research failed to "do justice . . . to the vast range of arguments and analyses Vietnamese writers have made over the past few years" about the American mission but hoped that "written projections of [South Vietnamese] sensitivities would create greater mutual understanding" between American and South Vietnamese, particularly the former.<sup>4</sup> Four years later, the independent researcher Jeffrey Race wrote *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province*, the earliest study of South Vietnam supported by extensive oral interviews, which he mostly conducted between late-1967 to mid-1968. This in-depth case study examined Long An province's revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements between 1954 and 1965. A former military officer and adviser in South Vietnam, Race argued that America and South Vietnam lost the revolutionary war in Long An province by the mid-1960s because of a failure to understand and adapt to the social and political conditions of the Vietnamese civil war. A desire to allow "the Vietnamese tell their own story" rather than let American officials or members of the foreign press speak for them and a need to move discussions of the war past the "repetitious incantation of the same stale quotations from the works of a few individuals who have actually traveled to the scene" motivated him to write the book.<sup>5</sup>

Multiple decades passed before the first, and until now, only cultural history of South Vietnamese society appeared based on extensive research through local sources. In 2001, the University of California-Berkeley masters student Cam Nguyet Nguyen wrote her thesis on the appeal

2 Jessica Elkind, *Aid Under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2016).

3 Andrew Gawthorpe, *To Build As Well As Destroy: American Nation Building in South Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

4 Alec Woodside, "Some southern Vietnamese writers look at the war," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (1969): 53-8.

5 Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

of South Vietnamese spy fiction between 1954 to 1975. The work focused on the “incomparable popularity” of novelist Bùi Anh Tấn’s Z28 espionage series, published from 1965 to 1974. This fictional series followed the successful and exciting global spy career of Tống Văn Bình, code name Z28, during the Cold War. A failure by major literary critics to recognize Bùi Anh Tấn and his perceived ‘trash’ stories in their studies of Vietnamese literature motivated her to undertake the study. She attributed the popular appeal of the Z.28 series among South Vietnamese to three factors: entertainment value, production quality, and recurring character types and narrative situations.<sup>6</sup>

In 2006, University of California-Berkeley PhD history candidate Nu Anh Tran wrote a research article about South Vietnamese continuity of identity and the effects of the American presence on the country’s development from 1965 to 1969. Promoting the study of South Vietnamese social history, she maintained that “South Vietnamese attitudes towards Americans from the mid 1950s to the mid 1970s have barely been explored in the existing scholarship on the Vietnam War” and encouraged scholars to “reevaluate the dominant characterization of the Republic of Vietnam as merely a product of American political and military intervention. . . .” Based on content found in *Political Discussion* (*Chính Luận*) newspaper, her article underscored the critical public response to negative comments about South Vietnamese society from an American serviceman named Private James Kipp in 1966. In a translated op-ed, Kipp characterized South Vietnamese as stupid, dishonest, uncultured savages who sold their wives and daughters into prostitution. Spawning an avalanche of angry responses, his comments hindered South Vietnamese-American relations and “generated acute anxiety among the South Vietnamese reading public concerning the maintenance of an authentic, autonomous identity.”<sup>7</sup> Several years later, another University of California-Berkeley PhD history candidate, Jason Picard, wrote an article narrating the social history of South Vietnam’s first national opposition newspaper *Daily Discussion* (*Thời Luận*). Outspoken northern Vietnamese migrants with liberal-democratic political aspirations founded this newspaper in 1955. Relying on sustained discourse from the publication, Picard revealed that the newspaper’s staff, starting in 1957, continuously pressed President Ngô Đình Diệm’s government to allow for an independent press, non-communist political opposition, and genuine democracy. This discourse ended in 1958 when officials permanently shuttered the newspaper. The article provided rare insight into State-press relations during the half of the First Republic.<sup>8</sup>

In 2017, University of Washington PhD candidate Huong Thi Diu Nguyen wrote a social-developmental history of Hue between 1957 and 1967. Seeking to eschew the “nearly-exclusive scholarly focus on political and military activities,” her dissertation examined how domestic factors shaped the city and the lives of ordinary citizens leading up to the 1968 Tet Offensive. Encyclopedic in nature, the work included sections on music, literature, education, public opinion, leisure, and political life. The three-part, seven-chapter study relied heavily on Vietnamese-language archival materials and contemporary interviews. A dearth of operating periodicals in Hue made delineating public discourse difficult, but she cited the short-lived 1964 Hue weekly newspaper *Standpoint* (*Lập Trường*) extensively in chapters 5 and 6.<sup>9</sup> The next year, Professor Olga Dror wrote a comparative social history of youth development in North and South Vietnam from the 1940s to the 1970s. Primary sources made up a majority of her research materials, particularly mass media. Centering around educational

6 Cam Nguyet Nguyen, *Z.28 and the Appeal of Spy Fiction in Southern Vietnam, 1954-1975* (Berkeley: University of California-Berkeley, thesis, 2001).

7 Nhu Anh Tran, “South Vietnamese Identity, American Intervention, and the Newspaper *Chính Luận* [Political Discussion], 1965-1969,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 1.1-2 (Feb./Aug. 2006): 169-209.

8 Jason Picard, “‘Renegades’: The Story of South Vietnam’s First National Opposition Newspaper, 1955-1958,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 10.4 (Fall 2015): 1-29.

9 Huong Thi Diu Nguyen, *Eve of Destruction: A Social History of Vietnam’s Royal City, 1957-1967* (Seattle: University of Washington, dissertation, 2017).

phenomenon, social organizations, and the creation of textual materials, the five-chapter monograph contrasted the divergent experiences of North and South Vietnamese youths growing up under perceived divergent political systems. Touting a non-elite approach, she criticized that “military and political aspects of the wars in Vietnam have been written about on an astounding scale” while the lives of civilians remained largely unexplored.<sup>10</sup>

South Vietnam’s interregnum period, 1963 to 1967, remains the country’s most neglected period among scholars with Vietnamese-language skills. Until now, no monograph exclusively devoted to this period based on South Vietnamese primary sources has existed. Scholars with Vietnamese-language skills have paid greater attention to the First and Second Republic years. Since the 2000s, a number of scholars with varying levels of devotion to South Vietnamese sources in the Vietnamese-language have written or published monographs focusing on the First Republic, including Jason Picard, Nu-Anh Tran, Jessica Chapman, Mark Moyar, Philip Catton, Peter Hansen, Ed Miller, Geoffrey Stewart, and Ronald Frankum.<sup>11</sup> The quality and quantity of research on the First Republic make this period the most thoroughly studied in South Vietnamese history. The second most studied period of South Vietnamese history, the Second Republic, from 1967 to 1975, lags behind the First Republic by at least one decade in terms of research. No studies focusing on South Vietnam’s Second Republic informed partially or primarily by South Vietnamese sources or perspectives appeared until the 2010s. In 2014, Keith Taylor’s edited volume *Voices from the Second Republic of South Vietnam (1967-1975)* discussed South Vietnam and its development based on the accounts of ten male former South Vietnamese nationals. Each contributor discussed his or his family’s efforts to build a better South Vietnam from 1967 to 1975.<sup>12</sup> Two years later, Cornell University Ph.D. candidate Sean Fear wrote a diplomatic history on South Vietnam’s failed political development and American-South Vietnamese relations during the final months of the interregnum period through the first half of the Second Republic. Partially based on South Vietnamese archival and press materials, he charted various difficulties Saigon and Washington faced building a viable South Vietnamese state.

When discussing the historiography of Vietnam War Studies, scholars have identified two general schools of thought into which most scholars fall: Orthodox and Revisionist. Perceived left-liberal anti-war ‘doves’ opposed to the American mission in Vietnam comprise the more popular Orthodox school. To support their anti-war position, members of this school often portray America and non-communist South Vietnam in a more critical light than North Vietnam and its allies. Perceived right-leaning pro-war ‘hawks’ supportive of non-communist South Vietnam and the American mission spearhead the Revisionist school. To support their anti-communist position, members often depict America and non-communist South Vietnam in a more favorable light than North Vietnam and its allies.<sup>13</sup> Despite having fundamental differences, these two schools share similar conceptualizations of

10 Oglá Dror, *Making Two Vietnam’s: War and Youth Identities, 1965-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

11 Nu-Anh Tran, *Contested Identities: Nationalism in the Republic of Vietnam, 1954 to 1963* (dissertation, Berkeley: UC-Berkeley, 2013); Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954 to 1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002); Peter Hansen, *The Virgin Heads South: Northern Catholic Refugees in South Vietnam, 1954-1964* (PhD dissertation, Melbourne: Melbourne College of Divinity, 2008); Ed Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Ronald Frankum, *Vietnam’s Year of the Rat: Elbridge Dubrow, Ngo Dinh Diem, and the Turn in U.S. Relations, 1959-1961* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014); Jason Picard, *Fragmented Loyalties: The Great Migration’s Impact on South Vietnam, 1954-1963* (Berkeley: University of California-Berkeley, dissertation, 2014).

12 Keith Taylor, (ed.), *Voices from the Second Republic of South Vietnam (1967-1975)* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2014).

13 While an oversimplified dichotomy, the Orthodox-Revisionist template helps frame many debates about the Vietnam War. For more information about these historiographical schools, see Gary Hess (1994); Peter Zinoman (2009); Andrew

Ngô Đình Diệm's 1963 overthrow and its impact on South Vietnam. Members of the Orthodox school, while in critical agreement about Ngô Đình Diệm dictatorial legacy, view the President's overthrow as descending the country into complete failure and mediocrity, leading to an American foreign policy commitment they detest. Some Revisionists also argue that Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow triggered widespread failure and mediocrity, but use this purported fact to argue counterfactually that Ngô Đình Diệm should have remained in power indefinitely because a rudderless society failed to function without his illustrious paternalistic guidance.

Within the Revisionist school, a subgroup of scholars portrays Ngô Đình Diệm's leadership in an almost exclusively positive light and his November 1963 overthrow as entirely negative for South Vietnam, most notably Mark Moyar and Geoffrey Shaw.<sup>14</sup> In 2006, the international historian Mark Moyar published a political-military history of Vietnam from 1954 to mid-1965, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*. Drawing almost exclusively on English-language sources, the study promised a new analysis of the Vietnam War which overturned "most of the historical orthodoxy" about the long-studied conflict.<sup>15</sup> It depicted President Ngô Đình Diệm as a "very wise and effective" national leader with no legitimate critics.<sup>16</sup> Moyar portrayed Ngô Đình Diệm's First Republic critics as illegitimate, agencyless, and limited to three basic categories: American puppets, secret communist agents, or Buddhist unknowingly influenced by secret communist agents.<sup>17</sup> As President, Ngô Đình Diệm "brought order" to a divided, disorganized, and demoralized South Vietnam following years of colonial rule.<sup>18</sup> During the Vietnamese civil war, he "held the upper hand" over communist forces starting in the late-1950s. The security failures Ngô Đình Diệm's government experienced during 1960 and 1961 Moyar blamed exclusively on the United States Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow. Based largely on assumption and circumstantial evidence, Moyar argued that Ngô Đình Diệm's accomplishments led "[m]ost South Vietnamese citizens" to have a "high opinion" of the President.<sup>19</sup> His admittedly authoritarian governing style did not bother the public, but "resonated with his countrymen."<sup>20</sup>

The toppling of Ngô Đình Diệm's government in November 1963 by General Dương Văn Minh and other military leaders had no legitimate support from the public according to Moyar. The servicemen responsible for the coup allegedly overthrew Ngô Đình Diệm not because the President had poor leadership qualities or failed to build a viable state, but to appease an anti-Ngô Đình Diệm faction

Weist, ed. (2010); Gary Hess (2015); and Michael Kort (2018).

14 Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Geoffrey Shaw, *The Lost Mandate of Heaven: The American Betrayal of Ngo Dinh Diem, President of South Vietnam* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015); Not all Revisionists agree with Geoffrey Shaw and Mark Moyar about Ngô Đình Diệm having an illustrious legacy. Douglas Pike, a longtime foreign service officer working for the US Department of State, indirectly criticized Ngô Đình Diệm multiple times in *War, Peace, and the Viet Cong* (1969). The political scientist Guenter Lewy (1980) described Ngô Đình Diệm as a "widely hated" leader who "concentrated all authority in his hands." The President appointed officials "who were unresponsive to the interests of the peasantry and often corrupt." His "arbitrary and authoritarian methods, including wholesale suppression of newspapers critical of the regime, gradually alienated important segments of the urban population."

15 Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, i.

16 Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, xiv.

17 Robbing Ngô Đình Diệm's elite non-communist critics of any and all agency, Moyar portrayed the 1960 Caravelle Group, comprised of eighteen prominent South Vietnamese politicians, religious figures, and intellectuals desirous to see Ngô Đình Diệm liberalize and reform his undemocratic government, as a faceless front organization of the United States Embassy (105-6). Based on much speculation and a few intriguing but vague mid-level communist sources, Moyar's account of the 1963 Buddhist-Intellectual Crisis painted the protest movement as engineered and led by a "significant number" of undercover communists agents, including "some" monks (217-8).

18 Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, xiv.

19 Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, xv.

20 Ibid, xiv.

within the US State Department.<sup>21</sup> The scholar maintained that reports by Orthodox American journalists about public satisfaction for the coup did not reflect reality. “[O]nlookers unfamiliar with Asia were inclined to view these events as proof that ‘the people’ despised the Diem regime,” but the “rebels” who orchestrated the coup “staged many, if not all,” of the demonstrations following the event. The author argued for a staged public response to the coup because servicemen freed numerous imprisoned students and Buddhists and transported them to unspecified locations to lead the public. Ignoring the larger celebratory atmosphere in the streets, Moyar depicted the public response as insignificant, centralized to a few locations in Saigon, and exclusive to radicals desirous to carry out destructive acts against statues and businesses associated with Ngô Đình Diệm and his family in the name of the military. By calling the demonstrations across the city “staged” by the military rather than *encouraged*, Moyar greatly misrepresented the public response to the coup and erroneously implied that students and Buddhists operated at the beck and call of the military. Explaining away the torrent of critical public discourse about Ngô Đình Diệm’s government in the South Vietnamese press proved impossible for Moyar. After mentioning that “praise for the plotters surged forth from journalist in Saigon. . . ,” he failed to discuss this critical public discourse or cite any newspapers.<sup>22</sup> This disregard for public opinion has true irony given Moyar’s earlier criticism of American journalists for misunderstanding public opinion about Ngô Đình Diệm and the coup.

Driving his point home, Moyar portrayed Ngô Đình Diệm’s demise as a complete setback for South Vietnam. “[M]iserable consequences” followed the November 1963 coup. According to the American diplomat Averell Harriman in 1964, “As you look back on it, Diem was better than the chaotic condition which followed him.” Moyar opined that “Diem had served as the immune system of South Vietnam, keeping factionalism at bay as antibodies ward off infection. When the Diem government ceased functioning, nothing was left to prevent from contracting debilitating diseases.”<sup>23</sup> “[T]he job is far too big for these little men,” the American counterinsurgency expert Ted Serong asserted, who recommended that the United States disregard South Vietnamese sovereignty and assume direct control of the country’s government.<sup>24</sup> For Moyar, the argument against Ngô Đình Diệm’s 1963 overthrow boiled down to rural security and Moyar’s personal assumption that Ngô Đình Diệm’s government had surpassed the point of potentially losing the war. When Ngô Đình Diệm died, “the South Vietnamese armed forces and the strategic hamlet program were still thriving, building on the great gains that had been registered since early-1962.”<sup>25</sup> Had Ngô Đình Diệm lived, Moyar speculated, the war *probably* does not escalate to a significant degree. While Moyar may have an argument that South Vietnamese leadership between November 1963 and mid-1965 “prosecuted the war far less effectively than Diem had,” Moyar ignored or legitimized the social and political cost of Ngô Đình Diệm’s presidency on non-communist South Vietnamese society to justify national security and American foreign policy objectives.<sup>26</sup>

In 2015, the Canadian diplomatic and military historian Geoffrey Shaw wrote *The Lost Mandate of Heaven: The American Betrayal of Ngo Dinh Diem, President of Vietnam*. Based exclusively on Western-language materials, including declassified US State Department documents, Shaw’s Revisionist monograph examined the presidency of Ngô Đình Diệm, the plot to displace him, and the impact of his overthrow on South Vietnamese society and American foreign policy. An

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21 Ibid, 244-74.

22 Ibid, 275; Moyar showed no ability or desire to consult South Vietnamese press materials throughout his study. He likely learned of this critical public discourse about Ngô Đình Diệm through *Newsweek* or the *New York Times*.

23 Ibid, 279.

24 Ibid, 282.

25 Ibid, 274.

26 Ibid, 286.

apologist for the President, Shaw portrayed Ngô Đình Diệm as a great and popular Catholic-Confucian leader who “deeply respected” Buddhism and “detested violence,” even against radical communists.<sup>27</sup> Any authoritarian qualities found in Ngô Đình Diệm stemmed from the President’s perceived admirable and widely-accepted personal belief that patriotic citizens must voluntarily surrender certain individual liberties to the government for the greater good of the nation.<sup>28</sup> His “tragic” 1963 overthrow and death allegedly displeased many South Vietnamese and devastated the country.<sup>29</sup> The author set forth the overarching thesis that Ngô Đình Diệm possessed the Confucian Mandate of Heaven, a moral and political authority ordained by the Heavens that most South Vietnamese purportedly recognized.<sup>30</sup> The Orthodox journalist Frances Fitzgerald originally proposed this theory back in the early-1970s, but Shaw failed to give her credit. Despite its titular prominence, the term Mandate of Heaven appeared only twice in Shaw’s monograph beyond the Preface, revealing that the author found little direct evidence of the term’s use by South Vietnamese and its practice in South Vietnam.

Only one South Vietnamese source cited in *The Lost Mandate of Heaven* suggested the existence of the Mandate of Heaven, Trần Văn Dĩnh, a Hue-born scholar, former assistant to the President, and diplomat who remained loyal to Ngô Đình Diệm’s government during the 1963 Buddhist-Intellectual Crisis—pertinent background details Shaw overlooked or failed to mention.<sup>31</sup> In an editorial imploring Americans to read Nguyễn Du’s early nineteenth-century classic novel *The Tale of Kieu* to better understand South Vietnamese society, Trần Văn Dĩnh argued that Vietnamese society exhibited strong Confucian character, especially a Confucian conception of morality and hierarchical cosmic social-professional order which slighted soldiers and venerated men of letters who led respectable lives. The editorial never specifically mentioned Ngô Đình Diệm, but Trần Văn Dĩnh’s intention to indirectly connect his former boss and the First Republic years with the Mandate of Heaven seems clear. Touting Trần Văn Dĩnh’s theoretical argument about the Confucian nature of South Vietnamese society as objective fact and compelling evidence, Shaw maintained that President Ngô Đình Diệm, a former imperial mandarin who allegedly lived the life of a monk, naturally appealed to the vast majority of South Vietnamese. Ngô Đình Diệm 1963 overthrow by servicemen, who occupied the lowest rank in society and had no ability to earn the Mandate of Heaven according to Trần Văn

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27 Ibid, 39; 118.

28 Ibid, 27.

29 Geoffrey Shaw, *The Lost Mandate of Heaven: The American Betrayal of Ngo Dinh Diem, President of Vietnam* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015): 23.

30 Even if Confucian philosophical background determined or influenced political loyalties to some degree during the First Republic, which Shaw never proved, the argument for South Vietnamese society having a monolithic, overwhelming, or even marginally dominant Confucian character belies the historical record. Charles Keyes argued in *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia* that rulers of traditional Vietnam faced major difficulties attempting to impose a Confucian-derived ideal order on society. A “vast gulf . . . separated the cultural tradition of the elite from the cultural traditions of the people” (1995: 194). Alexander Woodside maintained in *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* that pre-colonial southern Vietnam had a “more Buddhist, less Confucian, less Sino-Vietnamese” character than central and northern Vietnam (1988: 220). Considering that non-elites, particularly southern Vietnamese non-elites, made up a majority of South Vietnam’s population, Shaw’s theory about Ngô Đình Diệm having widespread popularity among the public due to their allegedly strong Confucian allegiances has little viability. Moreover, if politicians with Confucian backgrounds significantly appealed to South Vietnamese society, why does this fact not become apparent through national voting patterns during the interregnum period? Only 7 candidates identifying as Confucian won seats on the democratically-elected 96-person Constituent Assembly in 1966 (*Tự Do*, Sep. 14, 1966: 1). Trần Văn Lý, the former Confucian mandarin and presidential candidate who called for a national ban on the miniskirt, finish dead last in the 1967 presidential election out of 11 candidates (*Bình Minh*, Sep. 6, 1967: 1).

31 Trần Văn Dĩnh, “Why Every American Should Read Kim Van Kieu,” in Francois Sully, (ed.), *We the Vietnamese: Voices from Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1971): 232-38; Shaw simply described Trần Văn Dĩnh as a “Vietnamese writer” (29). To make Trần Văn Dĩnh look like an objective commentator, Shaw never acknowledged his personal, profession, or regional connection to Ngô Đình Diệm.



Dĩnh’s theoretical model, therefore “doomed” the interregnum period to fail, Shaw asserted.<sup>32</sup> Without Ngô Đình Diệm “no South Vietnam of any consequence” existed.<sup>33</sup>

The Orthodox school’s critical portrayal of the November 1963 coup and interregnum-era South Vietnam has a long history in the field of Vietnam War Studies, appearing in the writings of various Western scholars and journalists. In 1965, David Halberstam, an anglophone war correspondent stationed in Saigon from mid-1962 to late-1965, wrote *The Making of a Quagmire*, an elite-oriented Western account of how the United States created a foreign policy disaster in Vietnam from the early-1960s until early-1965.<sup>34</sup> One of the first and most notable Orthodox works to characterize the November coup as uninspiring, the book’s final chapters asserted that the coup only brought “brief optimism” to South Vietnamese society.<sup>35</sup> By early-1965, no worthwhile gains or dramatic changes came from Ngô Đình Diệm’s overthrow, he maintained. Between late-1963 and early-1964, associated with the leadership of Prime Minister Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ and General Dương Văn Minh, the government “seemed tired and lethargic” and proved “unable to respond to the urgency of the awesome challenges they had inherited.”<sup>36</sup> The reforms implemented by the new government “were largely neutralized” because of inept military leaders and the country’s “corroded” political system.<sup>37</sup> In late-February 1964, General Nguyễn Khánh overthrew Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ’s government and took power until early-November. Halberstam reduced Nguyễn Khánh’s ten months of leadership to the August Vung Tau Charter. This legitimately autocratic provisional constitution sparked off major organized demonstrations from students and Buddhists, simply labeled Buddhist “riots” by the journalist, eventually leading Nguyễn Khánh to resign as Prime Minister.<sup>38</sup> The next provisional government, helmed by Trần Văn Hương, failed to accomplish anything of significance, the journalist argued, because a faceless, power hungry Buddhist protest movement consistently challenged its authority. In late-January 1965, the ongoing conflict between government and protesters movement led General Nguyễn Khánh and other servicemen to intervene and assume governance of the country. Halberstam, who terminated his study around that time, did not know what awaited South Vietnam next; possibly national political stability or a final showdown between militant Buddhists and the new government. Whatever the case, he conceptualized the fate of South Vietnam and its development as synonymous with American foreign policy, which to him promised no hope. “The basic alternatives for Vietnam are the same now as they were in 1961; they are no different, no more palatable, no less of a nightmare.”<sup>39</sup>

Several years later, another influential Orthodox work portrayed the November 1963 coup against Ngô Đình Diệm as having little to no worthwhile influence on society and its development. In 1972, the journalist Frances Fitzgerald wrote *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*, an exploration of Vietnamese dynamics and the failure of American foreign policy in South Vietnam from the mid-1950s to the early-1970s.<sup>40</sup> Western sources, particularly the French sociologist Paul Mus, and Fitzgerald’s own observations as a journalist working in South Vietnam from February to November 1966 informed the monograph. *Fire in the Lake* made a foundational but contestable argument about President Ngô Đình Diệm’s popularity and the toppling of his government. While Fitzgerald, unlike Geoffrey Shaw, viewed Ngô Đình Diệm as a bad leader, similar to Shaw, she believed that the prototypical Asian dictatorial qualities he exhibited appealed to a majority of South

32 Shaw, *The Lost Mandate of Heaven*, 29.

33 Shaw, *The Lost Mandate of Heaven*, 24.

34 David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965).

35 Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, 307.

36 Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, 312.

37 Ibid, Halberstam, 307.

38 Ibid, 313.

39 Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, 315.

40 Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).

Vietnamese. This alleged attractiveness derived from Ngô Đình Diệm possessing the Mandate of Heaven and, correspondingly, society not valuing, desiring, or having cultural-psychological compatibility with individual liberties like democracy or freedom of speech. Given Ngô Đình Diệm's purported sacred status, the 1963 coup against him devastated the country, leaving South Vietnam without its Confucian patriarch and prefiguring its descent into cosmic disharmony. Fitzgerald, unlike Shaw, never advocated for Ngô Đình Diệm to remain in power, but similarly interpreted the coup against him as dooming the country. The President's assassination triggered the rise of several domestic leaders out of favor with the Heavens whose collective failures compelled a completely hopeless, incompatible American mission. According to Fitzgerald, the coup against Ngô Đình Diệm had such an unfavorable impact on the country's national development that the "people of Saigon rarely spoke" about it post November 1963. "There was nothing more to be said," she maintained.<sup>41</sup> These perfunctory assertions do not reflect historical reality. The 1963 coup inspired copious public discourse and galvanized major social and political changes. Such discourse and evidence of widespread changes following the coup, which appeared regularly in the local press, completely eluded the anglophone journalist during her research.

What positive qualities Fitzgerald did attribute to the November coup in *Fire in the Lake* she either minimized or portrayed in a negative light. After briefly acknowledging one major positive change brought about by Ngô Đình Diệm's government's overthrow—the release of political prisoners—Fitzgerald quickly changed the topic to vice and adult entertainment. Attempting to backhandedly portray South Vietnam as a den of moral depravity, Fitzgerald commented that Saigon's bars and nightclubs reopened while "the bar girls came back like painted swallows to settle in the bars of Tu Do Street." Unable to put her antagonistic, stereotypical feelings for a perceived completely corrupt, prostitute-infested South Vietnam aside, Fitzgerald highlighted the perceived negative impact of the November coup almost exclusively. What excitement did exist following the coup quickly evaporated, she proclaimed. The public allegedly became fearful, apathetic, and had no energy or agency. Anti-Ngô activists, who Fitzgerald described as "rebels" rather than liberators, "indulgently returned to their private pursuits" post-November 1963. Intellectuals absorbed themselves in "endless discussions" which purportedly led nowhere. Students retreated into "their jazz music and university elections." Buddhists inhabited the "obscure world from which they had come."<sup>42</sup> Considering that Fitzgerald arrived in South Vietnam in 1966, well after Ngô Đình Diệm's downfall, and had no ability to carry out research or conduct interviews in the Vietnamese-language, her self-serving Orthodox depiction of Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow as almost exclusively bad for South Vietnam and the public's lackluster response to the event remains largely, if not completely, unreliable.

The Orthodox scholar George Kahin depicted South Vietnam and the November 1963 coup in a similarly uninspiring light in his 1986 monograph *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam*.<sup>43</sup> Framing South Vietnamese history from the perspective of American foreign policy, Kahin portrayed the November coup as a foreign-backed military event that brought no worthwhile changes to South Vietnamese society. Kahin devoted one mere sentence to the popularity of the coup among South Vietnamese in his examination of the event. "A wide spectrum of accounts agree that most of the South Vietnamese people enthusiastically welcomed the overthrow of the Diem regime," he wrote. After this brief, reluctant acknowledgment, Kahin immediately shifted gears to deflect all positive attention away from the event. To sell readers on the negative legacy of the coup and the nefarious nature of South Vietnam's new administration, Kahin remarked that "President Kennedy was reportedly

41 Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 171.

42 Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 295-6.

43 George Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986).

shocked and perturbed by the murders of the two [Ngô] brothers . . . .”<sup>44</sup> The transparent transition painted Ngô Đình Diệm's death as an unjust crime perpetuated by nefarious South Vietnamese military leaders, thereby reducing the dictator's celebrated overthrow to a homicidal act. Kahin attributed nothing of significance to coup or the interregnum period. Purportedly failing to provide any real changes or improvements, the dissolution of Ngô Đình Diệm's government simply gave way to a series of failed political leaders.

The diplomatic historian George Herring promoted the customary Orthodox argument about Ngô Đình Diệm's 1963 overthrow bringing no worthwhile changes to South Vietnam in his 1990 article “‘People Quite Apart’: Americans, South Vietnamese, and the War in Vietnam.”<sup>45</sup> Published in *Diplomatic History*, the work discussed various dilemmas and frustrations faced by the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations in South Vietnam from the mid-1950s to 1975. To make up for the conspicuous absence of South Vietnamese in the burgeoning literature of the Vietnam War, Herring promised a greater examination of the South Vietnamese perspective. His examination mostly focused on the post-1975 writings of a few former South Vietnamese political elites. While apparently impressive for the time, such a limited perspective shows that by 1990, more than a decade after the Vietnam War ended, Western researchers still had yet to show much interest or appreciation for South Vietnamese opinion, particularly beyond a handful of elites who happened to publish works in the English-language. Consistent with this American-centric bias, Herring's framed the 1963 coup and its impact on interregnum-era South Vietnam almost exclusively from the perspective of American diplomats and servicemen, who believed that nothing worthwhile happened after Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow because South Vietnamese society had little to no agency or cohesion. Glossing over the coup and its impact, Herring asserted that the event simply “opened the way to a series of revolving-door governments that changed with startling rapidity” and accomplished nothing.<sup>46</sup> The “feckless,” “stubborn” South Vietnamese played no role other than submissive order takers.<sup>47</sup> By the spring of 1965, “South Vietnam verged on collapse,” one American general dramatically proclaimed.<sup>48</sup> Herring's superficial critical interpretation of the November 1963 coup and interregnum-era South Vietnam represented an exaggerated and biased American-centric account of events.

Over the course of four chapters, this dissertation challenges the historiographical arguments about Ngô Đình Diệm and the interregnum period surveyed above. Each chapter consist of multiple sections supported almost exclusively by South Vietnamese press materials from the interregnum period. Chapter One counters Revisionist depictions of Ngô Đình Diệm as an adept, popular leader without legitimate non-communist who should have remained President of South Vietnam. A torrent of public criticism found across the interregnum period about former President Ngô Đình Diệm and his family support the chapter. These various South Vietnamese sources put the Ngô family's perceived history of despotism and strict Catholic morality on full display. Five sections representing different perspectives within society frame this public criticism. The first section, focusing on student radicals, examines discourse surrounding the August 1963 government cover-up of high school student Quách Thị Trang's fatal shooting by police. Revealed to the public following Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow, Quách Thị Trang's martyrdom had a dramatic impact on student activism post-November 1963. The chapter's second section analyzes critical discourse about the 1959 Family Laws written by Trần Lệ Xuân, Ngô Đình Diệm's sister-in-law, the de facto First Lady, and a leading member of the National

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44 Kahin, *Intervention*, 180.

45 George Herring, “‘Peoples Quite Apart’: Americans, South Vietnamese, and the War in Vietnam,” *Diplomatic History*, 14.1 (Winter 1990): 1-23.

46 Herring, “‘Peoples Quite Apart,’” 3.

47 Herring, “‘People Quite Apart,’” 2, 3.

48 Herring, “‘People Quite Apart,’” 4.

Assembly.<sup>49</sup> While designed to improve the lives of women, this comprehensive legislative decree included a Catholic-influenced article that all but banned divorce, forcing many women to remain in unhappy or abusive marriages. The third section addresses critical discourse from performing artists about Ngô Đình Diệm's campaign to control the arts for nation building and propaganda purposes. This campaign devastated the country's cải lương (renovated folk musical theater) industry creatively and financially. The memoirs of Phạm Duy, an iconic modern musician, corroborate and expand on the negative impact of State sponsored propaganda on the performing arts. The fourth section discusses critical discourse from Hue journalists about Ngô Đình Diệm's government, including central Vietnam's most powerful official Ngô Đình Cẩn, the President's brother. This discourse provides further geographic scope to public criticism of Ngô Đình Diệm's autocratic government. The fifth section explores critical discourse from upland ethnic minorities found in published works written or edited by Paul Nur, a Bahnar ethnic minority leader and Catholic educator. These works demonstrate that upland minorities faced serious hardships, including incarceration, forced relocation, discrimination, and assimilation at the hands of Ngô Đình Diệm's government.

The preceding three chapters disprove Orthodox and Revisionist arguments about the uninspiring impact of Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow and the unremarkable nature of the interregnum period. Chapter two examines South Vietnamese society's slow but successful efforts to build a more democratic, administratively-decentralized political system after years of highly-centralized rule under the Ngô family dictatorship. The first section explores the failure of multiple governments to create a new official national constitution from late-1963 to mid-1965 and the public's continuous calls for democracy and elections. The second section discusses the May 1965 town, city, and provincial council elections. The first major elections of the interregnum period, their outcome represented a small but important step in building democracy and decentralizing governmental control. The third section covers the 1966 Constituent Assembly election and the drafting of an official constitution. This constitution promoted administrative decentralization and checks and balances through a unique, multifaceted presidential-style system with a bicameral legislature. The fourth section analyzes the simultaneous presidential and senatorial elections in September 1967. Signaling an end to the interregnum period, these highly-anticipated elections afforded the country political stability and greater democratic legitimacy through the creation of constitutionally-backed institutions.

Chapter three analyzes the Westernization of women's fashion and gender norms. The end of the Ngô family dictatorship and the culturally conservative, nativist climate it promoted allowed for a socio-cultural shift in female society to take place. Women of the interregnum period adopted Western standards of living, particularly aesthetically and behaviorally, to a much greater degree than women of the First Republic, embodying the possibilities of this new era, as well as the hopes and fears it evoked. The first section examines the evolution of women's fashion and gender norms from November 1963 until mid-1964, particularly the proliferation of "New Wave" fashion trends like sleeveless dresses, high-heeled shoes, and cosmetics. Symbols of female liberation and independence, Western fashion propagated within female society following the overthrow of Ngô Đình Diệm's government. The second section surveys women's fashion and gender norms in the context of the 1965 Ms. South Vietnam Beauty Contest. The first national beauty pageant in South Vietnamese history, this pageant shattered cultural taboos about acceptable female public behavior, including wearing skin-tight Western swim suits that exposed much of the body. The third section, covering years 1966 and 1967, focuses on the advent and growing popularity of the miniskirt in South Vietnam. Invented by the British designer Mary Quant, the miniskirt arrived in South Vietnam by no later than June or July 1966. Leading up to the 1967 September presidential election, the miniskirt became a national political and cultural taking

49 Trần Lệ Xuân married Ngô Đình Diệm's brother and main political adviser Ngô Đình Nhu. Since Ngô Đình Diệm lived an asexual lifestyle and never married, Trần Lệ Xuân functioned as South Vietnam's First Lady.

point when the field's eldest candidate Trần Văn Lý, a culturally conservative former mandarin, promised to ban the garment if elected president. The only candidate in the election to call for a ban on the miniskirt, Trần Văn Lý went on to finish dead last in the 11-person field.

Chapter four narrates advancements in South Vietnam's national sports culture from 1963 to 1966. Following years of government interference, perceived neglect, and poor leadership under former President Ngô Đình Diệm, Youth and Sports Minister Cao Xuân Vỹ, and the country's nominally private federation system, the sports community saw significant changes. The first section examines sports development from November 1963 until March 1964, the first six months following the coup against Ngô Đình Diệm. This six month period saw the resurrection of multiple neglected sports all but banned by the 1962 Moral Protection Laws and the election of new, more passionate leaders—some of whom had been alienated or blackballed by the sports community during the First Republic—on various national sports federation boards. The second section discusses sports development during the first half of 1965, largely associated with the leadership of Prime Minister Phan Huy Quát and his Minister of Youth and Sports Colonel Nguyễn Tấn Hồng. This six-month period saw much private organizational growth, including the birth of the country first women's soccer league, and the administrative decentralization of sports. The third section examines the historic victory of the South Vietnamese men's national team at the 1966 Merdeka soccer championship, Asia's preeminent annual soccer tournament. The national team's championship run at the 1966 Merdeka tournament, in which ten teams across South, Southeast, and East Asia participated, arguably ranks as South Vietnam's greatest sports accomplishment.

## Chapter One

*An Unambiguous Legacy:*  
Public Perceptions about former President Ngô Đình Diệm and the First Republic years

Inadequate political leadership and failed public expectations largely defined the tenure of Ngô Đình Diệm as president of South Vietnam, from 1955 to 1963. Exhibiting increasingly autocratic tendencies once elected, Ngô Đình Diệm failed to create a viable political state and healthy civil society during his eight years in power, officially known as the First Republic years. Censorship, propaganda, political nepotism, highly-centralized leadership, and disregard for public opinion reigned. After years of harsh governance, in May 1963, an urban protest movement against Ngô Đình Diệm's government predominantly comprised of students and Buddhist broke out, signaling the regime's downfall. Based out of central Vietnam, this protest movement erupted in response to perceived religious discrimination against Buddhists by Ngô Đình Diệm's Catholic-oriented regime and his government's use of police brutality to quell these demonstrations. On November 1, 1963, following seven months of paralyzing demonstrations, a contingent of high-ranking servicemen led by General Dương Văn Minh overthrew President Ngô Đình Diệm's government and ended the ongoing political crisis. The military coup ushered in a new period of South Vietnamese national development and consciousness associated with the country's interregnum years, from 1963 to 1967.

Perceiving President Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow as a revolutionary act, various spheres of South Vietnamese society celebrated the dissolution of his government and the country's unicameral legislature. For the first time, citizens had the opportunity to freely speak out against leaders like Ngô Đình Diệm, his brother and main adviser Ngô Đình Nhu, and National Assembly member Trần Lệ Xuân, married to Ngô Đình Nhu. Engendered by a rapidly expanding press corps and what *Liberty* (*Tự Do*) newspaper, one of the country's longest running and most respected publications, called the dawning of a "more open atmosphere . . . [whereby] most of the nation is no longer afraid" and living under "a heavy sense of suspicion," critical public discourse about Ngô Đình Diệm flooded the press after years of harsh censorship.<sup>50</sup> Numerous publications considered Ngô Đình Diệm's government and his family "dictatorial" ("độc tài"), an adjective few, if any, journalist dared to freely use during the First Republic.<sup>51</sup> Critical public discourse about Ngô Đình Diệm's government appeared most

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- 50 Nguyễn Hữu Dung, "Nghĩa Vụ của Báo chí Với Hiện Tình Việt Nam," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Feb. 10, 1964): 4; In December 1963, Lê Thiện Thao of *Tin Mới* newspaper recalled journalists commenting to him about the oppressed state of the press during the First Republic: "There's nothing to say ... They cover our mouths ..." ("Chả có gì nói cả.. Họ bịt mồm bịt miệng chúng tôi...") (Dec. 12, 1963: 3); Phạm Trần, a journalist whose career spanned the late-First Republic through the Second Republic years, maintained that Ngô Đình Diệm's government embraced heavy censorship going back to the mid-1950s. The press operated in "constant fear of being shut down." Journalists "did not dare practice journalism the way they wanted. . . ." (Tuong Vu, et al., eds, 2019: 117-8); The former First Republic official Nguyễn Thái highlighted various efforts made by Ngô Đình Diệm's government to systematically control the press starting as early as 1955 (1971: 240-3).
- 51 Numerous references to Ngô Đình Diệm's government and family as "dictatorial" exist: "Diễn Tiến của Quốc Cách Mạng Lật Đổ Chế Độ Độc Tài Ngô Đình Diệm," *Saigon Mai* (Sài Gòn: Nov. 5, 1963): 4; Lưu Ly, "Dân Đen Bàn Việc Nước," *Bất Khuất* (Nov. 8, 1964, No. 4): 1; "250 Liberated From Secret Prisons," *Vietnam Press* (Nov. 9, 1963, Morning Edition, No. 2860): 5; "Hội Đồng Quân Nhân Cách Mạng," *Chiến Sĩ Cộng Hòa* (Sài Gòn: Nov. 15, 1963): 3; "Chế độ văn hóa nô bộc đã chết," *Phổ Thông* (Sài Gòn: Nov. 15, 1963): 5; Tiểu Dân, "Cảm nghĩ về sự cáo chung của một chế độ độc tài," *Bách Khoa* (Sài Gòn: Nov. 15, 1963): 1; Nguyễn Văn Trung, "Độc Tài Hay Dân Chủ," *Sống Đạo* (Nov. 22, 1964, No. 4): 7; V.Đ., "Đề Phỏng Việt Cộng Lợi Dụng Cách Mạng," *Thông Tin* (Dec. 15, 1963, No. 1): 2; Nguyễn Ngu Í, "Kí Giả Và Nhân Dân Trong Giai Đoạn Hiện Tại," *Bách Khoa* (Dec. 15, 1963, No. 167): 111-114; "Nên Đối Với Xứ Thế Nào?," *Tin Mới* (Dec. 23, 1963, No. 20): 1; Nguyễn Ngu Í, "Đường Lối Của Phật Giáo Hiện Tại," *Bách Khoa* (Jan. 1, 1964, No. 168): 100-5; Lê Trần Sa, "Học Sinh và Sinh Viên phải làm gì trong giai đoạn hiện tại?," *Dân Tộc* (Jan. 9, 1964, No. 1): 2; Phong Vân, "Chế Độ Ngô Đình Diệm: Kiểm duyệt tưởng tích với tinh thần thù địch dân chúng," *Dân Tộc* (Jan. 11, 1964): 4; "Vai Trò Phụ Nữ trong cuộc vận động chống độc tài và kỳ thị tôn giáo của Ngô Triều," *Dân Tộc* (Jan. 12, 1964, No. 4): 2; Bảo Quang, "Lý Nhân Duyên," *Tự Do* (Jan. 4, 1964): 5; Tham luận của Dân Tôi, "Làm Cách Nào Để Tránh Vết Xe Cũ," *Tự Do* (Jan. 21, 1964): 3, 2; Cô Mộng Loan, "Tình Hình Cải Lương Trong Năm Qua," *Nói Thẳng* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 30, 1964): 3; "Vì sao Ngô Đình Diệm áp dụng chế độ độc tài . . . và chế độ ấy được," *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Feb. 20, 1964): 5; "Tám Tiếng Chuông," *Lập Trường* (Huế: May 9, 1964): 3; "Trường

frequently in the year after the coup. While critical discourse dissipated to some degree post-1964, much animosity towards Ngô Đình Diệm and the First Republic's dictatorial character lingered, ensuring that negative public attitudes never disappeared.

Five sections highlighting a wealth of critical public attitudes toward former President Ngô Đình Diệm, his family, and the First Republic years support this chapter. The first section examines discourse from and about student radicals. The author paid particular attention to the August 1963 cover-up of Quách Thị Trang's fatal shooting and its impact on student activism post-November 1963. The second section highlights discourse from critics of the 1959 Family Laws written by Trần Lệ Xuân. Designed to improve the family and the lives of women, the Family Laws had at least one major flaw. They all but banned divorce, forcing many unhappy couples and countless women in abusive relationships to remain married. The third section addresses discourse from and about performing artists. A growing emphasis on propaganda by Ngô Đình Diệm's government devastated the performing arts. Starting in 1961, Minister of Civil Affairs Ngô Trọng Hiếu forced the cải lương (renovated folk musical theater) community to perform less entertaining, east-to-follow works about the battlefield, causing the industry to lose many patrons and nearly go bankrupt. Additional accounts from the iconic modern musician Phạm Duy about the influence of propaganda on the arts going back to the mid-1950s add to this discourse. The fourth section shifts the geographic focus away from southern Vietnam by exploring critical discourse from Hue journalists. Their commentary shines light on the perspective of people from central Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diệm's region of birth and the former administrative territory of Ngô Đình Diệm's autocratic brother Ngô Đình Cẩn. The fifth section discusses discourse from upland ethnic minorities found in published works written or edited by Paul Nur, a Bahnar ethnic minority leader and Catholic educator. Their accounts disclose systematic discrimination against ethnic minorities living in the Central Highlands and much dissatisfaction for former President Ngô Đình Diệm's leadership. Through these five sections, supported predominantly by South Vietnamese press materials published between 1963 and 1967, a variety of critical attitudes, opinions, and experiences emerge that evince Ngô Đình Diệm's failure as a leader.

### Student Radicals

With the overthrow of President Ngô Đình Diệm's government on November 1, 1963, thousands of students throughout the country welcomed the administration's downfall. Their elation reflected a strong dissatisfaction for the former government. On November 24, 1963, the law school student Đinh Việt Tứ described life in South Vietnam under Ngô Đình Diệm as “suffocating.”<sup>52</sup> A few months later, student journalist Lê Trần Sa of *People (Dân Tộc)* newspaper maintained that “student

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Niệm Quách Thị Trang,” *Tình Thương* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 1964): iv; “Quách Thị Trang,” *Hành Động* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 26, 1964): 2; “Cái chết oai hùng của Quách Thị Trang,” *Tiếng Vang* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 26, 1964): 2, 3; “Một Năm Cách Mạng,” *Cảm Thông* (Đà Nẵng: Nov. 7, 1964): 4; “That Tricky Press Freedom!”, *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Apr. 13, 1965): 4; Ton That Thien, “Towards sex control?”, *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Apr. 20, 1965): 4; “Tinh thần cuộc Cách Mạng 1-11-63,” *Tiền Phong* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 1965): 2; Minh Huy, “Độc Tài,” *Tiền Phong* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 1965): 55; Trần Ngọc Sơn, “Lừa Cách Mạng,” *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Nov. 1, 1965): 4; Ton That Thien; “Lời kêu gọi đồng bào Thượng của Ông Đặc Ủy Trưởng Thượng Vụ,” *Thượng Vụ* (Sài Gòn: May 1966): 7; “Những công tác và chính sách của chính phủ đã thực thi ưu tiên dành riêng đồng bào Thượng từ ngày 17-10-64 đến tháng 5-1966,” *Thượng Vụ* (Sài Gòn: May 1966): 45; “Một Nguy Vong Đàng Đe Dọa Thanh Niên Thế Hệ: Chính là những bè bọ cặn bã của một lớp thanh niên thế hệ Ngô Đình Diệm còn rơi rớt,” *Chân Trời* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 7, 1966): 7; “Bảo vệ đến cùng tinh thần 1-11-63,” *Bình Minh* (Sài Gòn: Nov. 1, 1966): 1; “Tinh thần Cách Mạng 1-11-63,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Nov. 3, 1966): 7; “Personnalité de la semaine: M. Paul Nur,” *Le Viet Nam Nouveau* (Saigon: Jan. 21, 1967): 2; TT (\$7.50); “Trở lại vấn đề ngoại kiều đuổi nhà đuổi phố cần soạn thảo đạo luật mới về chế độ vô gia cư, thổ trạch,” *Tiền Tuyến* (Sài Gòn: Feb. 5, 1967): 4, 5; Vô Văn Ứng, “Đại sứ Bunker sẽ làm gì tại Miền Nam,” *Bình Minh* (Sài Gòn: Mar. 30, 1967): 1; “M. Phan Ba Cam, Leader de la Liste 'Cach Mang,’” *Le Viet Nam Nouveau* (Saigon: Sep. 18, 1967): 1.



organizations were [made to be] completely dependent on [Ngô Đình Diệm's] government. . . .”<sup>53</sup> “[I]f we showed our opposition, we would be imprisoned.” As part of this larger climate of student dissatisfaction for Ngô Đình Diệm's government post-November 1963, a major point of resentment concerned the death of the female Buddhist student activist Quách Thị Trang. Shot and killed by police during an August 1963 protest in Saigon, due to a government cover-up, Quách Thị Trang's death only became public knowledge in 1964. When revealed, her tragic death inspired a generation of student activists to continue her legacy by opposing the August 1964 Vung Tau Charter, an autocratic provisional constitution drafted by General Nguyễn Khánh's government.

Born in northern Vietnam's Thai Binh province on January 4, 1948, Quách Thị Trang came from an anti-communist family of post-1954 Buddhist migrants. *New Day* newspaper wrote that communist soldiers abducted and presumably killed Quách Thị Trang's father, a non-communist soldier, during her childhood. Her mother, the widow Hà Thị Vân, raised Quách Thị Trang and her seven siblings as a single parent. Quách Thị Trang's elder brother, Lieutenant-Colonel Quách Văn Liên, served in the South Vietnamese Army. During the 1963 Buddhist-Intellectual Crisis, a fifteen-year-old Quách Thị Trang showed maturity and initiative as a member of the student-Buddhist resistance in Saigon. Resistance leaders entrusted Quách Thị Trang with transporting documents and communicating with select student leaders.<sup>54</sup> After the August 21, 1963 police raid on Xa Loi pagoda, in which government security forces beat and arrested many Buddhist and student activists, Quách Thị Trang became more devoted to the cause and less concerned with her personal health. *Action (Hành Động)* newspaper, a self-proclaimed “resistance” publication founded in December 1963 by the novelist Bùi Anh Tuấn, conducted interviews with Quách Thị Trang's family and friends in 1964. According to these interviews, following the police raid on Xa Loi Pagoda, Quách Thị Trang confided to friends: “If this religious persecution lasts, I cannot go on living.”<sup>55</sup>

Eager to speak out against Ngô Đình Diệm's government, on August 25, 1963, Quách Thị Trang and two friends participated in a public demonstration on Dien Hong square (công trường Diên Hồng), located in front of Saigon's Ben Thanh market.<sup>56</sup> Three hundred Buddhists and student activists attended. Police and plain-clothed agents soon arrived on the scene to put an end to the protest. They dispersed the crowd using batons, rifle butts, and attack dogs. Security forces arrested many people.<sup>57</sup> Some student protesters refused to disperse. Quách Thị Trang moved to the front lines of the demonstration. A dedicated contingent of student activists raised a banner that read: “Kill us” (“Hãy giết chúng tôi đi.”). A confrontation ensued between protesters and security forces. During the clash, a bullet struck Quách Thị Trang in the right temple. Confusion and panic pervaded the scene. Demonstrators fled in all directions. In the pandemonium, most all demonstrators failed to notice Quách Thị Trang lying mortally wounded on the ground. Security forces quickly removed the fifteen-year-old's body, leaving only traces of blood. Quách Thị Trang's friends had no idea what happened to her. Security forces clandestinely transported Quách Thị Trang to Cộng Hòa Military Hospital (bệnh viện Cộng Hòa) on the northern outskirts of Saigon. There, she passed away. The next day, the viceroy of Saigon Major-General Tôn Thất Đính made no mention of the shooting at Diên Hồng square or

52 Nguyễn Ngu Í, “Sinh Hoạt: Kí Giả Và Nhân Dân Trong Giai Đoạn Hiện Tại,” *Bách Khoa* (Sài Gòn: Dec. 15, 1963): 111.

53 Lê Trần Sa, “Học Sinh và Sinh Viên phải làm gì trong giai đoạn hiện tại?,” *Dân Tộc* (Jan. 9, 1964, No. 1): 2.

54 “Ngày này năm ngoái: Nữ Sinh Quách Thị Trang ngã gục dưới làn đạn của bọn gia nô Triều Ngô,” *Ngày Mới* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 25, 1964): 1, 4; The Vietnam Nationalist Party leader Nghiêm Kế Tổ managed *Ngày Mới* newspaper.

55 “Quách Thị Trang,” *Hành Động* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 26, 1964): 2.

56 “Ngày này năm ngoái: Nữ Sinh Quách Thị Trang ngã gục dưới làn đạn của bọn gia nô Triều Ngô,” *Ngày Mới* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 25, 1964): 1, 4; “Quách Thị Trang,” *Hành Động* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 26, 1964): 2.

57 *Ngày Mới* newspaper reported that police tortured Quách Thị Trang's friend Yến. Quách Thị Trang's other friend Uyên escaped arrest and returned home (Aug. 26, 1964: 1, 4).

Quách Thị Trang's death. As reported by *Saigon Tomorrow (Saigon Mai)* newspaper on August 28, 1963, Major-General Tôn Thất Đính only stated that security forces had arrested and detained some youths for “illegally gathering” in various public places across the city.<sup>58</sup>

To conceal Quách Thị Trang's death, Ngô Đình Diệm's government went to extreme lengths. After the protest on Diên Hồng square, agents purportedly working for the Mật Vụ (Secret Police) told Quách Thị Trang's family that security forces had arrested and detained her. To perpetuate this lie, Professor Tô Đăng, a teacher at Quách Thị Trang's school and former employee of the Ministry of Education, told Quách Thị Trang's family that he had personally seen, talked with, and given money to Quách Thị Trang in jail. In reality, Quách Thị Trang died five minutes after police transported her to Cộng Hòa Military Hospital. Captain Đỗ Văn Giường, the serviceman tasked with “shrouding” the body (“người được cử ra để liệm em Quách Thị Trang”), told *Action* newspaper that, to hide evidence, on the afternoon of August 28, police buried Quách Thị Trang in an anonymous grave site at a military cemetery near Go Vap, located several miles north of downtown Saigon. Seeking to conceal the truth, Professor Tô Đăng informed Quách Thị Trang's family that they could not visit her in jail. Later, he repeated this information to family members when they asked a second time, saying that they could “never” (“chưa bao giờ”) visit her.<sup>59</sup> Dissatisfied with a lack of transparency over Quách Thị Trang's alleged arrest, the family suspected and eventually accused Ngô Đình Diệm's government of foul play but authorities refused to investigate. Her death remained concealed to the public.

With the overthrow of Ngô Đình Diệm's government on November 1, 1963, General Dương Văn Minh's administration granted amnesty to thousands of prisoners incarcerated during the First Republic, including all student and Buddhist activists. Quách Thị Trang remained missing following the amnesty. According to *Action* newspaper, following a preliminary investigation into Quách Thị Trang's disappearance, authorities discovered that a policeman had shot and killed her during the August 1963 protest on Diên Hồng square. In December 1963, authorities invited Quách Thị Trang's mother and siblings downtown. There, they informed the family of her passing. To provide some closure, authorities gave the family multiple articles of clothing worn by Quách Thị Trang the day she died.<sup>60</sup> According to the activist-oriented newspaper *Solidarity (Đoàn Kết)*, authorities later arrested a suspect, Nguyễn Văn Khánh, the deputy chief of Lê Văn Ken police station. Witnesses testified that they saw Nguyễn Văn Khánh shoot the teenager with his sidearm.<sup>61</sup>

While tragic, Quách Thị Trang's death protesting Ngô Đình Diệm's government had a major impact on student activism and South Vietnam's political development during the interregnum period. Quách Thị Trang's political activism inspired thousands of high school and college students to oppose the August 16, 1964 provisional constitution commonly known as the Vung Tau Charter (Hiến Chương Vũng Tàu). General Nguyễn Khánh implemented this constitution several months after overthrowing General Dương Văn Minh's government in early-1964. Nguyễn Khánh justified the provisional constitution as necessary and urgent because of a purported state of emergency related to the presence of 150,000 “VC” troops operating in South Vietnam, reported *Liberty* newspaper.<sup>62</sup> “Thailand is also in a state of emergency even though the country is not directly threatened by Communism,” Nguyễn Khánh told reporters. Comprised of 61 points, the Vung Tau Charter gave President General Nguyễn

58 “Có con em bị lưu giữ nên liên lạc với phường trưởng,” *Saigon Mai* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 28, 1963): 1; The former Director of Vietnam Press Nguyễn Thái later categorized *Saigon Mai* as one of the First Republic's “[l]ess vocally pro-Diem” newspapers (1971: 234).

59 “Quách Thị Trang,” *Hành Động* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 26, 1964): 2; Following the November 1, 1963 coup, many people believed that Tô Đăng had worked for the Mật Vụ. *Hành Động* wrote that “[t]here is a public opinion that Mr. Tô Đăng was a Secret Service agent” (Aug. 26, 1964: 2).

60 “Quách Thị Trang,” *Hành Động* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 26, 1964): 2.

61 “Vụ bắn chết cô Quách Thị Trang trong cuộc biểu tình trước chợ Saigon,” *Đoàn Kết* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 29, 1964): 1.

62 “Phái đoàn sinh viên yêu cầu: Tu chính hiến chương,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 24, 1964): 1, 4.

Khanh near-dictatorial powers. The constitution's Foreword ambiguously stated that “internal troubles and the threat of invasion” did not allow for “fundamental individual liberties” and “democratic institutions” to be “fully exercised and completed” until the situation saw progress.<sup>63</sup> The bi-monthly journal *Universal (Phổ Thông)*, chaired and edited by the central Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Vũ, considered the Vung Tau Charter “akin to the so-called [Republic of Vietnam] Constitution of 1956” legislated by the National Assembly. As observed by the Western legal scholar Mark Sidel, the South Vietnamese constitution of 1956 “reflected the desire of the then-leader of south Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diệm, for exceptionally strong executive powers.”<sup>64</sup>

On August 25, 1964, the one-year anniversary of Quách Thị Trang's death, students held a massive demonstration on Diên Hồng square to commemorate the teenager's life and death. Multiple South Vietnamese publications covered the protest.<sup>65</sup> Spearheaded by males and females from two large private schools in Saigon and Cholon, over 50,000 high school and university students participated in the event. The student protest began at 8:30 in the morning when participants marched down Lê Thánh Tông Street. The demonstration had a strong anti-Ngô Đình Diệm character. According to *Present Day (Ngày Nay)* newspaper, edited by the playwright Vũ Khắc Khoan, protesters carried a large banner reading “Quách Thị Trang's Blood Brought About the Collapse of the Ngo Family” (“Máu Quách Thị Trang đổ kéo luôn sự sụp đổ của họ Ngô đình”).<sup>66</sup> In front of Ben Thanh market, thousands of student demonstrators gathered awaiting a commemorative event. A group of teenagers soon arrived with a two-meter-high stone pillar and other building materials, wrote *Present Day* and *Liberty* newspapers.<sup>67</sup> They began constructing the base of a memorial monument honoring Quách Thị Trang's legacy and perceived historical importance. Students leaders delivered speeches to mark the occasion. They declared that Ben Thanh market had a new name: Quách Thị Trang market.<sup>68</sup> Student leaders also declared August 25—the day Quách Thị Trang died—Quách Thị Trang day.<sup>69</sup> According to *Present Day*, as the concrete foundation securing the base pillar dried, onlookers awaited the arrival of a head-and-shoulders stone bust of Quách Thị Trang crafted by a local art student.<sup>70</sup> Upon delivery, students placed the granite sculpture atop the towering pillar. Sizable, pure white, and with detailed features, the statue depicted Quách Thị Trang with a calm, resolute expression. Permanently erected before Ben Thanh market, Quách Thị Trang memorial monument constantly reminded the

63 “Nguyễn Văn: Hiến Chương Việt Nam Cộng Hòa,” *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 18, 1964): 1; “Ý thức rằng trước tình trạng khẩn trương hiện tại do nội loạn và hiểm họa ngoại xâm, những tự do cá nhân căn bản cũng như những định chế dân chủ không thể xử dụng trọn vẹn và hoàn tất ngay, mà phải được tuân tự ban bố và thiết lập song song với sự tiến triển của tình thế.”

64 Mark Sidel, *The Constitution of Vietnam: A Contextual Analysis* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2009): 15.

65 “Thượng Tọa Thích Thiện Minh kêu gọi: Thanh niên Phật tử bất bạo động trong cuộc truy niệm Quách Thị Trang,” *Ngày Nay* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 26, 1964): 1, 4; “Trên 50 ngàn học sinh sinh viên và Phật tử tham dự lễ truy điệu nữ sinh Quách Thị Trang,” *Tiếng Vang* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 26, 1964): 1, 4; “Tượng Quách Thị Trang đã được dựng tại Bồn Bình Saigon,” *Ngày Nay* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 27, 1964): 1, 4; “Quách Thị Trang người đi vào lịch sử . . .,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 27, 1964): 1; “Chợ Bến Thành đã trở thành Chợ Quách Thị Trang,” *Hành Động* (Aug. 27, 1964): 1, 4; “Chợ Bến Thành là chợ Quách thị Trang?,” *Ngày mới* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 27, 1964): 1.

66 “Tượng Quách Thị Trang đã được dựng tại Bồn Bình Saigon,” *Ngày Nay* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 27, 1964): 1, 4.

67 “Tượng Quách Thị Trang đã được dựng tại Bồn Bình Saigon,” *Ngày Nay* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 27, 1964): 1, 4; “Quách Thị Trang người đi vào lịch sử . . .,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 27, 1964): 1.

68 “Ngày này năm ngoái: Nữ Sinh Quách Thị Trang ngã gục dưới làn đạn của bọn gia nô Triều Ngô,” *Ngày mới* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 25, 1964): 1, 4.

69 “Ngày này năm ngoái: Nữ Sinh Quách Thị Trang ngã gục dưới làn đạn của bọn gia nô Triều Ngô,” *Ngày mới* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 25, 1964): 1, 4.

70 “Tượng Quách Thị Trang đã được dựng tại Bồn Bình Saigon,” *Ngày Nay* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 27, 1964): 1, 4.

public of Quách Thị Trang's legacy and President Ngô Đình Diệm's crimes during the 1963 Buddhist-Intellectual Crisis.<sup>71</sup>



Student protesters gathered around Quách Thị Trang's statue on August 25, 1964.<sup>72</sup>  
The banner reads: Imitate the struggle of Quách Thị Trang.

The protests by students and Buddhists against General Nguyễn Khanh's August 16, 1964 Vung Tau Charter significantly impacted the country's political development. Commencing on August 19, 1964, by mid-afternoon of August 25, Quách Thị Trang day, the burgeoning protest movement had helped convince General Nguyễn Khanh to resign as prime minister. General Dương Văn Minh and other leading military figures immediately revoked the Vung Tau Charter. *Universal* journal wrote that “Everyone in the capital received news of the Vung Tau Charter's cancellation like great news from the battlefield.” The experience reminded journalist Nguyễn Vạn Hồng of the stories of Bastille Day in Paris on July 14, 1789, when French citizens overthrew France's tyrannical monarchy. Two weeks after General Nguyễn Khánh's resignation, General Dương Văn Minh delivered a three-part speech over National Radio (Đại Phát Thanh Quốc Gia) calling for unity and discipline as the country moved forward, reported *Civil Rights* newspaper in early September 1964. During the broadcast, General Dương Văn Minh stated that student demonstrations against Nguyễn Khánh's government had helped convince military leaders to repeal the controversial Vung Tau Charter. General Dương Văn Minh considered the student opposition to the Vung Tau Charter a “brave” act, as brave as the student protests against Ngô Đình Diệm's government during the First Republic.<sup>73</sup>

71 Quách Thị Trang memorial monument remains erected before Ben Thanh market to this day but has been re-purposed politically. A replica statue of Quach Thi Trang can be found at Bách Tùng Diệp park at the corner of Nam Kỳ Khởi Nghĩa and Lý Tự Trọng, near the General Science Library.

72 “[Student demonstration photo]”, *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Aug. 26, 1964): 2.

73 “Trung tướng Dương Văn Minh gửi quốc dân đồng bào và sinh viên, học sinh,” *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 7, 1964): 4.



A family photograph of Quách Thị Trang.<sup>74</sup>

In the South Vietnamese press, journalists evoked or directly credited the late Quách Thị Trang with inspiring Nguyễn Khánh's resignation and the Vung Tau Charter's nullification. On August 26, 1964, *Action* newspaper stated that Quách Thị Trang lived in the minds of males and females everywhere, forever.<sup>75</sup> Her actions against Ngô Đình Diệm's government ensured that society would no longer “accept any demonic bloodthirsty monster in this country anymore!” The August 1964 edition of *Love (Tình Thương)* magazine, founded and run by students at Saigon's Medical University, maintained that students should commemorate Quách Thị Trang's death by continuing her struggle.<sup>76</sup> The magazine asserted that corruption, injustice, and tyranny did not cease completely with Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow. Two months later, *Universal* journal published “Making History: The generation of Quách Thị Trang.” Written by the journalist and literary critic Thiều Sơn, the article attributed Nguyễn Khánh's resignation and the Vung Tau Charter's revoking to the deceased teenage female martyr.<sup>77</sup> Thiều Sơn, a former political prisoner during the First Republic, stated that Quách Thị Trang's death had “strengthened” and “welded” the “ranks” of youths together, making Nguyễn Khánh's overthrow possible. Thiều Sơn considered the post-1963 period's growing number of politically active youths directly related to and continuous with Quách Thị Trang's political activism during the late-First Republic. He perceived student activists of the post-1963 era as part of the same collective peer group espousing the same basic critical, devoted political character, the “QTT generation.” An outspoken front against authoritarian governance, interregnum-era students played an important role shaping the country's political landscape. This historic developmental role, framed through public discourse on

74 “[Quách Thị Trang photograph],” *Ngày Nay* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 25, 1964): 1.

75 “Quách T. Trang sống mãi trong lòng người dân,” *Hành Động* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 26, 1964): 2.

76 Phạm Văn Lương, “Tưởng Niệm Quách Thị Trang,” *Tình Thương* (Aug. 1964): iv.

77 Thiều Sơn, “Thế hệ Quách Thị Trang làm lịch sử,” *Phổ Thông* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 1, 1964): 84-88.

Quách Thị Trang, emphasized a reliance by Ngô Đình Diệm’s government on police brutality, lack of transparency, and the repression of civil society.

### Critics of the 1959 Family Laws

Critics of the Family Laws passed by the National Assembly in 1959 constitute another group within South Vietnamese society dissatisfied with the leadership of political elites during the First Republic. Trần Lệ Xuân exhibited significant influence over female society and its development as a leading member of the National Assembly. The wife of Ngô Đình Diệm’s brother and main adviser Ngô Đình Nhu, Trần Lệ Xuân also served as the unofficial First Lady due to the president’s celibate lifestyle. Her influence on social development materialized most notably through the so-called national Family Laws (“Luật Gia Đình”), which she authored and sponsored to “strengthen family purity and end all injustices against Vietnamese women.”<sup>78</sup> Trần Lệ Xuân’s proposed Family Laws had more than one hundred articles spanning five sections: marriage qualifications, property, separation, violations of marriage obligations, and death. While designed to improve the family and provide women greater rights and quality of life, paradoxically, the proposed Family Laws restricted the rights of women in at least one key arena. Influenced by her Catholic orientation and the Catholic Church’s conservative attitude towards marriage, Article 56 strictly prohibited divorce. President Ngô Đình Diệm had the power to rule on rare special cases after meeting with court authorities, but Trần Lệ Xuân never specified what constituted a special case scenario. Article 57 mandated that unhappy spouses only had the right to petition the courts for a separation.<sup>79</sup> A stage of physical and emotional detachment, a separation did not legally recognize the marriage as dissolved. In theory, banning divorce in favor of separation encouraged spouses to work out their differences knowing that they could never marry anyone again. Criticized publicly during and after the First Republic, the Family Laws’ insistence on separation over divorce demonstrated Trần Lệ Xuân and the National Assembly’s disregard for public opinion.

South Vietnam’s National Assembly, an elected unicameral legislature with few constitutional checks and balances, began debating and tacitly approving the Family Laws in late-1957. The scope and complexity of the Family Laws pushed their official implementation back until early-1959. Leading up to their passage, society remained legally bound to a complex, disparate set of laws, codes, and ordinances covering marriage and the family drafted by colonial lawmakers. These lawmakers gave woman a legal status equivalent to an “incompetent” adolescent, “stopping the progress of Vietnamese women,” argued Trần Lệ Xuân<sup>80</sup> French colonial law had oppressed women by allowing polygamy and barring women from owning property. Pointing out that the country’s 1955 Constitution guaranteed men *and* women equal rights, as early as October 1957, Trần Lệ Xuân called for the National Assembly to immediately commence discussion of the Family Laws.

At least a few members of the general public expressed opposition to the proposed prohibition on divorce in the Family Laws. On January 2, 1958, *Liberty* newspaper published an open letter to the National Assembly from Trương Thị Hồng Hoa addressing the body’s ongoing discussions over banning divorce. She raised several salient points against implementing the prohibition, offering a multitude of scenarios to support her position. If a spouse committed a felony crime and had to serve a

78 Trần Lệ Xuân, *Luật Gia Đình (Luật số 1/59 ngày 2-1-1959)* (Sài Gòn: Quốc Hội, 1959): 5.

79 Trần Lệ Xuân, *Luật Gia Đình (Luật số 1/59 ngày 2-1-1959)* (Sài Gòn: Quốc Hội, 1959): 14; Only couples married from between five and fifteen years had the ability to apply for a separation through the courts. Those who qualified had to meet at least one of three criteria before filing a petition: The marriage must have an adulterous spouse, a violent or abusive spouse, or a spouse who did something to bring shame to the family (e.g. murder, rape, etc.).

80 Trần Lệ Xuân, *Luật Gia Đình (Luật số 1/59 ngày 2-1-1959)* (Sài Gòn: Quốc Hội, 1959): 1.

life sentence, why make the other person suffer through the marriage, she asked. What if a spouse left their partner and defected to the communist side? What if a spouse deceived the other about their romantic intentions or committed adultery? If a spouse did commit adultery, how can the National Assembly ask them to live together or stay married forever, she submitted. Even if the adulterer received harsh punishment from authorities, forcing the couple to remain married purportedly only brought more shame to the faithful spouse. If the couple have any children they “will be miserable and trampled on” because of all the fighting. Granting couples the right to divorce put children in a less difficult situation and prevented many spousal murders and suicides from happening, she argued. Failing to allow divorce would allegedly discredit the National Assembly as a representative body of the people and probably make ‘Free World’ foreigners laugh at South Vietnam’s perceived backward character. She urged representatives of the National Assembly to poll their constituents and consider their opposition to passing legislation banning divorce.<sup>81</sup>

The next week, *Liberty* newspaper published another open letter to the National Assembly from a female critic opposed to the Family Laws, Nguyễn Thị Minh Tam. The author stated that Trần Lê Xuân’s proposed law on marriage currently under consideration by the legislature had caused “many questions and concerns for women in particular and the entire nation in general.” She found the first chapters on marriage “extremely annoying,” particularly banning divorce. Married to a loveless husband, the author described the state of her marriage as “excessively cold-blooded.” Nguyễn Thị Minh Tam believed that she should have the legal right to dissolve her irreparable marriage. Forcing separation on unhappy couples equated to “endless,” “lifelong” sadness for men and women. Faced with the prospect of living alone the rest of her life and never remarrying because of the looming passage of the Family Laws, “what else can I hope to live for?”, she asked. Without the ability to divorce her husband, she confessed that she might have to find another way out, including suicide or attempted murder.<sup>82</sup>

On January 17, 1958, Congress convened to discuss and vote on Articles 56 and 57 concerning divorce and separation. Speaking at the forum, National Assembly member Trần Quang Ngọc repeated many times his opinion about the urgent social need for the Family Laws. Attempting to politicize Article 56, Trần Quang Ngọc suggested that the disruptive nature of the civil war mandated that South Vietnamese families stay together permanently. To allow divorce only helped the communists, he indirectly argued. Another member, Nguyễn Văn Cẩn, expressed reservations about the Family Law. He raised attention to the perceived influence of Catholicism on Articles 56, the religion practiced by President Ngô Đình Diệm and his family. He commented that prohibiting divorce “is a Catholic concept,” and Catholics only represented a statistical minority in South Vietnam. He felt “so lonely” because the majority of his peers in the National Assembly supported Article 56 and he did not. He opined that their spirit of service to the human race “is too poor” and their spirit of service to the majority of South Vietnamese people even poorer. He asked his peers to remove Article 56 from the Family Laws. National Assembly member Nguyễn Văn Liên responded to Nguyễn Văn Cẩn criticisms of the divorce prohibition by touting the function of separation. Article 57 provided unhappy spouses with “an escape” because it “has the effect of soothing the hatred and making them forgive each other” until they “look forward to living together again.” He pointed out that Article 56 empowered President Ngô Đình Diệm to approve divorces in special cases, but intimated that only those who lost a spouse may qualify. No one “dared” to allow someone to remarry if their spouse remained alive. He concluded: “prohibiting divorce is a revolutionary law to strengthen the Vietnamese nation and family,”

81 Trương Thị Hồng Hoa, “Diễn đàn Tự Do: Bức thư ngỏ kính gửi quý vị dân biểu Quốc Hội về vấn đề cấm ly dị,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 2, 1958): 3.

82 Nguyễn Thị Minh Tam, “Diễn đàn Tự Do: Chung quanh dự án Luật Gia Đình thư ngỏ kính gửi Quốc Hội Việt Nam về vấn đề cấm ly hôn,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 9, 1958): 3.

helping us to gain more prestige in the eyes of the free world. At the end of the January 17, 1958 session, the National Assembly voted to prohibit divorce 92 to 4.<sup>83</sup>

By late-May 1958, the National Assembly had finished voting on all 122 articles of the Family Laws and awaited their implementation. Most of the body agreed to delay the Family Laws' implementation several months to better prepare society. A few members of the National Assembly made last-minute pleas to delay the Family Laws even further. At a session held on May 29, 1958, Nguyễn Huy Chương stated that public opinion and some newspapers (like *Tự Do* and *Ngôn Luận*) had attacked the proposed Family Laws. A major critic himself, he asserted that "this law will disturb the lives of the people and the order of society." Instead of rolling out the Family Laws in six months, as suggested by Trần Lệ Xuân, he proposed a ten years hiatus on the legislation's implementation, allowing authorities time to educate the public about the Family Laws' dozens of articles and their potential impact. Another critic on the National Assembly, Nguyễn Đình Hiếu, suggested postponing the Family Laws one year to lessen public resentment. At one point, he raised concerns about the authority given to President Ngô Đình Diệm when deciding matters of divorce. The President would have the power to grant divorce requests, but what happened if the president took a wife and then later wanted to divorce her, he controversially asked. Trần Lệ Xuân refused to accept criticisms from dissenters and affirmed her support for the Family Laws' implementation in six months. Since establishing the Republic of Vietnam only took three years, the country had a track record of success and could handle the new legislation, she argued. Congressman Cao Văn Tường took to the podium and expressed disdain for public criticism of the Family Laws. His perceived vulgar attitude towards the public surprised many people, wrote *Liberty* newspaper. The newspaper openly questioned the professional merits of an elected member of the National Assembly who despised public opinion and did not care about the people's aspirations.<sup>84</sup> A few days later, the newspaper published a cartoon criticizing Cao Văn Tường titled "Muzzling the People." The image showed Cao Văn Tường forcefully covering a citizen's mouth with a bound copy of the Family Laws to keep the critic from speaking out against the legislation.<sup>85</sup> The image foreshadowed the inevitable passage of the Family Laws, which Congress finally implemented on January 2, 1959.

Following the overthrow of President Ngô Đình Diệm's government on November 1, 1963, the Family Laws and Article 56 remained on the books to the disappointment of many. In early-January 1964, towards the end of General Dương Văn Minh's leadership as Chief of State, the nullification of the Family Laws seemed an imminent possibility. On January 3, 1964, *New Day* (*Ngày Mới*) newspaper managed by the Đại Việt nationalist party member Nghiêm Kế Tổ reported that the Ministry of Justice had just completed a decree to amend the Family Laws. An anonymous "special source" inside or closely affiliated with the Ministry of Justice told the publication that administrators planned to replace the Family Laws because of their "cruel," "anti-democratic" character, which had caused "so much trouble in the family." Supportive of the move, *New Day* asserted that, following the 1963 "revolution," the Family Laws had raised "many questions" among the people, leading to calls on Dương Văn Minh's government to repeal the law. Based on the information provided by the special source, the newspaper informed readers that new legislation designed to replace the Family Laws would allow divorce, provide equal rights for men and women, and uphold the ban on polygamy.<sup>86</sup>

83 "Quốc Hội suýt biến thành tao đàn . . .," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 20, 1958): 4.

84 "Dự luật gia đình bị công kích kịch liệt giữa Quốc Hội," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: May 31, 1958): 4.

85 "Chặn Họng Thiên Hạ!," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: May 5, 1958): 1; The cartoon's caption read: "Representative Cao Văn Tường's method of resolving the people's questions."

86 "Luật gia đình mới" cho phép ly dị, nhìn nhận con rơi, cấm đa thê, nhận nguyên tắc nam nữ bình quyền," *Ngày Mới* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 3, 1964): 1.



The next day, on January 4, 1964 *Solidarity* newspaper published “How did Diệm, Nhu, and Lê Xuân harm women through the Family Laws?” The editorial called on authorities to extinguish the Family Laws, which “greatly harmed [South] Vietnamese women.” Denying wives the right to divorce their husbands made no sense and only caused “suffering.” Binding the wife and husband legally through a separation kept many unhappy couples together, prolonging the unhappiness and increasing the chances of conflict and violence. Separated wives who moved on with their lives had no legal recourse to remarry if they fell in love again. Having an adulterous husband even precluded a wife from receiving a divorce, *Solidarity* newspaper complained. Wives had the ability to report their spouses to police for adultery, an offense punishable by prison time, but relative few came forward. Reporting husbands to police took an important source of labor and alimony away from many families, leaving many housewives and their children in poverty. The Family Laws did require at-fault husbands to support their separated wives financially, but many husbands hid their income and property to justify the termination of financial benefits. The editorial closed by stating that Trần Lê Xuân “is the enemy of the Vietnamese family and society.”<sup>87</sup>

The same day, the conservative Catholic-oriented newspaper *Construction (Xây Dựng)*, edited by Nguyễn Quang Lãm, expressed indirect criticism of the Family Laws. In response to the prevailing restrictions on divorce, an employee of the paper encouraged dissatisfied couples to circumvent the Family Laws by applying for a divorce abroad. The publication informed readers of the situation playing out in Mexico, which had a liberal divorce policy. Every year, an average of 10,000 foreigners from countries with restrictive divorce laws traveled to Mexico to apply for a divorce. The Mexican court granted applicants a divorce within minutes for the cost of only five hundred dollars. Purportedly, many Western lawmakers criticized the Mexican courts for allowing indiscriminate divorce because it “sabotages people’s families.” Given the building climate of international pressure on Mexican leaders to make divorce more difficult, the newspaper encouraged South Vietnamese spouses in unhappy marriages to travel to Mexico before authorities there changed the law.<sup>88</sup>

As it turned out, revising the Family Laws never materialized under Dương Văn Minh’s government. Authorities had the opportunity to amend the Family Laws, but, for unknown reasons, failed to introduce new legislation before General Nguyễn Khánh carried out a successful military coup on January 30, 1964. Under Nguyễn Khánh, society continued to wait for officials to dissolve or revise the Family Laws. By mid-1964, the public became more outspoken about the matter. On June 19, 1964, *Liberty* newspaper published a letter from an anonymous citizen named “TTM” about the Family Laws. Addressed to General Nguyễn Khánh, the letter stated that the November 1, 1963 coup represented “a typhoon that blew away all the evils of the tyrannical dictatorship,” under which the people had “suffered” for almost a decade. The author identified several perceived injustices committed against society by Ngô Đình Diệm’s government, including religious persecution, grievous business practices, unjust taxes, and the Family Laws. The author, probably a woman based on her middle initial, attributed the Family Laws’ passage to Trần Lê Xuân, a “lewd and depraved woman” who forced unhappy married couples to live together without the possibility of a divorce. This situation caused “many” unfortunate situations, such as husbands killing their wives or wives killing their husbands. Following the 1963 coup, General Dương Văn Minh’s government eliminated many injustices “that the entire Vietnamese people longed for,” but the Family Law remained. “We all looked forward to a new ray of light” but eight months had passed since President Ngô Đình Diệm’s overthrow and still no change. The author asked General Nguyễn Khánh to review and overturn the

87 “Bọn Diệm, Nhu, Lê Xuân đã tàn hại giới phụ nữ thế nào bằng Luật Gia đình của chúng?”, *Đoàn Kết* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 4, 1964): 4.

88 “Mười phút, 500 đô la một vụ ly dị,” *Xây Dựng* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 4, 1964): 3.

“cruel” Family Laws so that society “can have a way to escape from life and death.” If the government did not take such measures, it risked “step[ping] back on the wrong path of the old regime.”<sup>89</sup>

A few weeks later, on July 5, 1964, the satirical newspaper *Basket of Ducks* (*Giỏ Vịt*) edited by journalist Tóc Móc published a one-panel cartoon expressing criticism of the Family Laws and Trần Lê Xuân. Drawn by the artist Thái Hưng, the image showed a woman resembling Trần Lê Xuân (down to her trademark beehive hair style and collarless áo dài) angrily confronting and restraining a woman for wearing a two-piece bikini in public. In Trần Lê Xuân’s left hand, she held a bound hardback copy of the Family Laws up to the woman’s face. “As long as we follow Bà Cố [Trần Lê Xuân] we will be good,” she exclaimed to the woman, pointing to the front cover of the Family Laws with her right hand. “The Family Law will exist for a long time, okay?,” she insisted. The woman wearing the bikini looked shocked. Reflective of the perceived oppressive nature of the Family Laws on female society, a length of rope bound her wrists tightly at the front, presumably tied by Trần Lê Xuân.<sup>90</sup>

Conscious of the public dissatisfaction for the Family Laws, authorities eventually overturned the controversial legislation. On July 23, 1964, General Nguyễn Khánh’s government implemented a new series of laws to replace the Family Laws formerly known as Decree No. 15/64. As recorded by the yearly government publication *Legal Reference Collection* (*Quy Pháp Vựng Tập*), not to mention newspapers like *Present Day* (*Ngày Nay*), *Civil Rights* (*Dân Quyền*), and *Echo* (*Tiếng Vang*), Article 1 repealed the Family Laws.<sup>91</sup> Article 63 stated that spouses may apply for divorce or separation after two years of marriage and expanded the required criteria applicants must meet before applying for a divorce.<sup>92</sup> Decree No. 15/64 mandated that a divorced woman must wait a period of 300 days to remarry following the second court-mandated mediation during the divorce process.<sup>93</sup> While these new laws imposed some legal restrictions on the romantic lives of South Vietnamese women, they afforded female society much greater freedom to divorce and separate from their husbands compared to the Family Laws.

Several days after the passage of Decree No. 15/64, *Action* newspaper published an editorial expressing appreciation for the overturning of the Family Laws. Since November 1963, of all the attempts to move on from Ngô Đình Diệm’s leadership, the abolition of the Family Laws “has probably been one of the most popular.” It “shed a ray of hope in the darkness of the sky.” Without the Family Laws’ repudiation, the Revolution of November 1963 remained an incomplete Revolution, the editorial argued. “All the people” welcomed the decision of General Nguyễn Khánh’s government to abolish the Family Laws, which left “tens of thousands of victims” in its wake.<sup>94</sup>

89 TTM, “Luật Gia Đình: Lá thư ngỏ,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 19, 1964): 2.

90 Thái Hưng, “Untitled Family Laws cartoon,” *Giỏ Vịt* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 5, 1964): 4.

91 Phủ Chủ Tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, *Quy Pháp Vựng Tập, Quyển VII, 1964* (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1965): 136; “Luật mới về hôn phối thay thế bộ luật gia đình của Trần Lê Xuân,” *Ngày Nay* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 28, 1964): 1; “Luật Gia Đình của Trần Lê Xuân bị Bãi Bỏ,” *Tiếng Vang* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 28, 1964): 1; “Sắc Luật Số 15/64 Ngày 23-7-1964 Bãi Bỏ Luật Gia Đình,” *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 6, 1964): 4.

92 Phủ Chủ Tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, *Quy Pháp Vựng Tập, Quyển VII, 1964* (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1965): 150-1; “Luật mới về hôn phối thay thế bộ luật gia đình của Trần Lê Xuân,” *Ngày Nay* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 29, 1964): 3; “Luật Gia Đình của Trần Lê Xuân bị Bãi Bỏ,” *Tiếng Vang* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 1, 1964): 2; “Sắc Luật Số 15/64 Ngày 23-7-1964 Bãi Bỏ Luật Gia Đình,” *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 12, 1964): 3; The marriage could have an adulterous spouse, a spouse convicted of a felony, a violent or abusive spouse, a spouse who abandoned the family, or a missing spouse whose whereabouts cannot be verified

93 Phủ Chủ Tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, *Quy Pháp Vựng Tập, Quyển VII, 1964* (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1965): 156; “Luật mới về hôn phối thay thế bộ luật gia đình của Trần Lê Xuân,” *Ngày Nay* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 2, 1964): 3; “Luật Gia Đình của Trần Lê Xuân bị Bãi Bỏ,” *Tiếng Vang* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 4, 1964): 2; “Sắc Luật Số 15/64 Ngày 23-7-1964 Bãi Bỏ Luật Gia Đình,” *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 14, 1964): 3.

94 “Đã bãi bỏ Luật Gia Đình, bao giờ bãi bỏ tàn tích cũ?,” *Hành Động* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 27, 1964): 1, 5.

The next month, starting on August 23, 1964, the lawyer Phạm Thanh discussed the country's new divorce law in the activist-oriented newspaper *Discourse (Nghị Luận)*, also managed by the Đại Việt nationalist party member Nghiêm Kế Tổ. Responding to reader demands to have a more clear understanding of the divorce law, Phạm Thanh wrote a ten-part article on the topic.<sup>95</sup> The author complained that the 1959 Family Laws gave President Ngô Đình Diệm the power to grant divorces in special cases, but lawmakers never specified what constituted a special case.<sup>96</sup> Strictly prohibiting divorce had created an “aggressive” environment for husbands and wives with the potential of leading to “disaster.”<sup>97</sup> “How many people have been forced to live awkwardly in constant anguish, in a forced family setting, in a state of always stalking each other with hostile eyes . . . ?” he asked.<sup>98</sup> Perceived as significantly flawed, the Family Law “trampled on human values.”<sup>99</sup> The “fake” law of separation, the only solution offered to discordant couples, failed to resolve marital problems and only caused resentment and hatred. Spouses had the option to live in different residences temporarily during their separation, but the legal bonds of wedlock still existed, preventing a “smooth escape” for families living in difficult situations. The lawyer pointed out that the separation law left ambiguous how to deal with disputes related to personal property.<sup>100</sup> He maintained that giving couples the right to divorce had “undeniable benefits” because not “every family in society is homogeneous at all.”<sup>101</sup> Phạm Thanh's concluding article, published on September 3, 1964, asserted that Decree No. 15/64 made the divorce process relatively fast and easy to avoid prolonging the disharmony and suffering of people who no longer wanted to live together.<sup>102</sup>

### Performing Artists

Within the framework of critical public discourse on President Ngô Đình Diệm's government post-November 1963, performing artists contributed much to the conversation. Commentary from sources during and after the interregnum period illustrate the perceived propagandized state of the performing arts under President Ngô Đình Diệm. Print media from the interregnum period shows that, during the later stages of the First Republic, cải lương, a female-dominated profession considered South Vietnam's most popular public art form, entered a professional crisis.<sup>103</sup> Attempting to turn the tide of the Vietnamese civil war culturally and psychologically, starting in the early-1960s, Ngô Đình Diệm's government encouraged, if not, forced, cải lương singing troupes to fall in line with its pro-war propaganda objectives. This highly-politicized campaign to militarize theatrical performances and, by association, theatergoers, devastated the theatrical industry psychologically, artistically, and financially. Among theatrical performers, particularly those associated with cải lương, morale, creativity, and profits reached an all-time low. Many performers abandoned the profession altogether. The writings of Phạm Duy, particularly his post-1975 memoirs, shed additional light on the impact of propaganda on the performing arts. An iconic singer-songwriter who broke with the Viet Minh in the 1940s, Phạm

95 Phạm Thanh, “Giải đáp thắc mắc chung về vấn đề ly dị (I),” *Nghị Luận* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 23, 1964): 2.

96 Phạm Thanh, “Giải đáp thắc mắc chung về vấn đề ly dị (III),” *Nghị Luận* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 25, 1964): 2.

97 Phạm Thanh, “Giải đáp thắc mắc chung về vấn đề ly dị (II),” *Nghị Luận* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 24, 1964): 2; Phạm Thanh, “Giải đáp thắc mắc chung về vấn đề ly dị (III),” *Nghị Luận* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 25, 1964): 2.

98 Phạm Thanh, “Giải đáp thắc mắc chung về vấn đề ly dị (III),” *Nghị Luận* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 25, 1964): 2.

99 Phạm Thanh, “Giải đáp thắc mắc chung về vấn đề ly dị (IV),” *Nghị Luận* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 26, 1964): 2.

100 Phạm Thanh, “Giải đáp thắc mắc chung về vấn đề ly dị (III),” *Nghị Luận* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 25, 1964): 2.

101 Phạm Thanh, “Giải đáp thắc mắc chung về vấn đề ly dị (II),” *Nghị Luận* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 24, 1964): 2.

102 Phạm Thanh, “Giải đáp thắc mắc chung về vấn đề ly dị (IX),” *Nghị Luận* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 3, 1964): 2.

103 For more information about the history and characteristics of renovated folk musical theater, see Trần Văn Khải, *Nghệ Thuật Sân Khấu Việt Nam: Hát Bội, Cải Lương, Thoại Kịch, Thú Xem Diễn Kịch* (Sài Gòn: Khai Trí, 1970) and Trần Văn Khê, *La Musique Vietnamiennne Traditionnelle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962): 90-4.

Duy worked for Ngô Đình Diệm's government as a low-level civil servant for several years. His writings discuss the larger impact of propaganda on the performing arts going back to the mid-1950s, and corroborate interregnum-era accounts about the negative impact of propaganda on the cải lương industry starting in the early-1960s.

An official named Ngô Trọng Hiếu oversaw the government's campaign to censor and control South Vietnam's cải lương industry. Born in Cochinchina's Binh Duong province during the second decade of the twentieth century, Ngô Trọng Hiếu (also known as Paulus Hiếu) served Ngô Đình Diệm's government from inception to demise.<sup>104</sup> In 1955, after Ngô Đình Diệm became president, Ngô Đình Diệm appointed Ngô Trọng Hiếu General Manager of the Treasury. In 1961, after multiple posts, Ngô Trọng Hiếu became Minister of Civil Affairs (Bộ trưởng Công Dân Vụ), his final assignment with Ngô Đình Diệm's administration. As Minister of Civil Affairs, Ngô Trọng Hiếu launched and administered the government's campaign to manage and further propagandize popular culture. To inspire national sentiment and cultivate a more fervent public wartime mentality, Ngô Đình Diệm's government gradually shaped the performing arts, including cải lương, into a hardened tool of political and martial indoctrination. Thế Phong, a writer and former “political lecturer” formerly employed by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, stated in his 1970 memoir that artistic freedom tightened (“dự định thắt chặt tự do văn nghệ”) under Ngô Trọng Hiếu.<sup>105</sup> Gradually, the autonomy and leadership role of artists diminished in the performing arts. Ngô Trọng Hiếu “only allow[ed] government officials to run the arts.” To better control musicians on the grass roots level, authorities required independent musicians to gain permission to perform.

Following the overthrow of Ngô Đình Diệm's government in November 1963 coup, various artists and journalists discussed the perceived negative impact of propaganda on the cải lương industry. *People (Dân Tộc)* newspaper considered the campaign an important topic of public discussion. On January 11, 1964, in the newspaper's third issue, the publication addressed the state of cải lương during the First Republic years. According to the journalist Phong Vân, Ngô Đình Diệm's government had censored the cải lương industry with “increasing intensity” (“ngày càng gắt gao”) starting in 1962.<sup>106</sup> Mật Vụ (Secret Police) agents purportedly forbade performers from “humiliating” the President in their works. One one occasion, authorities took issue with Hoàng Mai's 1949 cải lương drama “Tây Thi, gái nước Việt” (“Tây Thi, a Viet girl”), which experienced a popular resurgence in late-1962. Authorities demanded that the troupe cut (“chặt”) the part of King Ngô Phù Sai, who shared the same family name as Ngô Đình Diệm, from the performance. Phong Vân did not explain the reasoning behind the alleged order, but literary scholarship shows that the drama portrayed Ngô Phù Sai as an irresponsible, lustful, failed leader. Ngô Phù Sai became infatuated with Tây Thi, leading him to neglect his political responsibilities and eventually lose the kingdom.<sup>107</sup> This portrayal clashed with the State-approved portrayal of Ngô Đình Diệm as bachelor who loved South Vietnam alone and abstained from pursuing women romantically. The perceived “hostile” (“thù địch”) attitude of Ngô Đình Diệm's government toward cải lương composers adversely impacted the profession, asserted *People (Dân Tộc)* newspaper.

104 Trần Văn Minh, “Thử bàn về vấn đề trung lập,” *Quê Hương* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 1961): 10; In 1957, Ngô Đình Diệm appointed Ngô Trọng Hiếu ambassador to Cambodia. His two-year tenure in Phnom Penh ended in controversy. In early-1959, the Cambodian government accused Ngô Trọng Hiếu of conspiring with the Khmer dissident Dap Chuôn to overthrow Crown Prince Sihanouk. Phnom Penh demanded the diplomat's resignation. For the next three years, Ngô Trọng Hiếu advised junior staff members of the government in Saigon; Thế Phong, *Nhà Văn Tác Phẩm Cuộc Đời* (Sài Gòn: Đại Ngã, 1970): 159; Huỳnh Bá Thành, *Ký sự nhân vật* (TPHCM: NXB Trẻ, 2002): 303.

105 Thế Phong, *Nhà Văn Tác Phẩm Cuộc Đời* (Sài Gòn: Đại Ngã, 1970): 180-1.

106 Phong Vân, “Chế độ Ngô Đình Diệm: Kiểm duyệt từng tích với tinh thần thù địch dân chúng,” *Dân Tộc* (Sài Gòn, Jan. 11, 1964): 4, 2.

107 Vũ Hạnh and Nguyễn Ngọc Phan, *Văn Học Thời Kỳ 1945-1975 ở Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh* (TPHCM: NXB Văn Hóa Sài Gòn, 2008): 111-114.

The climate of control looming over the creative process made it difficult for some writers to compose dramas. Cải lương “was a reflection of life,” but discussing life during the First Republic had potential risks. Fearful of “teasing” (“khêu móc”) Ngô Đình Diệm's government in their work and allegedly facing arrest (“bắt tù”) by security forces, some writers lost interest in composing dramas and put the pen down altogether.<sup>108</sup>

*Outspoken* (*Nói Thẳng*) newspaper, chaired by the poet Trần Đồng Vọng, discussed the cải lương industry under President Ngô Đình Diệm a few weeks after *People* newspaper. In the paper's January 30, 1964 debut edition, editors included two articles on the history of South Vietnam's cải lương industry during and after the First Republic. Both articles took a critical view of the former regime's campaign to propagandize cải lương. The first article, written by the journalist Trọng Minh, referred to Civil Affairs Minister Ngô Trọng Hiếu as “malicious” (“thâm độc”) and “sinister” (“nham hiểm”). As Minister of Civil Affairs, Ngô Trọng Hiếu had “attempt[ed] to crush the art industry by forcing all writers to bend their pen” to the government's political will. The narrow spectrum of appropriate content approved for public consumption by the government led to predictable, boring theatrical dramas. Devoid of variety and artistic integrity, public interest waned and bottomed out.<sup>109</sup> The paper's second article on cải lương, written by the journalist Ms. Mộng Loan, depicted the cải lương industry as “completely deadlocked” creatively prior to the November 1963 coup. Before the government took over the industry, theatrical arts had provided society a distraction from politics and the Vietnamese civil war. This distraction no longer existed by the early-1960s. The proliferation of politically-motivated theatrical narratives turned many theatergoers off. Patrons began to seek out other entertainment options. They attended cinemas, relaxed in tea rooms, and listened to other genres of music.<sup>110</sup> The once-popular art form of cải lương became increasingly unpopular and stigmatized.

As patrons of cải lương performances dissipated, the cải lương industry fell on hard economic times, particularly starting in early-1963. Wages reached “extreme” lows for performers, according to *Outspoken* newspaper. One notable troupe, The Trâm Vàng (Golden Hairpins), struggled to stay afloat. No longer able to compete financially with industry icons like the Thanh Minh-Thanh Nga troupe, the Golden Hairpin's founders Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Trâm and Mr. Nguyễn Văn Lợi fell into massive debt. Their total loss amounted to some 2 million đồng (approximately \$27,000). Unable to repay their debt, the Nguyễn's disbanded the Golden Hairpins in 1963. Overcome with grief, the couple's daughter Nguyễn Kim Loan attempted suicide. Another large theater troupe, Hoa Sen (the Lotus singers), also experienced financial hardship. Founded in the 1940s, the group's figurehead Bầu Cao revealed to journalist Mộng Loan in early-1964 that he had never been poorer. He never dissolved the Lotus singers, but dire economic conditions precluded the troupe from functioning. Mộng Loan considered Bầu Cao's story a testament to the problematic nature and “tragic” impact of the propaganda campaign instituted by Ngô Đình Diệm's government. In addition to the Golden Hairpins and the Lotus singers, various other smaller cải lương troupes had no choice but to disband. These groups included Năm Công, Thanh Hiệp, and Bầu Tám Chương. Mộng Loan commented that so many troupes had dissolved during the late-First Republic that she could not remember them all.<sup>111</sup>

Concurrent with post-November 1963 commentary from *People* and *Outspoken* newspapers on the state of the cải lương industry during the late-First Republic, multiple other interregnum-era publication echoed similar criticisms. In January 1964, the weekly arts and entertainment magazine *Drama* (*Kịch Ảnh*) featured a lengthy article on the cải lương industry pre-November 1963. Written by

108 Phong Vân, “Chế độ Ngô Đình Diệm: Kiểm duyệt tòng tích với tinh thần thù địch dân chúng,” *Dân Tộc* (Sài Gòn, Jan. 11, 1964): 4, 2.

109 Trọng Minh, “1964: Sân Khấu Cải Lương sẽ đi về đâu?,” *Nói Thẳng* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 30, 1964): 3.

110 Cô Mộng Loan, “Tình Hình Cải Lương Trong Năm Qua,” *Nói Thẳng* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 30, 1964): 3.

111 Cô Mộng Loan, “Tình Hình Cải Lương Trong Năm Qua,” *Nói Thẳng* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 30, 1964): 3.

the cải lương aficionado and beat reporter Sĩ Trung, the article maintained that the theater industry had regressed significantly during the early-1960s. In order to “sanitize” (“lành mạnh hóa”) cải lương, Ngô Trọng Hiếu and the Ministry of Civil Affairs had “brainwashed” (“tẩy não”) composers through public meetings known as drama workshops (cuộc hội thảo ca kịch). At these workshops, which took place at the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Censorship Board, or locations associated with the Mật Vụ, the so-called “healing” of the theatrical arts took place. The Censorship Board and the Ministry of Civil Affairs promoted musical compositions with the strongest fighting spirit (“chiến đấu tính”) possible.<sup>112</sup>

By mid-1962, wrote Sĩ Trung, the majority of the country's major cải lương troupes had little choice but to embrace the propaganda campaign. Troupes regularly performed composition “stereotyped after the so-called 'battlefield drama’” (“theo cái gọi là 'tuồng chiến đấu.’”). Even the Thanh Minh-Thanh Nga troupe, which arguably aspired to improve the country's theatrical profession more than any other troupe, fell into line. The downward turn imposed on the cải lương industry by Ngô Trọng Hiếu transformed South Vietnam's theatrical culture into an uncreative, unpopular, economically stagnant art form. The propagandized and “childish” (“ấu trĩ”) nature of cải lương “paralyzed” (“tê liệt”) theatrical composers.<sup>113</sup> Disinterested in propagandized entertainment, intellectuals and the general public began shunning theater. Other setbacks during the late-First Republic further burdened the industry's prospects: ticket prices increased, a government-imposed curfew inhibited night performances, and the prevailing climate of violence during the Buddhist-Intellectual Crisis (from May 1963 to November 1963) made many patrons less interested to seek out entertainment. Tickets for many shows went unsold. The income of large singing troupes like Thanh Minh-Thanh Nga decreased significantly, while smaller troupes fell into a state of more extreme economic crisis. Most all stage performers purportedly felt “nauseous” (“buồn nôn”) about the tragic state of theatrical arts.<sup>114</sup>

Following multiple years of increasing reliance on propaganda by President Ngô Đình Diệm's government, the dilapidated cải lương industry saw some improvements after the November 1963 coup. The country's new political leadership did not help the struggling industry financially, *Outspoken* newspaper lamented in January 1964, but did “liberate” the artistic community mentally. With exception to pornographic, pro-neutralist, and pro-communist content, writers had the freedom to promote whatever themes and narratives they desired. The journalist Trọng Minh asserted that the return of non-propagandistic theatrical content would fill a “spiritual” void in society.<sup>115</sup> Other journalists had less animated views about the revolutionary impact of the November 1 coup on the cải lương industry. In September 1964, the daily newspaper *New Life* (*Sống Mới*), managed by the Mekong Delta-born novelist and journalist Dương Hà, portrayed Ngô Đình Diệm's propaganda campaign as having a lasting, more detrimental impact on the industry. The propaganda campaign of Ngô Đình Diệm's government had kept the theatrical arts “deadlocked” with no means of escape. “All compositions were confined to clichés, without a clear direction.” The industry “receded” (“thụt lùi”) and failed to meet the aspirations of the people. With the dawning of the post-November 1963 “revolutionary period,” the masses expected “a new wind to blow in and dissipate the dark clouds hovering over the theater and arts scene” (“một luồng gió mới thổi vào quét tan những mây mờ hắc ám trong làng văn nghệ sân khấu”) but the theatrical industry struggled to break free from the past. The authoritarian influence exerted over cải lương by Ngô Đình Diệm's government discouraged many artists from forging a new direction.<sup>116</sup> To make matters worse, as reported by *Drama* magazine in

112 Sĩ Trung, “Tổng kết sân khấu năm qua, Sân khấu năm mới năm cũ,” *Kịch Ảnh* (Jan. 28, 1964): 29, 31-32.

113 Sĩ Trung, “Tổng kết sân khấu năm qua, Sân khấu năm mới năm cũ,” *Kịch Ảnh* (Jan. 28, 1964): 29, 31-32.

114 Sĩ Trung, “Tổng kết sân khấu năm qua, Sân khấu năm mới năm cũ,” *Kịch Ảnh* (Jan. 28, 1964): 29, 31-32.

115 Trọng Minh, “1964: Sân Khấu Cải Lương sẽ đi về đâu?”, *Nói Thẳng* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 30, 1964): 3.

116 Nhân Gian, “Các nhà văn nghệ sân khấu nghĩ sao?”, *Sống Mới* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 21, 1964): 2, 4.

January 1965, the curfew imposed on Saigon by General Nguyễn Khánh starting in August 1964 greatly hindered the profession economically.<sup>117</sup>

Among performing artists, President Ngô Đình Diệm's attempts to control and propagandize the arts did not impact the cải lương industry alone. The life and writings of Phạm Duy, a popular modern musician and a former employee of Ngô Đình Diệm's government, portray the modern folk musical industry under Ngô Đình Diệm as subject to similar pressures. Relying on multiple sources, including Phạm Duy's postwar memoirs, an interview Phạm Duy gave to *Encyclopedia (Bách Khoa)* journal in early-1967, and Phạm Duy's 1964 musical epic *Mother Vietnam (Mẹ Việt Nam)*, this second line of discourse characterizes the history and impact of propaganda on South Vietnamese arts from the mid-1950s to the early-1960s, particularly the modern music industry.

Born in 1921 to a middle-class family in Hanoi, Phạm Duy attended Thăng Long high school in the mid-1930s.<sup>118</sup> His teachers included the future communist military leader Võ Nguyên Giáp and the future lawyer and Republican politician Trần Văn Tuyên. In the mid-1940s, Phạm Duy launched his music career with a traveling cải lương singing troupe known as Đức Huy, later known as Đức Huy-Charlot Miều.<sup>119</sup> Following the 1945 August Revolution, when a general uprising temporarily liberated Vietnam from French colonial rule, Phạm Duy joined the anti-colonial Việt Minh resistance led by Hồ Chí Minh.<sup>120</sup> Phạm Duy contributed to the movement's cause by writing many songs.<sup>121</sup> His membership in the Việt Minh lasted for six years. Phạm Duy's relationship with the Việt Minh deteriorated when leadership embraced censorship and propagandization of the arts. Authorities ruled over the art scene with an “iron hand” (“bàn tay sắt”) following the 1950 Art Conference (Đại Hội Văn Nghệ).<sup>122</sup> At the conference, which Phạm Duy attended, Việt Minh leaders “attacked” (“đả kích”) and prohibited songs perceived as harmful or useless to the war effort.<sup>123</sup> For example, the poet Tố Hữu told attendees that they could no longer perform Vọng Cổ songs because the genre had a “sentimental tone” (“âm điệu ủy mị”) and made “the listener fall asleep. . .” (“làm cho người nghe bị ru ngủ”), “dissipating the whole [war] effort” (“tiêu tan cả chí phấn đấu”). The announcement “dampened” (“bụng bảo dạ”) Phạm Duy’s spirit, but he remained silent. The next year, while stationed in Thanh Hoa, poor quality of life and the pregnancy of wife Phạm Thị Quang Thái compelled Phạm Duy to finally leave the Việt Minh.<sup>124</sup> The family fled Thanh Hoa for French-controlled Vietnam, where they lived for multiple years. In July 1954, two months after the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, Phạm Duy left Vietnam for Paris to study music.<sup>125</sup> Phạm Duy trained and studied music privately under the composer Robert Lopez.<sup>126</sup>

In 1955, Phạm Duy returned to Saigon, then part of the newly-created post-colonial state of South Vietnam administered by President Ngô Đình Diệm. The musician found work at the government-sponsored National Radio station (Đài Phát Thanh Sài Gòn). The composition of President Ngô Đình Diệm's anti-communist government had appealing qualities to Phạm Duy. Phạm Duy's friend Phạm Xuân Thái served as Minister of Information and Psychological Warfare.<sup>127</sup> Phạm

117 “Nhìn lại 12 tháng cải lương buồn thảm,” *Kịch Ảnh* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 16, 1965): 58.

118 Phạm Duy, *Hồi ức Phạm Duy: Nhớ* (HCMC: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2005): 15, 16; Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Thơ Ấu Thời Vào Đời* (USA: PDC Musical Productions, 1990): 11, 122.

119 Phạm Duy, *Hồi ức Phạm Duy: Nhớ*, 81-2; Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Thơ Ấu Thời Vào Đời*, 221.

120 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Cách Mạng Kháng Chiến* (USA: PDC Musical Productions, 1989): 32-3.

121 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Cách Mạng Kháng Chiến*, 71, 72, 76, 90, 233-4, 249-50.

122 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Cách Mạng Kháng Chiến*, 285, 286.

123 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Cách Mạng Kháng Chiến*, 288.

124 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Cách Mạng Kháng Chiến*, 311-328.

125 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Phân Chia Quốc-Cộng* (USA: PDC Musical Productions, 1991): 64-5, 69.

126 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Phân Chia Quốc-Cộng*, 72.

127 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Phân Chia Quốc-Cộng*, 65, 82.

Duy's elder brother Phạm Duy Khiêm held the position of Special Minister to the Prime Minister. The director of National Radio Đoàn Văn Cừ, who Phạm Duy knew from his time with the Viet Minh, hired Phạm Duy to conduct a modern folk band later known as Hoa Xuân.<sup>128</sup> Around this time, the country's modern folk music industry began to change. Attempting to build the fledgling post-colonial South Vietnamese state into a strong, sovereign nation, Ngô Đình Diệm's Ministry of Information “perceived the propaganda ability of the arts” as key to nation-building.<sup>129</sup> It oversaw the establishment of a pro-government music organization known as Văn Hóa Vụ (the Cultural Affairs office) to “mobilize artists to participate in political life.” Empathetic to the government's anti-communist, nation-building cause, Phạm Duy willingly participated in the propaganda campaign.

Between 1955 and 1963, Ngô Đình Diệm's government relied more and more on propaganda to advance its military and political objectives. The scholar Nu-Anh Tran maintained that South Vietnam witnessed an “intense” propaganda campaign between years 1955 and 1956.<sup>130</sup> The Ministry of Information produced a range of artistic content designed to mobilize the population and consolidate Ngô Đình Diệm's power, including modern folk songs, cải lương compositions, and poems. According to Phạm Duy, following the failed land reform campaign by Hồ Chí Minh's government in North Vietnam during the 1950s, Ngô Đình Diệm's government stepped up its cultural propaganda campaign against communism.<sup>131</sup> In 1956, the Ministry of Information launched the Tố Cộng (Denounce the Communists) campaign. As part of this campaign, authorities sought to better organize the activities of artists for propaganda purposes. National Radio in Saigon became a major hub of pro-government musical activity. Many bands came into existence around this time, but the relative harmonious state between authorities and modern folk musicians began to decline. Ngô Đình Diệm's government purportedly began replacing knowledgeable, well-connected people in the music industry with civil servants from central Vietnam “who did not have the artistic experience. . . .”<sup>132</sup> At National Radio, authorities replaced Director Đoàn Văn Cừ with the Hue-born Bửu Thọ. Redundant propaganda songs unpleasant to the audience's ears purportedly flooded the station's airwaves. Artists like Phạm Duy only managed to “leak out love songs” (“rỉ rả đưa ra những bản nhạc tình”).<sup>133</sup>

Ngô Đình Diệm's government continued to rely heavily on propaganda music to support nation-building and the war effort. In 1959, the Ministry of Information launched a music propaganda campaign to support the agrovile program (khu trù mật).<sup>134</sup> This rural program, according to the pro-government journal *Homeland (Quê Hương)*, concentrated much of the country's scattered farming populations into larger villages with “adequate security, prosperous economy, and convenient transport routes.”<sup>135</sup> The next year, following the failed November 11, 1960 coup by servicemen Nguyễn Chánh Thi and Vương Văn Đông, the government “paid more attention to propaganda” (“chú ý hơn tới công tác tuyên truyền”), wrote Phạm Duy.<sup>136</sup> In 1961, Ngô Đình Diệm's government founded the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Through this organization, Minister Ngô Trọng Hiếu “sought to win over artists and writers” (“tìm cách thu phục giới văn nghệ sĩ”). Around this time, Phạm Duy worked as a Public Service Officer for the National Film Center (Trung Tâm Điện Ảnh Quốc Gia).<sup>137</sup> Part of his job

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128 Ibid, 82, 86.

129 Ibid, 88.

130 Nhu-An Tran, *Contested Identities: Nationalism in the Republic of Vietnam (1954-1963)* (Berkeley: UC-Berkeley, dissertation, 2013): 26.

131 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Phân Chia Quốc-Cộng*, 90.

132 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Phân Chia Quốc-Cộng*, 91.

133 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Phân Chia Quốc-Cộng*, 97.

134 Ibid, 97.

135 Dư Văn Ngà, “Vị Thanh: Danh Từ Lịch Sử,” *Quê Hương* (Sài Gòn: Apr. 1960): 321.

136 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Phân Chia Quốc-Cộng*, 171.

137 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Phân Chia Quốc-Cộng*, 172.



involved “contribut[ing] to the implementation of propaganda films.” In 1962, Ngô Đình Diệm's government launched a music propaganda campaign to support the strategic hamlet (ấp chiến lược) program.<sup>138</sup> The pervading climate of propaganda did not leave much room for non-political music. Popular songs of a sentimental nature did exist during the mid-to-late First Republic, Phạm Duy maintained, but they did not have the support of the government. Authorities did not ban these songs, they purportedly tolerated them.

With the outbreak of the Buddhist-Intellectual Crisis in May 1963, Phạm Duy had mixed emotions. The protest movement made him happy because “the dictatorial government could be overthrown.” At the same time, the government's downfall “could benefit the Northern government.” A non-participant in the protests, Phạm Duy saw multiple people he admired oppose Ngô Đình Diệm's government. In June, the Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức sat down at a busy Saigon intersection and self-immolated in protest of the government's perceived anti-Buddhist stance. “I was shaken by” Thích Quảng Đức's death, Phạm Duy stated.<sup>139</sup> The next month, authorities announced their intention to bring the popular writer Nhất Linh to trial for allegedly supporting the failed November 11, 1960 coup. Before Nhất Linh's opening day in court, the literary icon committed suicide in protest of the charge. Phạm Duy had much respect for Nhất Linh's historical contributions to the development of Vietnamese literature, calling him the “soul” of the Self-Strengthening Literary Group (Tự Lực Văn Đoàn) during the 1930s.<sup>140</sup> In August, security forces arrested Phạm Duy's best friend Nguyễn Đức Quỳnh for opposing Ngô Đình Diệm's government during the Buddhist-Intellectual Crisis. A former employee of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Nguyễn Đức Quỳnh had worked closely with Ngô Trọng Hiếu to influence the cải lương industry as his main adviser (“cố vấn”).<sup>141</sup> Security forces also arrested Phạm Duy's friend Lý Đại Nguyên. Phạm Duy reacted “strongly” to these events between June and August, but he, a husband and father of four children, remained silent and continued working at the Film Center.

On November 1, 1963, General Dương Văn Minh's coup overthrew Ngô Đình Diệm's government and ended the seven-month-long Buddhist-Intellectual Crisis. In the third volume of Phạm Duy's memoirs, the musician wrote: “When the old regime [was overthrown], there was relative freedom in the country, and everyone, including students, started to have freedom of life.”<sup>142</sup> Following the November coup, Phạm Duy left his job at the National Film Center. He found work teaching at Saigon's National Music School (Trường Quốc Gia Âm Nhạc) on Nguyễn Du street.<sup>143</sup> To supplement his income, he recorded music, sang on the radio, and performed acoustic sets in tea rooms, where many youths hung out. According to the artist-journalist Tạ Ty, a friend of Phạm Duy since the First Indochina War, the November 1, 1963 coup had a career-altering impact on the musician. In Tạ Ty's 1971 biography on Phạm Duy, the author stated that Phạm Duy abandoned his music projects and “threw himself into his [new] music” following the 1963 coup.<sup>144</sup> In 1964, Phạm Duy completed *Mother Vietnam*, a four-part, twenty-one song musical epic. Phạm Duy called the work a “fervent hymn to the glory of the motherland and [her] many symbolic maternal figures immortalized in folklore.”<sup>145</sup> He centered the epic around multiple inspirational themes: “a need of love and a thirst for

138 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Phân Chia Quốc-Cộng*, 97.

139 Ibid, 177.

140 Ibid, 135.

141 During Nguyễn Đức Quỳnh's employment with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, he became acquainted with various cải lương singing troupes, including Thanh Minh, Hoa Sen, and Phước Chung (Phạm Duy, 1991: 54-5); Thế Phong, *Nhà Văn Tác Phẩm Cuộc Đời* (Sài Gòn: Đại Ngã, 1970):171.

142 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Phân Chia Quốc-Cộng*, 181.

143 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Phân Chia Quốc-Cộng*, 179.

144 Tạ Ty, *Phạm Duy còn đó nỗi buồn* (Sài Gòn: Văn Sử Học, 1971): 126.

145 Phạm Duy, *Mẹ Việt Nam* (Sài Gòn: Việt Hương, 1967): 11, 61.

peace. . .” and “to see these fundamental virtues flowering more widely throughout the present cruel world.” The singer intended youths to be the epic's main audience, his memoirs reveal. He believed that youths needed a less “decadent” form of popular music that inspired youths to sing, not just listen.<sup>146</sup> After *Mother Vietnam*, singing emerged as a popular activity among youths, Phạm Duy maintained. Young people purportedly became “strongly involved in singing” for the first time in South Vietnamese history. (“Đây là lần đầu tiên giới trẻ được tham gia mạnh mẽ vào các cuộc ca hát”).

Politics do not constitute a major theme of *Mother Vietnam*, but Phạm Duy did include a subtle but important reference to Ngô Đình Diệm's government and the November 1963 coup in the musical epic's finale. Ending the work on a joyful, auspicious note, the second to last stanza stated: “Vietnam, walking toward the future. Its sacred link guiding the world. Fighting for mankind's fate. . . .”<sup>147</sup> These lines may appear ahistorical but allude to Buddhist resistance and Ngô Đình Diệm's demise. Phạm Duy pointed out in a footnote that “martyr monks” who self-immolated during the First Republic helped forge this sacred link.<sup>148</sup> By evoking Thích Quảng Đức and other monks who gave their lives opposing Ngô Đình Diệm's government, the epic concluded by portraying Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow as historically significant to South Vietnam's development politically and socially.

### Hue Journalists

Critical attitudes towards Ngô Đình Diệm's government pervaded populations well beyond southern Vietnam and Saigon. Post-November 1963 discourse from Hue journalists shows major dissatisfaction towards Ngô Đình Diệm's family and former government existed in central Vietnam, where Ngô Đình Diệm grew up. Many citizens of Hue associated the First Republic years with oppression and dictatorship, Hue periodicals show. Prior to November 1963, since at least the late-1950s, Ngô Đình Diệm's government had ruled over Hue with a spirit of oppression arguably unmatched anywhere else in the country except Saigon or the Central Highlands. The president's 1963 toppling brought much happiness and many changes to the former imperial capital, including the press industry. A number of new print media outlets had the opportunity to form. The city had significantly fewer media outlets compared to Saigon but a few major, short-lived activist and intellectual-oriented newspapers existed, specifically *Standpoint (Lập Trường)* and *Hue Students (Sinh Viên Huế)*. Staffed by many opponents of former President Ngô Đình Diệm's government, these newspapers provided much insight into how the administration maintained its power in central Vietnam and beyond, its Machiavellian character, the impact of the November 1963 coup, and prevailing public attitudes about who authorities should legally prosecute for their crimes during the First Republic.

Criticism of Ngô Đình Diệm's former government appeared regularly in Hue's *Standpoint (Lập Trường)* newspaper. Professors Cao Huy Thuần, Lê Tuyên, and Tôn Thất Hanh of Hue University founded this newspaper in late-March 1964. A sixteen-page weekly, *Standpoint's* distribution range extended well beyond the former imperial capital. Readers throughout central and southern Vietnam enjoyed reading the paper, according to the literary scholar Hữu Tá Trần.<sup>149</sup> During the newspaper's six months of operation, its staff regularly reported on central Vietnamese society and events. When discussing Ngô Đình Diệm's former government, the publication had much to say. Many editions

146 Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Phân Chia Quốc-Cộng*, 181.

147 Phạm Duy, *Mẹ Việt Nam* (Sài Gòn: Việt Hương, 1967): 59, 81.

148 Phạm Duy, *Mẹ Việt Nam*, 81.

149 Huong Thi Diu Nguyen, *Eve of Destruction: A Social History of Vietnam's Royal City, 1957-1967* (Seattle: University of Washington, dissertation): 234; Hữu Tá Trần, *Nhìn lại một chặng đường văn học* (TPHCM: NXB Thành phố HCM, 2000): 43.

featured content critical of Ngô Đình Diệm's "corrupt," "dictatorial" government.<sup>150</sup> During the newspaper's opening months of operation, its staff heavily criticized two former high-ranking members of Ngô Đình Diệm's government, Ngô Đình Cẩn and Phan Quang Đông.

While the November 1963 deaths of President Ngô Đình Diệm and his adviser Ngô Đình Nhu devastated the leadership structure of Ngô Đình Diệm's government, several other major figures associated with Ngô Đình Diệm's former administration remained alive and wanted by General Dương Văn Minh's government.<sup>151</sup> Authorities considered Ngô Đình Cẩn and Phan Quang Đông two of the country's most wanted criminal figures. *Standpoint* wrote that Ngô Đình Cẩn, a high-ranking member of Ngô Đình Nhu's semi-clandestine Cần Lao Party, had secretly administered central Vietnam since the 1950s.<sup>152</sup> With the professional title of Supreme Adviser of Political Groups in the Central Area and Abroad (Cố vấn chỉ đạo các đoàn thể chính trị Trung Cao Hải), Ngô Đình Cẩn held no official government position. In reality, his family connections and leadership position within the Cần Lao Party enabled him to wield immense power and authority throughout Hue and central Vietnam. Ngô Đình Cẩn had so much power that *Standpoint* considered him the Ngô Đình Diệm of central Vietnam ("... Ngô đình Cẩn là Ngô đình Diệm ở miền Trung").<sup>153</sup> Phan Quang Đông, Hue's other high-ranking accused criminal figure employed by Ngô Đình Diệm's former government, ran the Hue-based national secret police apparatus known as the Secret Police (Mật Vụ). This security service controlled society through a vast network of spies operating across various strata of society. Phan Quang Đông worked closely with Ngô Đình Cẩn, who himself worked closely with high-ranking officials in Saigon. According to the former First Republic official Nguyễn Thái, the Secret Police collaborated with the Presidential Office for Political and Social Research (Sở Nghiên cứu Chính trị Xã hội), a covert national intelligence agency run by Trần Kim Tuyến out of the Presidential Palace in Saigon.<sup>154</sup> After the November 1 coup, police quickly rounded up and arrested fugitives Ngô Đình Cẩn and Phan Quang Đông.

The State charged former officials Ngô Đình Cẩn and Phan Quang Đông with various crimes: extortion, unlawful arrest, detention, torture, and murder. If convicted, the men faced the death penalty. The two defendants went to trial in early-1964. Originally, the State planned to prosecute Ngô Đình Cẩn and Phan Quang Đông together, but Ngô Đình Cẩn suddenly developed heart problems and received a temporary reprieve.<sup>155</sup> Phan Quang Đông's public trial went forward without much delay. During the trial, prosecutors demonstrated that Phan Quang Đông had ordered the torture and murder of multiple people.<sup>156</sup> Witnesses with ties to the Mật Vụ revealed the truth behind businessman Trần Bá Nam's 1958 death, previously declared a suicide by authorities. The businessman had not committed suicide by jumping off a building, as Phan Quang Đông had maintained. Intelligence agents, on direct orders from Phan Quang Đông, had thrown Trần Bá Nam off the building during a failed extortion attempt. A six-person Court composed of military and civilian judges found Phan Quang Đông guilty on March 28, 1964. He awaited execution by firing squad.

Still in poor health, Ngô Đình Cẩn's trial commenced a few weeks after the six-person Court found Phan Quang Đông guilty. At the six-day trial, the State implicated Ngô Đình Cẩn in the kidnapping, torture, and murder of Nguyễn Đắc Phương (1957), Trần Bá Nam (1958), and Võ Côn

150 Kỳ Khôi, "Hướng về nông thôn," *Lập Trường* (Huế: Apr. 11, 1964): 5; "Tám Tiếng Chuông," *Lập Trường* (Huế: May 9, 1964): 3.

151 "[untitled editorial]," *Lập Trường* (Huế: Mar. 28, 1964): 1.

152 Từ Nguyên, "Cảnh cuối cùng của màn kịch Ngô Đình Cẩn," *Lập Trường* (Huế: Apr. 25, 1964): 13.

153 "Ngô Đình Cẩn: Hành quyết hay không hành quyết?," *Lập Trường* (Huế: Apr. 25, 1964): 4.

154 Nguyen Thai, *Is South Vietnam Viable?* (Manila: Carmelo & Bauermann, Inc., 1962): 202-9.

155 Ba Cao and Sơn Trung, "Vụ Án Lịch Sử: Ngô Đình Cẩn—Phan Quang Đông," *Lập Trường* (Huế: Mar. 28, 1964): 2.

156 Nguyễn Văn Tâm, "Bản Cáo Trạng của Tòa Án Cách Mạng," *Lập Trường* (Huế: Mar. 28, 1964): 3, 14.

(1959).<sup>157</sup> Ngô Đình Cẩn denied all the charges leveled against him. He put all the blame on Phan Quang Đông. Attempting to prove his innocence, Ngô Đình Cẩn maintained that he had no real power. As a professed independent adviser with no ties to the government, he had no authority to order Phan Quang Đông or any other member of Ngô Đình Diệm's administration to do anything, he claimed. State prosecutors presented damning evidence showing that the defendant had worked for and with high-ranking members of Ngô Đình Diệm's government. As reported by *Vietnam Press*, prosecutors submitted secret communications between Ngô Đình Cẩn and Trần Kim Tuyền, chief of the Presidential Office for Political and Societal Research.<sup>158</sup> One telegram from Trần Kim Tuyền instructed Ngô Đình Cẩn to make sure that Nguyễn Đắc Phương's 1957 death looked "plausible" so that no one suspected government interference.

Testimonies by key State witnesses helped close the case against Ngô Đình Cẩn.<sup>159</sup> Ngô Đình Cẩn's personal secretary Hồ Đắc Trọng tied Ngô Đình Cẩn to the murder of contractor Nguyễn Đắc Phương. Ngô Đình Cẩn had ordered secret agents to "investigate" Nguyễn Đắc Phương, Hồ Đắc Trọng testified, after which the contractor died. Phan Quang Đông gave the most damning testimony. Phan Quang Đông refuted Ngô Đình Cẩn's argument that he (Ngô Đình Cẩn) had no real authority. Phan Quang Đông told the Court that he had reported directly to Ngô Đình Cẩn. He also refuted Ngô Đình Cẩn claims of having committed no crimes, stating that Ngô Đình Cẩn had ordered the killings of Nguyễn Đắc Phương, Trần Bá Nam, and Võ Côn. Ngô Đình Cẩn denied all of Phan Quang Đông's allegations. He accused Phan Quang Đông of trying to escape justice by attributing his (Phan Quang Đông's) crimes to him. On April 22, 1964, the Court found Ngô Đình Cẩn guilty of murder, unlawful detention, extortion, and harming the national economy. The Court sentenced him to death. Police escorted Ngô Đình Cẩn out of the courtroom to an awaiting car. On the veranda, a local youth expressed satisfaction at the verdict, saying "Hooray Revolutionary Court," reported *Standpoint*.<sup>160</sup>

The State executed Ngô Đình Cẩn and Phan Quang Đông by firing squad on May 9, 1964, reported *Vietnam Press*.<sup>161</sup> Their executions took place in separate cities. Secret Police spy chief Phan Quang Đông died before a firing squad at Hue's sports stadium.<sup>162</sup> Much animosity existed towards the former official. Eager to see Phan Quang Đông punished, tens of thousands of people from Hue and the surrounding area packed the stadium's field and grandstands. Several hours later, a 10-man firing squad executed Ngô Đình Cẩn at Saigon's Chi Hoa prison.<sup>163</sup> Numerous witnesses attended the execution, including Ngô Đình Cẩn's lawyer, family members of Ngô Đình Cẩn's victims, and some 200 local and foreign journalists. A Catholic priest gave Ngô Đình Cẩn absolution before guards led the inmate off to face the firing squad.

While pleased at the justice meted out by the Court, *Standpoint* newspaper remained largely unsatisfied with Ngô Đình Cẩn and Phan Quang Đông's trial and execution. Authorities had yet to bring other perceived criminal figures associated with Ngô Đình Diệm's government to justice. The paper asserted that many citizens, particularly in Hue, waited impatiently for the State to prosecute all those responsible for persecuting monks, nuns, teachers, and students during the Buddhist-Intellectual

157 Nguyễn Văn Tâm, "Bản Cáo Trạng của Tòa Án Cách Mạng," *Lập Trường* (Huế: Mar. 28, 1964): 3, 14; Từ Nguyên, "Cảnh cuối cùng của Màn kịch Ngô Đình Cẩn," *Lập Trường* (Huế: Apr. 25, 1964): 13.

158 "Can denies all charges," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Apr. 16, 1964, evening edition): 5; "Can has heart attack, trial recessed," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Apr. 17, 1964, morning edition): 4.

159 Ba Cao and Sơn Trung, "Vụ Án Lịch Sử: Ngô Đình Cẩn—Phan Quang Đông," *Lập Trường* (Huế: Mar. 28, 1964): 2; Nguyễn Văn Tâm, "Bản Cáo Trạng của Tòa Án Cách Mạng," *Lập Trường* (Huế: Mar. 28, 1964): 3; "Can appears in court on stretcher; still denies charges," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Apr. 18, 1964, morning edition): 4.

160 Từ Nguyên, "Cảnh cuối cùng của Màn kịch Ngô Đình Cẩn," *Lập Trường* (Huế: Apr. 25, 1964): 13.

161 "Can, Dong to be executed tomorrow," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: May 8, 1964, evening edition): 2.

162 "Phan Quang Dong executed in Hue," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: May 10, 1964): 2.

163 "Ngo Dinh Can executed yesterday," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: May 10, 1964): 2.

Crisis of 1963. “All must go to Court. All must be penalized,” editors demanded. Alleged offenders not yet brought to justice for their crimes included the grenade throwers at Ben Ngu Bridge (June 1963) and the perpetrators of the crackdown at Tu Dam pagoda (August 1963). “The people expect the Revolutionary Court to take immediate action and deal with all the perpetrators involved,” wrote *Standpoint*.<sup>164</sup> These calls for a wider campaign of prosecution against Ngô Đình Diệm's government demonstrated that many Hue residents not only disliked Ngô Đình Diệm's former government but urged authorities to take further legal action against it.

Several months later, discourse about the negative character of Ngô Đình Diệm's government and the positive impact of the November 1963 coup appeared in the Hue-based weekly newspaper *Hue Students* (*Sinh Viên Huế*). Founded in early-September 1964 by members of the General Assembly of Students (Tổng Hội Sinh Viên Huế) at Hue University, this eight-page weekly and its staff of student journalists considered Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow a major milestone in South Vietnamese history. On November 1, 1964, the one-year anniversary of the November Revolution, the staff devoted an issue to discussing the First Republic years and Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow. In a front-page editorial, Chairman Vĩnh Kha portrayed the November coup as a major inspiration to student activists in Hue. Attributing Ngô Đình Diệm's demise to the efforts of activists and servicemen, he maintained that the November 1, 1963 coup had motivated many students to oppose social injustice. As activists during the First Republic had risked personal harm to bring about Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow, so too would interregnum-era students embrace social activism to keep the country safe, he asserted. For Vĩnh Kha, maintaining the country's spirit of activism had important reciprocal value. Speaking for student activists at Hue University, if not student activists throughout the country, he insisted that “we” must pay back the “grace, debt, love, [and] life” to the servicemen, professors, spiritual leaders, and fellow companions who contributed to the toppling of Ngô Đình Diệm's government's the previous year.<sup>165</sup>

In addition to Vĩnh Kha's front page editorial celebrating the November 1, 1963 coup, this special edition of *Hue Students* featured two other pertinent items: a prison memoir secretly written by student activists during the late-First Republic and a comparative research article on dictatorship in Asia and Europe. Each work painted Ngô Đình Diệm's government in a critical light. The prison memoir, originally recorded on cigarette rolling papers at Hue's Lao Thừa Phủ prison during the Buddhist-Intellectual Crisis, documented the trying experiences of numerous student inmates during their final week of incarceration leading up to the November 1 coup. By October 25, 1963, police in Hue had imprisoned more than a dozen male and female student activists at Lao Thừa Phủ for over a month and a half.<sup>166</sup> Most of the students' ages ranged from fifteen to twenty-five years old. At the colonial-era correctional institution, the student activists faced difficult living conditions. According to co-author Trần Nguyên, the guards treated the student inmates like “high-level horrible enemies” (“những kẻ thù tối ư kinh khủng”) and subjected them to a special, more limiting detention policy compared to the communists and gangsters incarcerated there. Bed bugs, mosquitoes, and bad food made their living situation worse. The student activists lived miserable lives but tried to keep their faith. “We just prayed and waited,” the memoir stated. When military leaders toppled Ngô Đình Diệm's government, authorities liberated these student political prisoners incarcerated at Lao Thừa Phủ.

The second pertinent item from the November 1 anniversary edition of *Hue Students*, a historical article on dictatorship titled “Machiavelli and Today's Dictators,” added a comparative international component to the critical public discourse on Ngô Đình Diệm's government.<sup>167</sup> Written by the student journalist “Văn,” the article used Niccolò Machiavelli's sixteenth-century realist political

164 “Đặng Sĩ và Chế Độ Cũ,” *Lập Trường* (Huế: May 9, 1964): 3.

165 Vĩnh Kha, “Thư quản nhiệm,” *Sinh Viên Huế* (Huế: Nov. 1, 1964): 1.

166 Trần Nguyên Diệu Nguyên, “7 Ngày Trong Tù Ngục,” *Sinh viên Huế* (Huế: 11-1-64): 6.

167 Văn, “Machiaveli và những nhà độc tài thời nay,” *Sinh Viên Huế* (Huế: 11-1-64): 7.

treatise *The Prince (Sứ Quân)* as a general guide to understanding how contemporary European and Asian dictators developed and maintained their authority. As discussed by Văn, dictators relied on different inhuman measures to maintain their authority, including violence and harshly punishing select opposition figures to set an example for the larger public. The base mentality of all ancient dictators, Văn stressed, revolved around the dictator's desire to be feared rather than loved by his or her people.

After providing readers a basic understanding of how ancient despots behaved and maintained their power, the article moved on to discuss contemporary European and Asian dictators. Văn's analysis did not favor or discriminate against twentieth-century authoritarian leaders based on political orientation. The journalist portrayed both sides of the political spectrum as having various cruel despots. In post-1917 communist Russia, Vladimir Lenin had ordered the execution and banishment of many people without trial. His successor Joseph Stalin proved much worse, sending millions to concentration camps. In Central Europe, millions had “suffered” the rule of Adolph Hitler and his Secret Police, the Gestapo. Under Hitler's fascist leadership, the State “slaughtered” millions of people. Beyond Europe, Asia had no shortage of brutal rulers. Dispelling any notion of having communistic sympathies, editors singled out the mainland Chinese political figure Mao Zedong as one of the region's most ruthless leaders. Since Mao Zedong took control of mainland China in 1949, social and economic conditions had deteriorated. Government control intensified, State propaganda proliferated abroad, and authorities failed to implement a modern economy. Văn maintained that Mao purposefully created the country's dire economic conditions. Purportedly, a bad economy kept the masses distracted and overworked to deter any potential organized mass uprisings. Republican Asia had dictators, too. Văn briefly mentioned the civilian strongman Syngman Rhee (Lý Thừa Vãn), who served as South Korea's president from 1948 to 1960. Văn reserved most of their criticisms for former President Ngô Đình Diệm. He considered Ngô Đình Diệm a “disciple” of Machiavelli. Ngô Đình Diệm had relied on “cruel tricks” to maintain his power, such as destroying rival national political parties, executing or exiling sectarian leaders, and crushing religious groups. Ending the article on a comparative note, Văn likened Ngô Đình Diệm's dictatorial reign to the Spanish-Italian Catholic noblewoman Lucrezia Borgia, who ruled over parts of ancient Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Each regime had applied brutal, deceitful tactics against the people, the journalist maintained.<sup>168</sup>

### Upland Minorities

During the late-interregnum period, upland minorities voiced much criticisms of President Ngô Đình Diệm's government, exposing systematic discrimination in the Central Highlands. Two publications associated with the Bahnar ethnic minority leader and Catholic educator Paul Nur highlight these criticisms: *Highland Affairs (Thượng Vụ)* magazine, established by Paul Nur in June 1966, and Paul Nur's 1966 monograph *Highland Policies in Vietnamese History (Sơ lược về chính sách thượng vụ trong lịch sử Việt Nam)*. *Highland Affairs* magazine, managed by a staff of upland minority and lowland ethnic Vietnamese journalists, indirectly represented more than two dozen ethnic minority groups living in South Vietnam, including but not limited to Rhade, Sedang, Bahnar, and Cham.<sup>169</sup> Published by the Special Commission for Highland Affairs, a government-sponsored representative body for upland minorities chaired by Paul Nur, the magazine specialized in discussing and reporting on highland history, culture, and politics. Paul Nur's monograph, an introductory history of major government policies toward ethnic minorities between the tenth and twentieth centuries, included one

168 Văn, “Machiavelli và những nhà độc tài thời nay,” *Sinh Viên Huế* (Huế: 11-1-64): 7.

169 Nguyễn Kim Dũng, “Các Sắc Dân tại Việt Nam,” *Thượng Vụ* (May 1966): 16-18; Gerald Hickey, *The Major Ethnic Groups of the South Vietnamese Highlands* (Santa Monica: The Rand Corporation, 1964).

chapter on the First Republic years. The professor of anthropology Nghiêm Thẩm, an adviser to Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's government on ethnic minority affairs, wrote in the book's Introduction that he “fully agree[d] with the ideas presented” in the monograph.<sup>170</sup> Through these two publications, Paul Nūr and other ethnic minority journalists revealed the neglect and oppression upland minorities experienced under Ngô Đình Diệm while better incorporating the highlands and its struggles into the country's national history.

Most upland minorities living in South Vietnam inhabited the Central Highlands (Cao Nguyên Trung Phần), a spacious, sparsely-populated region in central Vietnam encompassing several provinces along or near the country's western borders with Cambodia and Laos. Collectively, the total number of South Vietnamese upland minorities exceeded no more than one million people, reported *Political Discussion* newspaper in late-1965.<sup>171</sup> A heterogeneous group, South Vietnamese upland minorities had largely different cultural practices and histories compared to lowland ethnic Vietnamese. According to the May 1966 edition of *Highland Affairs* magazine, most minority groups spoke a different language than lowland ethnic Vietnamese, practiced a different belief system, organized kinship along bilateral rather than unilateral lines, and employed shifting, not sedentary, agriculture.<sup>172</sup>

Prior to Ngô Đình Diệm's leadership in the mid-1950s, upland minority people in the Central Highlands experienced relative autonomy socially and politically. During the colonial period, French authorities had kept upland and lowland societies largely segregated. In 1946, the colonial government “indirectly separated” the Central Highlands and allowed upland minorities to make the region their own (“. . . gián tiếp tách Cao nguyên ra khỏi Việt Nam để làm của riêng”), wrote *Highland Affairs* magazine.<sup>173</sup> Authorities created the Upland Minority Country of South Indochina (Pays Montagnard du Sud-Indochinois). French colons administered this nominally autonomous territory indirectly, as opposed to the practice of direct French rule in the lowlands. The ethnographer Oscar Salemink portrayed this “sudden” decision by the French to recognize the Highland's administrative authority as part of a “divide-and-rule policy” designed to block efforts by the Viet Minh to obtain Vietnamese independence.<sup>174</sup> In 1950, following the 1949 Elysée Agreement granting the State of Vietnam nominal independence, French authorities transferred control of the Central Highlands to the former Emperor and pro-French Chief of State Bảo Đại. The region became a special territory of the Crown (chê độ Hoàng Triều Cương Thổ) and retained its separate administrative structure, according to *Highland Affairs*.<sup>175</sup>

After France's May 1954 defeat at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, perennial Chief of State Bảo Đại formed a cabinet to administer the partitioned territory of south Vietnam and recruited Ngô Đình Diệm to serve as Prime Minister. His appointment foreshadowed a near decade-long conflict between Central Highlands society and the central government. As reported by the Rhadé minority group journalist Y Khấp Niê in *Highland Affairs*, Chief of State Bảo Đại and Prime Minister Ngô Đình Diệm seemed eager to improve relations with the Central Highlands. In June 1955, Prime Minister Ngô Đình Diệm declared that lowland and highland people would be “equal” without “any discrimination at all” from that point on. He promised to implement a “policy of national unity” (“chính sách đại đoàn kết dân tộc”) that would bring spiritual and material happiness (“hạnh phúc về tinh thần và vật chất”) to highland society. “At first, everyone thought that [this new] policy was very good.” Many upland

170 Paul Nūr, *Sơ lược về chính sách thượng vụ trong lịch sử Việt Nam* (Sài Gòn: Phủ đặc ủy Thượng vụ, 1966):

171 Đặng Tâm, “Đưa yếu tố chính trị lên Cao Nguyên,” *Chính luận* (Dec. 22, 1965): 4.

172 Nguyễn Kim Dũng, “Các Sắc Dân tại Việt Nam,” *Thượng Vụ* (Sài Gòn: May 1966): 16-18.

173 “Thành quả đại hội các sắc tộc thiểu số Việt Nam 1967,” *Thượng Vụ* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 1967): 7.

174 Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlands: A Historical Contextualization, 1850-1990* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003): 130.

175 “Thành quả đại hội các sắc tộc thiểu số Việt Nam 1967,” *Thượng Vụ* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 1967): 7; Bao Dai, *Le Dragon D'Annam* (Paris: Plon, 1980): 228.

minorities welcomed the central government's more active role in highland affairs. Lowland authorities implemented many measures to improve the highlands politically, economically, and socially, but the relative harmony between upland and lowland societies did not last. Over time, particularly after Ngô Đình Diệm became president of South Vietnam in October 1955, many upland minorities began to feel misled by his government. Promises made to improve and respect highland society did not come to fruition. In the Central Highlands, many people purportedly viewed the policies implemented by the government to unify lowland and highland societies as “serious mistakes” (“sai lầm nghiêm trọng”).<sup>176</sup> Another Rhadé minority group journalist working for *Highland Affairs* magazine, Y Chôn Mlô Duôn Du, asserted several months later that Ngô Đình Diệm's policies during the First Republic reflected the “extreme measures” (“biện pháp quá khích”) taken by his government to “assimilate” (“đồng hóa”) upland minority people into lowland society. . . .”<sup>177</sup>

Territorial sovereignty and land rights became major points of contention between upland minorities and President Ngô Đình Diệm's government. According to Y Khấp Niê, during the French colonial period, highland people had more land rights than under Ngô Đình Diệm. French authorities never recognized highland people's territorial sovereignty, but did allow landowners to sell their land (no more than thirty acres) to lowland ethnic Vietnamese.<sup>178</sup> Under Ngô Đình Diệm's governance, reported Y Chôn Mlô Duôn Du in December 1966, authorities neither directly recognized highland people's territorial sovereignty or allowed highland farmers to freely sell their land.<sup>179</sup> To forbid such transactions, the central government passed Decree No. 513-a/ĐT/LĐĐD on December 12, 1958 and Circular No. 981/DC on May 28, 1959. These policies mandated that highland people could only use their land for planting crops. Any sale of land had to be authorized by the Presidential Office, which Ngô Đình Diệm rarely, if ever, granted. Highland people felt “blatantly misled” by Ngô Đình Diệm's government.<sup>180</sup>

President Ngô Đình Diệm's decision to abolish the Central Highlands Court System further exacerbated tensions between upland minorities and lowland authorities. During the colonial period, the Central Highlands had its own legal codes and Court System. Highland people considered the Court System an important aspect of upland minority culture and sovereignty. According to Y Khấp Niê and Paul Nur, under Ngô Đình Diệm, the government dissolved the Central Highland Court System.<sup>181</sup> Lowland courts and laws became the new official legal authority throughout the highlands. The decision caused a “formidable disturbance in the social organization of [highland] tribes,” wrote Paul Nur. Highland law degraded, while other “fine” customs declined. People “were very upset.”<sup>182</sup> Using a metaphor to convey the disruptive impact of the highland Court System's termination by Ngô Đình Diệm's government, Paul Nur compared the traumatic experience to taking a fish from water, putting it on dry land, and expecting it to live a normal life.<sup>183</sup>

176 Y Khấp Niê, “Vai trò quan trọng của đồng bào Thượng trong công cuộc chống Cộng Sản xâm lăng tại Cao Nguyên,” *Thượng Vụ* (Sài Gòn: May 1966): 58.

177 Y Chôn Mlô Duôn Du, “Quan niệm về nếp sống của đồng bào Thượng và anh em FULRO,” *Thượng Vụ* (Sài Gòn: Dec. 1966): 10, 46.

178 Y Khấp Niê, “Vai trò quan trọng của đồng bào Thượng trong công cuộc chống Cộng Sản xâm lăng tại Cao Nguyên,” *Thượng Vụ* (Sài Gòn: May 1966): 59.

179 Y Chôn Mlô Duôn Du, “Quan niệm về nếp sống của đồng bào Thượng và anh em FULRO,” *Thượng Vụ* (Sài Gòn: Dec. 1966): 10, 46.

180 Nguyễn Văn Cần, Vấn đề kiến điền đất đai canh tác cho đồng bào Thượng,” *Thượng Vụ* (Sài Gòn: May 1966): 40.

181 Y Khấp Niê, “Vai trò quan trọng của đồng bào Thượng trong công cuộc chống Cộng Sản xâm lăng tại Cao Nguyên,” *Thượng Vụ* (Sài Gòn: May 1966): 60; Paul Nur, *Sự lược về chính sách thượng vụ trong lịch sử Việt Nam* (Sài Gòn: Đặc ủy Trưởng Thượng Vụ, 1966): 108.

182 Bách Lý, “Việc tái lập các tòa án phong tục,” *Thượng Vụ* (Sài Gòn: Dec. 1966): 25.

183 Paul Nur, *Sự lược về chính sách thượng vụ trong lịch sử Việt Nam*, 108.



Other perceived major violations to highland society by Ngô Đình Diệm's government took shape through language training and the highland school system. Like French colonial authorities, Ngô Đình Diệm's government had used highland schools and language training as a form of social and administrative control. As reported by *Highland Affairs* magazine, during the colonial period, authorities had mandated that instructors at elementary and primary schools in the Central Highlands teach their students the French language and highland dialects only.<sup>184</sup> Authorities barred the language of lowland ethnic Vietnamese from highland curricula. Part of a French colonial strategy to divide and conquer Vietnam's population, this divisive tactic kept upland minorities and lowland people socially and culturally separated. During the First Republic, to consolidate power away from the highlands, President Ngô Đình Diệm also exploited language training and education. Despite earlier pledges to respect the customs and cultures of highland society, authorities largely abolished the teaching of highland dialects in the Central Highland school system. Learning the Vietnamese language became mandatory for upland minority students, reflecting a policy of forced assimilation by the central government. Đỗ Văn Tú, who wrote a book on the highland educational system from the late-1800s to 1973, stated that the linguistic shift during the First Republic “bewildered” (“ngơ ngác”) many students, leading them to struggle mightily with their studies.<sup>185</sup> Discrimination also existed within the Central Highlands school system. According to Paul Nūr, unlike lowland students, national authorities barred upland minorities from receiving scholarships to study abroad during the First Republic.<sup>186</sup>

In the armed forces, lowland officers did not treat ethnic minorities well or effectively utilize them in combat, further increasing the divide between lowland and upland societies during the First Republic years. Although the Central Highlands represented a major battleground during the Vietnamese civil war, lowland military officers operating in the region did not value the opinions of local servicemen, who knew the region and its population best. According to Paul Nūr's monograph, lowland servicemen discriminated against and largely ignored their upland minority counterparts. Lowland military leaders mostly relied on highland officers for translation work back at the barracks, not commanding troops in the field. Seniority and chain of command did not apply to highland officers, either. If a highland officer gave an order to a lowland soldier, the lowland soldier would ignore the order.<sup>187</sup>

Administratively, the efforts by Ngô Đình Diệm's government to centralize power away from the Central Highlands provoked additional friction between upland minorities and lowland authorities. As reported by the journalist Mưnh Chưh Tronãng in August 1966, under Chief of State Bão Đại, the central government established a Highland Senior Officials Committee at the National Administration School in Dalat to encourage and better incorporate upland minority officials into the national administration.<sup>188</sup> Located in the Central Highlands, this government-run school trained senior staff members for administrative duties post-graduation, wrote *Homeland (Quê Hương)* journal in 1960.<sup>189</sup> According to Mưnh Chưh Tronãng, in late-1958, Ngô Đình Diệm dissolved the Highland Committee and moved the National Administration School to the capital, far away from the Central Highlands. Before its relocation, the National Administration School produced one final graduating class of several

184 Y Khấp Niê, “Vai trò quan trọng của đồng bào Thượng trong công cuộc chống Cộng Sản xâm lăng tại Cao Nguyên,” *Thượng Vụ* (Sài Gòn: May 1966): ; Mưnh Chưh Tronãng, “Vấn đề đào tạo cán bộ hành chánh cấp chi huy người Thượng,” *Thượng Vụ* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 1966): 10-13.

185 Đỗ Văn Tú, *Vấn đề giáo dục sinh viên học sinh các sắc tộc* (Sài Gòn: Bộ Phát Triển Sắc Tộc, 1973): 17.

186 Paul Nūr, *Sơ lược về chính sách thượng vụ trong lịch sử Việt Nam*, 108.

187 Paul Nūr, *Sơ lược về chính sách thượng vụ trong lịch sử Việt Nam*, 107.

188 Mưnh Chưh Tronãng, “Vấn đề đào tạo cán bộ hành chánh cấp chi huy người Thượng,” *Thượng Vụ* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 1966): 10-13.

189 Vũ Quốc Thông, “Vấn đề đào tạo Cán bộ Hành chánh tại Việt Nam Cộng Hòa và các nước ngoài,” *Quê Hương* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 1960): 116.

dozen upland minority officials. Ngô Đình Diệm's government declined to offer any of these graduates administrative posts.<sup>190</sup>

To protect upland minority society and its “natural rights” (“quyền lợi thiên định”) from further perceived violations by President Ngô Đình Diệm’s government, a number of upper-class minority leaders organized an underground civil rights struggle movement starting in 1957, wrote Y Chôn Mlô Duôn Du in December 1966.<sup>191</sup> Comprised of middle and upper-class ethnic minority civil servants, teachers, and military personnel, this movement quickly spread to different provinces in the Central Highlands. In 1958, these activists founded a leadership committee (Ủy ban Lãnh Đạo Trung Ương và địa phương Tỉnh) and went public with their demands. Through a letter written to regional highland authorities, the committee announced the movement's existence. Members implored regional authorities to respect minority peoples' civil rights and sovereignty. Regional authorities ignored their demands. Next, highland leaders wrote directly to the central government in Saigon. They asked Ngô Đình Diệm to consider convening a congress to allow upland minorities to present their aspirations to the government. The central government ignored their demands. Out of options, leaders like Paul Nur, at that time principal of Kontum Elementary School (trường Tiểu học Kontum), and E Bham Enuol, the future FULRO chairman, asked the United Nations to intervene. When highland leaders notified authorities in Saigon that they had contacted the United Nations, Ngô Đình Diệm's government began to pay attention. Lowland authorities reportedly telegraphed E Bham Enuol in Pleiku promising to hold the country's first highland-oriented congress on October 3, 1958. This proposed conference never took place. Before its convocation, allegedly on direct orders from Ngô Đình Diệm’s government, local security agencies “kidnapped” (“bắt cóc”) most all the movement's leaders, including Paul Nur and E Bam Enuol. They took “all measures” to punish the upland officials and soldiers associated with the movement to end the protest movement, asserted Y Chôn Mlô Duôn Du. According to the former First Republic government official Nguyễn Trắc Dĩ, following this 1958 governmental crackdown, authorities forcefully relocated many civil servants and military personnel associated with the highland civil rights movement to the lowlands.<sup>192</sup>

The arrest of many key Central Highland political leaders by Ngô Đình Diệm's government, including Paul Nur and Y Bham Enuol, brought a swift end to the Central Highlands' civil rights movement. Detained as political prisoners, these upland minority civil rights activists languished in prison for years. They gained their freedom only in early-1964, when General Nguyễn Khánh's government granted them amnesty. According to the *Saigon Daily News*, on February 9, 1964, Interior Minister Hà Thúc Ký visited with E Bham Enuol and more than a dozen other political prisoners held at the Directorate General of Police and Security.<sup>193</sup> Along with a Hoa Hao priest detained for nearly six years on charges “believed to be groundless,” Hà Thúc Ký granted E Bham Enuol an immediate pardon. He promised other political prisoners fair trials in the immediate future. Paul Nur, incarcerated elsewhere, also received amnesty from Nguyễn Khánh government in early-1964. The French-language newspaper *New Vietnam (Le Viet Nam Nouveau)*, run by Phạm văn Nhơn, commented in January 1967 that Paul Nur's incarceration “confirm[ed] a deep awareness and devotion to the true

190 Mưnh Chư Tronăng, “Vấn đề đào tạo cán bộ hành chính cấp chi huy người Thượng,” *Thương Vụ* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 1966): 10-13.

191 Y Chôn Mlô Duôn Du, “Quan niệm về nếp sống của đồng bào Thượng và anh em FULRO,” *Thương Vụ* (Sài Gòn: Dec. 1966): 10, 46.

192 Nguyễn Trắc Dĩ, *Tìm hiểu phong trào tranh đấu FULRO (1958-1969)* (Sài Gòn: Bộ phát triển sắc tộc ấn hành, 1969): 6, LTQGI.

193 “Releases 2 On the Spot: Political Prisoners are First Concern of Interior Minister,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Feb. 10, 1964): 2; Interior Minister Hà Thúc Ký, a Dai Viet Party opposition leader to Ngô Đình Diệm's government during the First Republic, spent five years incarcerated at this same prison during the First Republic.

interests of his [highland] compatriots. . . .”<sup>194</sup> With slowly improving highland-lowland relations and the establishment of the Special Commission for Highland Affairs in 1966, Chairman Paul Nur used his position to help disseminate knowledge about Central Highlands culture and history. Through publications like *Highland Affairs* magazine and the monograph *Highland Policies in Vietnamese History*, the systematic discrimination upland minorities experienced under Ngô Đình Diệm's government entered the public conscience for the first time

### Conclusion

The five sections above do much to demonstrate how South Vietnamese critics in the aftermath of Ngô Đình Diệm's assassination recognized the First Republic's legacy as synonymous with religious zealotry, nativism, autocracy, and widespread unpopularity. During the 1963 Buddhist-Intellectual Crisis, students radicals protested State-sponsored police brutality and perceived religious discrimination against Buddhists. In August 1963, police shot and killed high school student Quách Thị Trang. To cover up the shooting, authorities secretly disposed of her body and lied to her family about her arrest and incarceration. An investigation into her disappearance following President Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow revealed the truth about her fate. News of Quách Thị Trang's tragic death had a major impact on the country's social and political development. Her altruism and activist spirit inspired thousands of students to successfully oppose the August 1964 Vung Tau Charter and Nguyễn Khánh's domineering leadership.

The experiences of performing artists during the First Republic highlighted the primacy of propaganda in Ngô Đình Diệm's nation building campaign and its effect on the performing arts. Ngô Đình Diệm's government increasingly controlled the cải lương industry starting with Ngô Trọng Hiếu's 1961 appointment to Minister of Civil Affairs. The longtime official had no musical training but exhibited unquestioned loyalty to the government and its agenda. He strongly recommended, if not forced, artists to perform works with battlefield themes to keep their jobs. The government emphasis on performing propagandistic theatrical works caused the industry to regress significantly. Creativity, artistry, attendance, and revenue all declined. The experiences and insider commentary of Phạm Duy disclosed additional details about the hijacking of the performing arts by Ngô Đình Diệm's government from the mid-1950s up to the November 1963 coup. Multiple State-sponsored propaganda campaigns and the appointment of unqualified, out-of-touch officials eager to control and manipulate art significantly degraded the modern music scene.

Critics of the 1959 Family Laws written by National Assembly member Trần Lệ Xuân to improve society, particularly the lives of women, revealed the political arrogance and hazardous nature of the legislation's near-ban on divorce. This Catholic-influenced facet of the Family Laws completely discounted the wishes and practices of the country's non-Catholic majority population. Forcing many unhappy couples to remain legally bonded through a separation, the prohibition on divorce created unhealthy living environments for families. The November 1963 coup overturned much of the legislation passed during the First Republic but the Family Laws remained on the books. Multiple publications called for their repeal. Authorities finally rescinded the Family Laws in mid-1964, finalizing the social transition away from the First Republic to the interregnum period.

Hue journalists voiced significant dissatisfaction for Ngô Đình Diệm's administration. Ngô Đình Diệm's Machiavellian character evoked comparisons to one of early modern Europe's most notorious autocratic Catholic rulers, the Spanish-Italian noblewoman Lucrezia Borgia. Unsympathetic coverage of Ngô Đình Cẩn and his 1964 trial portrayed the president's brother as a ruthless shadow

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<sup>194</sup> Nguyen Thanh, "Personnalite de la demaine: M. Paul Nur," *Le Viet Nam Nouveau* (Saigon: Jan. 21, 1967): 1, 2.

administrator. With virtually unchecked power, he ordered acts of murder and extortion against urban non-communists. Many residents of Hue supported his execution but wanted a larger campaign of government prosecutions targeting individuals who had ordered or carried out alleged crimes during the Buddhist-Intellectual Crisis.

Publications written or edited by Paul Nur disclosed systematic mistreatment and discrimination upland minority people faced at the hands of Ngô Đình Diệm's government throughout the First Republic years. When Ngô Đình Diệm became president in 1955, he aggressively pursued a policy of assimilation. Authorities did not directly recognize highland people's territorial sovereignty or allow highland farmers to freely sell their land. President Ngô Đình Diệm's government abolished the Central Highlands Court System and largely eliminated the teaching of highland dialects in the Central Highland school system. Lowland servicemen stationed in the Central Highlands discriminated against upland minority servicemen. Ngô Đình Diệm's government dissolved the Highland Committee and relocated the National Administration School from Dalat to Saigon. By 1958, the growing climate of discrimination and disrespect from Ngô Đình Diệm's administration compelled action. A protest movement led by upper-class ethnic minority leaders broke out across the Central Highlands. The government responded by arresting the movement's core leaders, including Paul Nur. These political prisoners remained incarcerated until after the November 1963 coup, when General Nguyễn Khánh's government granted them amnesty.

## Chapter Two

Political development:  
South Vietnam's democratic, decentralizing turn

South Vietnamese history between the First Republic years associated with Ngô Đình Diệm's presidency, from 1955 to 1963, and the Second Republic years associated with Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's presidency, from 1967 to 1975, represents a relatively short but crucial period of national political development. While many people associate this four-year period exclusively with coups, counter-coups, security failures, and a phase of decisive escalation for the United States, it also had major historical significance. A close reading of South Vietnamese legislation and print media show that the interregnum period, from 1963 to 1967, saw the proliferation of lively public discourse about democracy, major structural changes through administrative decentralization, notable elections with increasingly high participation rates, and the establishment of constitutionally-backed democratic institutions. The desire within society to build a more democratic, administratively-decentralized political system derived largely from widespread dissatisfaction for the First Republic's 1956 constitution and the failure of former political leaders to respect democracy, public opinion, and calls for reform. Too much power had resided in the hands of President Ngô Đình Diệm at the executive level. The country's elected unicameral legislature had failed to properly check his authority. Often taking the side of the government over the people, the legislature gradually became a rubber stamp of the executive branch. With the dissolution of Ngô Đình Diệm's government, the 1956 constitution, and the National Assembly in November 1963, South Vietnamese political elites and the public sought to correct the mistakes of the First Republic by building an improved system of democratic governance with increased public and institutional checks and balances.

Four sections narrate this chapter's examination of South Vietnam's democratic, decentralizing turn during the interregnum period. The first section discusses the failure of multiple consecutive governments to implement democracy from late-1963 to mid-1965. Throughout this time period, the public remained eager for elections. The second section examines the May 30, 1965 town, city, and provincial council elections. A small but important step in building democracy and decentralizing governmental control, these elections created dozens of councils across the country responsible for representing the public in local and regional affairs. 3,411,482 people, 72 percent of registered voters (citizens eighteen years or older), turned out to elect over 550 public servants. The third section covers the 1966 Constituent Assembly election and the drafting of an official constitution. More than 1,000 candidates ran in the Constituent Assembly election, with 80 percent of registered voters casting a ballot. Once established, following several months of hard work and debate, this 117-person body created a unique, decentralized presidential-style political system for the country. To check the future president's power and differentiate itself from the political structure of President Ngô Đình Diệm's former government, this new constitution gave South Vietnam a president, vice-president, and prime minister instead of just a president and vice-president. The Constituent Assembly further promoted decentralization and checks and balances by giving the country a bicameral legislature (senate and house of representatives) instead of just a unicameral legislature (house of representatives), as had existed during the First Republic. The fourth section analyzes the simultaneous presidential and senatorial elections in late-1967. On September 3, 1967, more than four million people turned out to vote in these elections. General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and his running mate General Nguyễn Cao Kỳ defeated ten civilian tickets to win the presidency and vice-presidency, providing political legitimacy and stability at the executive level. The simultaneous senate election established a 60-person legislative body legally independent of the executive branch. These national, regional, and sub-regional elections between years 1965 and 1967 marked an imperfect but important stage of national development for South Vietnam. Together, they redefined South Vietnam's political structure, afforded the country greater democratic legitimacy through constitutionally-backed institutions, and offered a skeptical-to-optimistic public the prospect of a better future.

**Democracy delayed:  
From Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ to Trần Văn Hương,  
November 1963 to January 1965**

More than one and a half years passed following the coup against Ngô Đình Diệm's government before any major democratic elections took place. Three different governments came to power during this time period. The prospect of democracy existed but never came close to the implementation stage. The civilian-military government of Prime Minister Nguyễn Ngọc, formerly Ngô Đình Diệm's vice president, attempted to implement democracy first. In late-December, 1963, Prime Minister Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ's government established a 60-person advisory and legislative body known as the Council of Notables. The Council of Notables had the task of drafting a provisional constitution, a necessary first step before any elections could take place. On January 10, 1964, the body's members created a Constitutional Study Commission chaired by Nguyễn Văn Bông, a Sorbonne-educated professor of political science and constitutional law.<sup>195</sup> By mid-January, the Council of Notables remained unsure about whether to create a presidential or parliamentary-style provisional government. As reported by *Vietnam Press*, a twice-daily pro-government publication, Nguyễn Văn Bông believed that the public no longer wanted a president in charge of the country following the First Republic years.<sup>196</sup> As the Council of Notables carried out its various responsibilities, councilman Trần Trung Dung emerged as a potential roadblock to creating a provisional constitution. A former assistant defense secretary under President Ngô Đình Diệm, he maintained that political leaders should not implement a constitution during a time of war. The *Saigon Daily News*, an English-language daily run by Nguyễn Văn Tuổi, stated that many members strongly disagreed with his position and even regretted his membership on the council. Challenging Trần Trung Dung's logic, Dr. Phan Hữu Chương asserted that Ngô Đình Diệm's government did not respect the 1956 constitution during its first four years of its existence and "there was no war" at that time.<sup>197</sup> Despite Trần Trung Dung objections, the Council of Notables moved forward with its plans to draft a constitution. On January 21, 1964, *Vietnam Press* announced that the Council of Notables wanted to hear the public's suggestions about drafting a constitution, even calling for the press to organize debates.<sup>198</sup> These debates and a constitution never materialized. One week later, on January 30, 1964, General Nguyễn Khánh took advantage of a foreign policy crisis with France to overthrow Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ's government and dissolve the month-old Council of Notables.<sup>199</sup>

South Vietnam waited several long months before the prospect of democracy appeared on the horizon. In early-September 1964, Prime Minister General Nguyễn Khanh's military government established a 17-person advisory and legislative body known as the High National Council. According to multiple newspapers, authorities entrusted this body with drafting a provisional constitution to empower a temporary civilian government. Once accomplished, the body would move on to discuss the convocation of a national assembly responsible for drafting an official constitution and legislating

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195 "Hội Đồng Nhân Sĩ sẽ thảo luận về vấn đề mở tổng tuyển cử để thống nhất Việt Nam," *Tiếng Vang* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 13, 1964): 1.

196 "Notables debate constitutional issue—Mr. Mai Tho Truyen resigns," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Jan. 16, 1964, Morning edition): 1.

197 "Tran Trung Dung flailed at Notables Council meet," *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Jan. 16, 1964): 2.

198 "Council of Notables wishes to receive suggestions," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Jan. 21, 1964, Evening edition): 3.

199 "Sáng ngày 30-1-64 tại Saigon đã xảy ra một cuộc đảo chánh không đổ máu," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Feb. 1, 1964): 1.

elections to determine national leadership.<sup>200</sup> To start the process of creating a provisional government, the High National Council set up a constitution-drafting committee and called on the public to submit suggestions through a letter-writing campaign, wrote *Vietnam Press*.<sup>201</sup> Members debated the provisional constitution behind close doors for the next few weeks. By the second week of October, the body publicly announced the provisional constitution's promulgation. On October 25, 1964, *Dawn* (*Bình Minh*) newspaper, associated with southern intellectuals like Lý Quý Chúng (pen name Nguyễn Lý), reported that the constitution created a temporary parliamentary style government with an appointed figurehead prime minister, a less powerful intermediary chief of state, and a bicameral legislature through a national assembly and senate.<sup>202</sup> In this temporary political system, the chief of state appointed a prime minister, after which the prime minister formed a cabinet. Shortly thereafter, the High National Council unanimously appointed its own chairman Phan Khắc Sửu provisional chief of state.<sup>203</sup> He resigned his position on the council, began vetting candidates for prime minister, and soon settled on the former mayor of Saigon Trần Văn Hương.<sup>204</sup> At this time, General Nguyễn Khánh dissolved his military government, making way for Trần Văn Hương's transitory civilian government.<sup>205</sup>

With Trần Văn Hương's cabinet formally administering the country, the High National Council had accomplished its opening goal of setting up a civilian caretaker government. South Vietnam seemed on the path to democratic legitimacy. Next, the High National Council began discussing the convocation of a national assembly, a legislative body responsible for drafting an official constitution and legislating national elections. The High National Council invited the public to voice their opinions about convening a national assembly multiple times, according to *Vietnam Press*.<sup>206</sup> The body continued working on convocating a national assembly but other pressing matters, like Buddhist protests against the government and a historic flood in central Vietnam, divided members' attention. By December 15, 1964, convening a national assembly remained a point of discussion but never had the opportunity to progress any further.<sup>207</sup> On December 20, General Nguyễn Khánh dissolved the High National Council and illegally detained several of its members, accusing them of fomenting a counter-revolutionary plot against the military and nation, reported various newspapers. Military leaders allowed Trần Văn Hương's government to continue administering the country. They entrusted Chief of State Phan Khắc Sửu with legislative powers and set a timeline of three months for convening a national assembly.<sup>208</sup> This national assembly never had the opportunity to convene. In late-January

200 "Trung tướng Minh triệu tập thượng hội đồng Q.G.," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 9, 1964): 1; "Ủy ban lãnh đạo lâm thời Q.G. và Quân lực đồng ý cử," *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 9, 1964): 1, 4.

201 "HNC welcomes people's suggestions," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Sep. 30, 1964): 2.

202 "T.H.Đ.Q.G. giải thích tinh thần và nội dung hiến chương 20-10-64," *Bình Minh* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 25, 1964): 1, 8.

203 "Tiểu sử tân quốc trưởng Phan-K-Sửu," *Miền Nam* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 27, 1964): 1, 4; "Từ nay đến ngày Quốc Dân Đại Hội Ô. P.K. Sửu: Nguyên thủ Q.G.," *Xây Dựng* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 27, 1964): 1, 4.

204 "Việt Nam Cộng Hoa đã thành lập xong chánh phủ dân sự," *Nghị Luận* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 27, 1964): 1, 4; "Sau khi được TG. chỉ định tân Thủ Tướng Trần Văn Hương đã đệ trình chương trình hoạt động lên T.H.Đ.Q.G. chiều hôm 31-10," *Xây Dựng* (Sài Gòn: Nov. 2, 1964): 1, 6.

205 "Thực hành đúng theo lời cam kết trong tuyên cáo 27-8-64 của HĐQĐCM: 26-10-64: Quân đội đã trao quyền cho dân sự," *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 28, 1964): 1, 4.

206 "HNC calls for help in deciding on national convention," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Oct. 29, 1964, Evening edition): 1; nov. 11.

207 "High National Council consults notables on subject of national convention," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Dec. 16, 1964, Evening edition): 1.

208 Phạm Việt Tuyên, "Họp báo ở Bộ Tổng Tư Lệnh chiều 20-12, Hội Đồng Quân Lực tuyển bổ: Ô. Ô. Lê Văn Thu, Trần Văn Văn và một số nhân vật chính trị đã bị bắt giữ," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Dec. 22, 1964): 1, 4; "Cuộc họp báo quan trọng tại Bộ Tổng T.L.," *Xây Dựng* (Sài Gòn: Dec. 22, 1964): 1, 4; "Bao nhiêu người bị giữ?," *Xây Dựng* (Sài Gòn: Dec. 22, 1964): 1, 4; "Hai văn kiện chính thức giải tán T.H.Đ. và sửa lại Hiến Chương," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Dec. 22, 1964): 1.



1965, Nguyễn Khánh orchestrated a coup against Trần Văn Hương's government, once again disrupting the process to bring democracy to the country.

The public continuously expressed desires for the implementation of democracy throughout the periods of leadership under Prime Ministers Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ, Nguyễn Khánh, and Trần Văn Hương. Calls for democracy commenced shortly after the overthrow of Ngô Đình Diệm's government. One of the earliest examples of citizens calling for democracy appeared a few weeks into Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ's premiership. On November 20, 1963, *Telegram* (Điện Báo) newspaper, known as *Saigon of Tomorrow* (*Saigon Mai*) during the First Republic, reported that members of the Provisional Student Congress at Saigon University held a press conference a few days earlier to discuss their role in the current political period. They read a declaration before the media. The first point of the declaration urged students to “[a]ctively support all struggles for democratic ideals and basic human freedoms.”<sup>209</sup> A few months later in mid-January 1964, a student journalist at *Liberty* (*Tự Do*) newspaper, one of the country's most respected publications, maintained that national leaders had prevented or failed to provide Vietnamese people the opportunity to “sow the seeds of democracy” for decades. Perceiving democratic freedoms as crucial to South Vietnam's war effort, Lê Vĩnh Bãng asserted that “[i]t is impossible for the country to survive war without developing freedom.” He asserted that “[c]itizens only aggressively fight the enemy when they . . . are respected” and have legally-enforced democratic rights.<sup>210</sup> In August 1964, during the early stages of General Nguyễn Khanh's second government, the Buddhist-oriented daily newspaper *Present Day* (*Ngày Nay*) also complained about the lack of democracy in Vietnam historically. It maintained that Vietnamese people “have never seen the silhouette of democracy” going back to at least the 1940s. The 1946 constitution under Hồ Chí Minh and the Việt Minh led to a communist regime, while the 1956 constitution created by Ngô Đình Diệm led to dictatorship and a “false democracy.” The publication did not know which path the country's leaders should take to establish a legitimate democracy—because others had failed at the task—but believed that the process involved organizing fair elections.<sup>211</sup>

In the Central Highlands, democracy, too, remained a major issue for thousands of ethnic minorities long dissatisfied with their unequal treatment by lowland society and its leaders. Following an 8-day-long rebellion by ethnic minorities in September 1964, a tense stalemate persisted between Central Highland society and Prime Minister Nguyễn Khánh's government for more than one month. On October 18, 1964, the nascent activist-oriented newspaper *White Star* (*Sao Trắng*) wrote that General Nguyễn Khánh flew to Pleiku to participate in ongoing government discussions with the National Council of Upland Minorities, a 76-person body with representation from eleven provinces in the Central Highlands. Some 270,000 people of Rhade, Jarai, and Bahnar descent lived in this region.<sup>212</sup> At the conference, Nguyễn Khánh promised to implement a program that improved Highland society socially, economically, militarily, and politically. This program included organizing regional elections to determine representation for a future national assembly conceptualized by the High National Council, reported multiple publications.<sup>213</sup> Satisfied with the promises made by Nguyễn Khánh's government at the conference, including equal rights and convening a national assembly, ethnic minority leaders signed a document declaring their support for the Saigon administration. They

209 “Tuyên ngôn của đại hội sinh viên lâm thời Saigon,” *Điện Báo* (Sài Gòn: Nov. 20, 1963): 1, 4.

210 Lê Vĩnh Bãng, “Thế nào là chế độ cũ . . . chế độ mới?,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 12, 1964): 1, 4.

211 “Xây dựng dân chủ,” *Ngày Nay* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 19, 1964): 1, 4.

212 “Thủ tướng Nguyễn Khánh bay lên Pleiku tiếp xúc khẩn với đồng bào thượng,” *Sao Trắng* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 19, 1964): 1, 4.

213 “Chính sách mới của chính phủ đối với các đồng bào Thượng,” *Tiếng Vang* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 24, 1964): 1, 4; “P.M. Khanh promises montagnard uplift program,” *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Oct. 18, 1964): 1.

vowed to work with the government to build freedom, democracy, and lowland-highland unity.<sup>214</sup> To publicize and officially document their position, the National Council of Upland Minorities issued a provisional constitution outlining a transitional path from Nguyễn Khánh's illegal military government to a more legal provisional civilian administration. The charter strongly endorsed a provisional civilian government that advocated social justice, respected basic freedoms endorsed by the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights, and allowed for the "decentralization" ("phân quyền") of political power through elections.<sup>215</sup>

When Trần Văn Hương became prime minister of South Vietnam in late-October 1964, calls for democracy and elections soon followed his provisional civilian government's appointment. On November 12, 1964, the activist-oriented central Vietnamese newspaper *Standpoint (Lập Trường)*, founded by Professors Cao Huy Thuần, Lê Tuyên, and Tôn Thất Hanh of Hue University, published the editorial "Advance the National Assembly." This editorial called for authorities to hold elections to establish a national assembly capable of legislating an official constitution. Dissatisfied with the prospect of an appointed national assembly, the newspaper wanted the public to elect its own representatives. It desired to see the creation of a national assembly and an official constitution that accurately reflected the aspirations of the people, unlike "the National Assembly under the Ngô dynasty." Although the publication acknowledged that the "situation in the country is not suitable for holding an election," it proposed holding a national assembly election adapted to meet South Vietnam's evolving security concerns. Direct universal suffrage could decide representation in large urban and rural population centers, editors believed. An electoral college could decide representation in less secure rural parts of the country. In rural areas heavily affected by communist activities, the editorial suggested either temporarily reserving assembly seats or directly appointing well-known local representatives with superb backgrounds. Perceiving the revolutionary changes engendered by Ngô Đình Diệm's 1963 overthrow as unfinished, *Standpoint* desired to see the revolutionary process completed through a national assembly election.<sup>216</sup>

Two months later, *Encyclopedia (Bách Khoa)* journal, run by various reputable writers, maintained that the feigned existence of democracy in Vietnam historically made citizens more eager for its legitimate implementation. On January 15, 1965, the journalist Thế Nhân recalled that members of Hồ Chí Minh's government in North Vietnam had evoked "democracy" and even included the term in the official title of the country, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, founded in 1945. This inclusion purportedly "fooled no one." Many South Vietnamese people apparently used the term "democracy" sarcastically when referring to North Vietnam. Next, Thế Nhân argued that a similar anti-democratic climate had existed in South Vietnam during Ngô Đình Diệm's First Republic. The president and his government emphasized "true democracy," but this administration purportedly became a "most brutal anti-democratic regime." The journalist rhetorically questioned if a lack of democracy under Ngô Đình Diệm explained why people during the interregnum period "are eager to protect the democratic freedoms they have been deprived of before. . . ." He asserted that society required democracy and social justice "just like every other [basic] need people required to live." Implementing and developing democracy had major perceived importance for South Vietnam, according to Thế Nhân, because it countered communist authoritarianism, and "Communism is the most severe dictatorship of all possible dictatorship on earth."<sup>217</sup>

214 "Kiến nghị của các đại diện đồng bào Thượng Đệ lên Thủ Tướng," *Sao Trắng* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 20, 1964): 1, 4; "Chính sách mới của chính phủ đối với các đồng bào Thượng," *Tiếng Vang* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 24, 1964): 1, 4.

215 "Thượng hội đồng Quốc Gia đã ban hành hiến chương," *Tiếng Vang* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 22, 1964): 1, 4.

216 "Tiến tới quốc dân đại hội," *Lập Trường* (Huế: Nov. 12, 1964): 7.

217 Thế Nhân, "Những bước tiến về dân chủ của VNCH trong năm 1964," *Bách Khoa* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 15, 1965): 188, 189.

A failure to implement democracy by multiple governments and a chorus of non-elite voices calling for elections defined the first fifteen months following the overthrow of Ngô Đình Diệm's autocratic government. The difficulty of nation building during a civil war and General Nguyễn Khánh's arrogance help explain this lack of democratic development. The absence of political stability and organized elections caused many people to voice their desire for democracy. Calls for legitimate democracy by college student activists in Saigon appeared as early as November 20, 1963, during Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ's time as prime minister. Multiple publications complained about a perceived lack of genuine democracy in Vietnam going back decades. The governments of Hồ Chí Minh and Ngô Đình Diệm had both promised and evoked democracy but proved dictatorial. In the Central Highlands, numerous leaders of the ethnic minority community convened a conference and demanded that Nguyễn Khánh's government organize elections to determine representation in a future national legislative body. In Hue, journalists urged Trần Văn Hương's government to establish a national assembly capable of legislating an official constitution that accurately reflected the people's aspirations, unlike the 1956 constitution.

### **Democracy introduced: The May 1965 town, city, and provincial council elections**

In mid-February 1965, increasingly disruptive protests from radical Buddhists dissatisfied with Prime Minister Trần Văn Hương's leadership led General Nguyễn Khánh to launch a partial coup. After a short transition period following Trần Văn Hương's ouster, caretaker Chief of State Phan Khắc Sửu appointed the longtime Đại Việt Party leader Phan Huy Quát to the position of prime minister.<sup>218</sup> Like the short-lived civilian governments of Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ and Trần Văn Hương, Phan Huy Quát's cabinet sought to bring democracy to the country through elections. Unlike these previous civilian governments, Phan Huy Quát's cabinet managed to organize and carry out elections before military leaders intervened. Held on May 30, 1965, the South Vietnamese town, city, and provincial council elections determined the membership of 48 regional and local councils throughout the country. These councils had the responsibility of communicating with their constituents and working with local or regional authorities on various matters. The number of available seats on these 48 councils totaled 571 people. A councilperson's term tentatively lasted for three years. To guard against the development of stale, inadequate leadership, a perceived problem with public servants on the National Assembly during the First Republic, legislators mandated yearly elections to potentially vote out under-performing council members. Authorities randomly subjected one-third of the membership on every council to the reelection process after the first year, and two-thirds of every council after the second year. Legislators decreed that each of South Vietnam's 43 provinces have a council, with membership ranging between six and fifteen people. Additionally, they mandated that five major towns or cities also have councils: Saigon, Danang, Dalat, Vung Tau, and Hue. Vung Tau had the smallest council, six people, and Saigon the largest, thirty people. When held on May 30, 1965, the town, city, and provincial elections saw participation from millions of voters and more than 1,000 candidates. A historic occasion and political milestone, the elections provided South Vietnam the first taste of democracy following the overthrow of Ngô Đình Diệm's dictatorial government.

Phan Huy Quát's government legislated the May 30, 1965, the town, city, and provincial council elections on April 8, 1965 through Decrees 67-NV, 68-NV, 69-NV, and 70-NV. As recorded in *Legal Reference Collection (Quy pháp vịnh tập)*, these decrees mandated that citizens eighteen and older had

218 "Qua nhiều cuộc hội đàm với các tướng lãnh trong HĐQL: B.S. Phan Huy Quát được mời thành lập tân chánh phủ," *Ngày Mới* (Sài Gòn: Feb. 16, 1965): 1, 6; "Kết hợp các lưu lượng nhân dân và các xu hướng chính trị tân chính phủ Phan Huy Quát sẽ gồm lối 20 tổng trưởng," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Feb. 17, 1964): 1.

the ability to vote in the elections. Potential candidates had to submit their candidacy application by no later than April 20, 1965, with a preliminary list of candidates subject to revision by authorities released to the public on April 30. Only people at least 25-years old with citizenship continuously since birth, naturalized citizens for at least five years, and those who returned to South Vietnam at least three years before the election had the ability to run as candidates. Candidates had to reside in the town, city, or province they wanted to serve for at least six months leading up to the April application date. Citizens in violation of their draft status, convicted criminals, communists, neutralists, serving officers in the military, police commanders, and various serving civil servants (mayors, district chiefs, etc.) did not have ability to run in the election. Campaigning would take place between May 15 and May 25, 1965. To better ensure fairness and equal access to resources, legislators mandated that every town, city, and provincial election receive oversight from an election managerial committee, on which one representative of each candidate would sit. These managerial committees coordinated with local authorities and handled everything from assigning fliers, organizing discussions with the public, and ensuring equal radio time. Covered by taxpayer dollars, the costs of the elections and the candidates' campaigns had a flexible budget equally distributed among the candidates. Political officials planned to announce the election's official results on June 3, 1965.<sup>219</sup>

The public responded with varying degrees of skepticism and hope following the announcement of the May 1965 town, city, and provincial council elections by Phan Huy Quát's provisional government. On April 15, 1965, *Labor (Lao Động)* newspaper, self-identifying as a publication "struggling for freedom and democracy," carried an editorial by Hoàng Sơn asserting that democracy had not existed in Vietnam for more than twenty years going back to the August 1945 Revolution. Across these two decades, political leaders in North and South Vietnam had purportedly used "enchanted" words like "Revolution" and "Democracy" endlessly but never actually followed through. Hồ Chí Minh's government touted "building a New Democracy" but this broken promise transformed into "pebbles which paved the way" for Communism. In South Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diệm's government promoted democracy to "seduce and attract people to . . . build the foundation of the [First] Republic. . . ." This promise of democracy by Ngô Đình Diệm never materialized, only a "totalitarian dictatorship" that brought suffering to the people. The overthrow of Ngô Đình Diệm's government brought more assurances of democracy from political elites, but this 'democracy' became "just flashy paint on the lips" because of interference from "the militaristic serviceman!" Hoàng Sơn compared the failed promise of democracy historically to "ghosts haunting the souls of Vietnamese people. . . ." Finally, after two decades since the 1945 Revolution, it appeared that Prime Minister Phan Huy Quát's government looked to exercise these ghosts by embracing "true democracy." Perceived by Hoàng Sơn as having a patriotic spirit, Phan Huy Quát seemed to have "the shadow of democracy fluttering behind him." A South Vietnamese population "long embarrassed" by the word democracy eagerly waited for its legitimate implementation.<sup>220</sup>

219 Phủ Chủ Tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, "Sắc lệnh số 67-NV ngày mùng 9 tháng tư năm 1965 ấn định lại tổ chức và điều hành của hội đồng đô thành Sài Gòn," *Quy Pháp Việt Nam Tập, Quyển VIII*, 1965 (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1966): 597-608; Phủ Chủ Tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, "Sắc lệnh số 68-NV ngày mùng 9 tháng tư năm 1965 thiết lập tại mỗi tỉnh một hội đồng tỉnh để cộng tác với tỉnh trưởng trong việc quản trị tỉnh," *Quy Pháp Việt Nam Tập, Quyển VIII*, 1965 (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1966): 609-20; Phủ Chủ Tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, "Sắc lệnh số 69-NV ngày mùng 9 tháng tư năm 1965 thiết lập tại mỗi thị xã một hội đồng thị xã để cộng tác với thị trưởng trong việc quản trị thị xã," *Quy Pháp Việt Nam Tập, Quyển VIII*, 1965 (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1966): 620-31; Phủ Chủ Tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, "Sắc lệnh số 70-NV ngày mùng 9 tháng tư năm 1965 ấn định tổ chức việc bầu cử hội đồng đô thành, hội đồng tỉnh và hội đồng thị xã," *Quy Pháp Việt Nam Tập, Quyển VIII*, 1965 (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1966): 632-52.

220 Hoàng Sơn, "Quan điểm: Dân muốn nói: Dân chủ không ngưng mồm," *Lao Động* (Sài Gòn: Apr. 15, 1965): 1, 8.

The Buddhist newspaper *Present Day* newspaper shared a less optimistic opinion of Phan Huy Quát's government and the prospects of democracy a few weeks later. On May 3, 1965, a front page editorial maintained that the advent of Phan Huy Quát's government brought high expectations but failed to deliver on one key issue. When taking office, Phan Huy Quát had stated his intention to allow opposition political forces to participate in a national assembly, a major step in creating a democratic system. Since that time, events had pushed back convening a national assembly twice. The editorial viewed these postponements as evidence that true democracy did not exist in South Vietnam. "Nothing has changed." Perceiving the upcoming May 30 town, city, and provincial council elections as incapable of influencing national policy and leadership, *Present Day* wanted Phan Huy Quát to live up to his word and convocate a national assembly. The editorial asserted that "[w]hat all the parties and national forces are waiting for is a generous conference, in which all forces must be united to exercise democracy and plunge themselves into the fight against communism. . . ." It concluded by acknowledging that "we still have hope" in Phan Huy Quát and believe him capable of eschewing political monopoly and building democracy.<sup>221</sup>

The same week, *Civil Rights* (Dân Quyền) newspaper dissected the composition of candidates running for the Saigon City Council. The Saigon City Council had 30 seats representing the capital's eight districts. The first preliminary listing of candidates included 149 people. The regional background of the candidates broke down as follows: 83 from south Vietnam, 50 from central Vietnam, 40 from north Vietnam, 1 from Cambodia, and 1 from China. The professional backgrounds of the candidates had significant diversity: 43 merchants, 16 professors or teachers, 12 journalists, 11 retired civil servants, 7 former ward chiefs, 6 private school principals, 6 directors or employers, 5 technicians, 4 union representatives, 3 contractors, 3 engineers, 2 architects, 2 dentists, 1 pharmacist, etc. The field suffered from a lack of diversity through gender and age. The list of candidates included only four women: the 41-year-old merchant Trần Thị Mười, the 42-two-year-old merchant Trần Kim Thoa, the 37-year-old journalist Vũ thị Minh Ngọc, and 44-year-old hospital director Phan Thị Trường. Middle-aged people comprised the majority of the candidacy list. Candidates between the ages of 46 and 59-years-old numbered seventy-nine, the largest age group. By comparison, candidates between the ages of 25 and 35-years-old numbered only seven, one more than the smallest age group (over 70-years-old). *Civil Rights* newspaper found it ironic that many Saigon youths had protested for the removal of older politicians from national service following Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow but did not have a high candidate participation rate in the Saigon City Council election. Given the large field of candidates running in the election, editors believed that if authorities allowed the election campaign to take place and proliferate it "will be very exciting."<sup>222</sup>

On May 23, 1965, more than one week after campaigning for the town, city, and provincial elections started, *Civil Rights* newspaper published "An open letter to all voters nationwide" by journalist Nguyễn Tú Vân. Urging people to vote, the letter began by declaring that next week's town, city, and provincial elections marked the opening of the country's democratic period since November 1, 1963. "[T]his is the first time our people have been able to directly choose [candidates] on their own behalf. . . ." This democratic right had escaped South Vietnamese people for many years, he maintained. From 1955 to 1965, South Vietnamese had lived under different free and democratic governments, but "everyone knows that Freedom and Democracy only existed on paper." This decade-long authoritarian climate purportedly left many people apathetic about democracy and elections. Eager to reverse this historical trend, *Civil Rights* newspaper maintained that "we cannot keep an indifferent attitude." People "must be a force of support for those who are virtuous and talented irrespective of religion, party, or locality." Confident of the upcoming elections' fairness, Nguyễn Tú

221 "Chính phủ Phan Huy Quát và vấn đề dân chủ," *Ngày Nay* (Sài Gòn: May 3, 1965): 1.

222 "Hội đồng Đô thành 30 hội viên, đại diện 8 quận," *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: May 5, 1965): 1.

Vân called for voters to carefully examine the candidates to ensure that dedicated, honest, passionate politicians represented the people.<sup>223</sup>

On election day, May 30, 1965, journalists An Tĩnh and Vũ Thanh Lê of *South Vietnam (Miền Nam)* newspaper, edited by the post-1954 northern Vietnamese émigré Cát Hữu, encouraged citizens to vote. Emphasizing the historical significance of the town, city, and provincial council elections, the publication maintained that Vietnam had not seen democracy for decades. Purportedly, when the Việt Minh first organized elections in 1946, many people had expressed excitement and turned out to vote. Their elation eventually turned to disappointment “because representatives could not speak the voice of the masses, only the voices of the Party. . . .” With each passing election people grew more and more disappointed. Under Ngô Đình Diệm, elections “were no different from those of the communist era. . . .” This legacy of non-democratic administration in Vietnam going back to the 1940s made the people “extremely drowsy and skeptical of every election.” Claiming to speak objectively, An Tĩnh and Vũ Thanh Lê asserted that the town, city, and provincial council elections have “brought quite a full sense of democracy and freedom.” The elections represented “progress on the road to democracy” they believed, but the journalists cautioned that moving towards a true liberal democracy following multiple decades of dictatorship meant undergoing “a long period of experimental learning” for the country.<sup>224</sup>

Over the next several days, the national press published several articles about the outcome of the election and the composition of the town, city, and provincial councils. A selective review of these results reveals some interesting facts and figures. *Civil Rights* reported that 3,411,482 out of 4,693,371 registered voters (72 percent) turned out for the election.<sup>225</sup> In Saigon, a little over 70 percent of registered voters, over 400,000 people, cast their ballots, according to *Political Discussion* newspaper.<sup>226</sup> The *Saigon Daily News* called this figure “reasonably high.”<sup>227</sup> Nationwide, men dominated the councils. Women comprised a numerical minority. Two women, Trần Kim Thoa and Phan Thị Trường, sat on the thirty-person Saigon City Council as representatives of District 2 (three seats) and District 8 (three seats), respectively.<sup>228</sup> The *Saigon Post*, a politically conservative English language daily run by the Đại Việt affiliate Bùi Diễm, later commented that Trần Kim Thoa had run in multiple elections during the First Republic years but failed to win. “If electoral defeats and frustrations for . . . the dictatorial regime of the late Ngo Dinh Diem, who rigged both small and big elections, are a mark of honesty and genuine devotion to public service, Mrs. Tran Kim Thoa indeed has [much] to pride herself [on]. . . .”<sup>229</sup> A third female candidate, Trần Thị Mười, finished three places away from winning a District 2 seat. *Civil Rights* published a short letter written by Trần Thị Mười thanking her District 2 constituents for their support. Her first time running in any election, she finished a respectable sixth out of seventeen District 2 candidates with over 5,000 votes. This turnout left her “extremely touched.” Inspired by the election, she vowed to continue serving the people and working for the common good regardless of her position.<sup>230</sup> Several women sat on different councils beyond the capital. Ms. Phạm Thị Huyền sat on the six-person Vung Tau Town Council. Ms. Nguyễn

223 Nguyễn Tú Vân, “Thơ ngỏ kính gởi các bạn cử tri toàn quốc,” *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: May 23, 1965): 1, 4.

224 “Ý nghĩa dân chủ của cuộc bầu cử H.Đ.Đ.T.,” *Miền Nam* (Sài Gòn: May 30, 1965): 1.

225 “Chính quyền cho biết trong cuộc họp báo chiều 1-5,” *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 3, 1965): 1, 4.

226 These provinces included Bình Tuy, Phước Tuy, Long Khánh, Biên Hòa, Gia Định, Bình Dương, Tây Ninh, Bình Long, Phước Long, Hậu Nghĩa, and Long An.

227 “Election day quiet,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: May 31, 1965): 1.

228 “Danh sách ứng cử viên đặc cử Hội đồng Đô thành,” *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 1, 1965): 3, 6.

229 “Woman of achievement: Mrs. Tran Kim Thoa,” *Saigon Post* (Saigon: Jun. 20, 1965): 6.

230 “Sau cuộc bầu cử Hội đồng Đô thành: Bà Trần Thị Mười cảm tạ đồng bào cử tri quận 2,” *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: June 3, 1965): 1.

Thị Loan served on the fifteen-person Danang City Council<sup>231</sup> Ms. Trần Thị Xá sat on the fifteen-person Gia Định Provincial Council.<sup>232</sup> Ms. Dương Thị Hiém served on the nine-person Bình Dương Provincial Council. Ms. Trần Huệ Phương sat on the nine-person Ba Xuyen Provincial Council.<sup>233</sup>

The town, city, and provincial councils had minimal representation from non-ethnic Vietnamese. *Civil Rights* wrote that 10 upland minorities, 8 ethnic Chinese, 3 ethnic Khmer, and 1 lowland ethnic Chăm won council seats, but did not specify on which town, city, or provincial councils each person sat. A report in *Political Discussion*, one of the country's more popular respected newspapers, showed that six provinces in the Central Highlands elected the following ten ethnic minority representatives. Kpagol sat on the six-person Pleiku Provincial Council.<sup>234</sup> Three ethnic minorities served on the nine-person Darlac Provincial Council: Y Bham Nie, Y Djam Nie, and Y Blieng Hmox. Glinh sat on the six-person Kontum Provincial Council. K'Biang served on the six-person Tuyen Duc Provincial Council.<sup>235</sup> Two upland minorities sat on the six-person Phu Bon Provincial Council: Rcom Phoa and Rablau Koano.<sup>236</sup> Y Plur and Điều Krơi served on the six-person Quảng Đức Provisional Council.<sup>237</sup> Identifying every ethnic Chinese councilperson proved more difficult. Most of what we know concerns ethnic Chinese sitting on the Saigon City Council representing District 5, home to the more than 100,000 ethnic Chinese residents. According to *Civil Rights*, ethnic Chinese won four out of five District 5 seats. The four victors included Trương Văn Cón, Lưu Vĩnh Thái, Diệp Cảnh Sanh, and La Mạnh. More non-ethnic Vietnamese may have participated in, and potentially won, council seats had authorities not made mistakes informing the public. Muslim leaders from seven ethnic Chăm villages in Chau Doc province bordering Cambodia complained that local authorities only informed them of their right to field candidates for the election the day before the candidacy deadline expired.<sup>238</sup>

Overall, the town, city, and provincial council elections dealt with several major security issues. Communist forces attempted to disrupt or prevent the elections in various locales but largely failed. Communists operating in Bien Hoa province installed grenades on provincial roads 24 and 32 near Tan Dinh and Phuoc Hoi communes, wrote the *Saigon Daily News*. Five regional forces servicemen received minor injuries.<sup>239</sup> According to *Civil Rights*, infrequent incidents of violence or intimidation marred at least a dozen provinces. A number of polling stations shuttered for security reasons or had their ballot boxes stolen. In Quang Nam province, authorities closed two district polls for security reasons. Leading up the election, communists had forbid participation in the provincial election but its residents "are still enthusiastic to vote," claimed the newspaper. In Quang Tin province, communists entered Xuyen Moc district and stole almost everyone's voting cards. The most serious incidents involved violence against voters or election supporters. In Ba Xuyen province, communist gunfire wounded one voter and killed another, a mother to eight children. Communists shot other participants in Dinh Tuong, Ba Xuyen, Chau Doc, and Hau Nghia provinces. A failed attempt by communists to steal two ballot boxes in Mo Duc district, Quang Ngai province ended with nine voters dead.<sup>240</sup>

231 "Kết quả bầu cử Hội đồng Tỉnh và Thị xã (I)," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 2, 1965): 3, 6.

232 "Kết quả bầu cử Hội đồng Tỉnh và Thị xã (III)," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 4, 1965): 3, 6.

233 "Kết quả bầu cử Hội đồng Tỉnh và Thị xã (IV)," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 5, 1965): 3, 6.

234 "Kết quả bầu cử Hội đồng Tỉnh và Thị xã (III)," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 4, 1965): 3, 6.

235 "Kết quả bầu cử Hội đồng Tỉnh và Thị xã (IV)," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 5, 1965): 3, 6.

236 "Kết quả bầu cử Hội đồng Tỉnh và Thị xã (V)," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 6, 1965): 3, 6.

237 "Kết quả bầu cử Hội đồng Tỉnh và Thị xã (VI)," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 8, 1965): 3, 6.

238 Hội đồng Giáo Cả, "Ứng cử viên đồng bào Việt gốc Chăm trong Hội đồng hàng tỉnh Châu Đốc," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: May 20, 1965): 5.

239 "Trái với sự lo ngại của nhiều người, ngày May 30, 1965: Cuộc bầu cử Hội đồng Đô thành đã diễn ra hết sức êm thấm," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 1, 1965): 3, 6.

The May 1965 town, city, and council election had major significance to South Vietnam's post-November 1963 political development. After multiple decades under the leadership of communist President Hồ Chí Minh and non-communist President Ngô Đình Diệm, the failure of multiple political leaders to implement democracy from November 1963 to early-1965 engendered mixed responses from the public. Many citizens reacted to the anti-democratic climate with apathetic cynicism. At the same time, many others became more desirous for the legitimate implementation of democracy. With the overthrow of Ngô Đình Diệm's government in 1963, multiple short-lived South Vietnamese administrations attempted but failed to bring democracy to the country. Not until Prime Minister Phan Huy Quát came to power in February 1965 did any government have success carrying out this mission. On May 30, 1965, authorities organized elections to determine representative leadership at the provincial and local level, marking the beginning of a national trend of decentralizing political control post-November 1963. Over 70 percent of the population and more than 1,000 candidates participated in the election. A small, imperfect step to building democracy in South Vietnam, the town, city, and provincial elections brought increased political legitimacy to the country and modest hope to a citizenry long denied this basic human right. While military leaders soon replaced Phan Huy Quát's government following a provisional constitutional crisis, ending any chance for his government to convocate a national assembly, the town, city, and provincial elections foreshadowed, if not laid the foundation, for other important elections in the future.

### **The road to constitutional democracy: The September 1966 Constituent Assembly election**

The remaining years of the interregnum period unfolded under the provisional leadership of Prime Minister General Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, Chief of State General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, and a military body known as the National Leadership Committee, on which both generals sat. Coming to power in mid-June 1965, Generals Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu postponed legislating a national assembly election until twelve months into their rule, three times the amount of time afforded to the civilian governments of Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ, Trần Văn Văn, and Phan Huy Quát before military leaders intervened. On June 19, 1966, the National Leadership Committee legislated the September 11, 1966 Constituent Assembly election. Like previously envisioned national assemblies, this 117-person body had the responsibility of creating an official constitution and legislating governmental elections. Compared to the 1965 town, city, and provincial elections, more well-known political figures campaigned for a seat on the Constituent Assembly, reflecting its perceived greater national importance. On election day, 80 percent of registered voters participated in the election, up noticeably from the 1965 town, city, and provincial elections. When drafting the constitution, the Constituent Assembly decided on a unique, decentralized political system with a president, vice-president, prime minister, and a bicameral legislature. The Constituent Assembly then legislated laws for the September 3, 1967 elections for president, vice-president, and a 60-person senate. A major step in South Vietnam's political development, the November 11, 1966 Constituent Assembly election empowered representatives from across the country to bring much-needed constitutional legitimacy and democratic institutions to the country.

Months of public appeals for democracy preceded the decision by the National Leadership Committee to legislate the Constituent Assembly election. A few weeks after military leaders replaced Prime Minister Phan Huy Quát's civilian government, *Liberty* newspaper discussed the need for democracy in multiple front page editorials. On June 22, 1965, editors expressed aspirations for

240 "VC phá cuộc bầu cử tại vài vùng xa xôi ở các tỉnh, nhưng trên toàn diện, cuộc bầu cử vẫn tiến hành," *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 1, 1965): 1, 4.



members of the National Leadership Committee to perform better at their administrative duties than previous provisional administrators. Since November 1963, different political leaders had failed to lay the foundation for a democratically-elected government.<sup>241</sup> Considering the implementation of democracy an urgent matter, two days later, the publication opined that the implementation of democracy had the ability to guard against potential dictatorship. In a democratic country, “the destiny of society does not rest in the hands of any one individual or group, no matter how talented the individual or group.” To emerge from the “chaos” of the previous two years and reach the ultimate goal of democratic governance required progress and maturity, the newspaper believed. Editors hoped that democratic institutions convinced politicians to “rise above childish habits,” cooperate better and more politely, and resolve disagreements through democratic means.<sup>242</sup>

The next month, *Love (Tình Thương)* magazine, run by students at Saigon’s Medical University (Đại học Y khoa), published a lengthy letter to the editor from Dr. Nguyễn Đức discussing the importance of having a democratically-elected government. He portrayed South Vietnam’s political landscape as divided and unstable since Ngô Đình Diệm’s failed period of leadership. Several coups, poor leadership, protests from different religious groups, destructive rumors, and factionalism helped explain the current political scene. He warned that if political and religious leaders did not heal their divisions, they would continue to “stab knives into each other’s heart and back until the day the Communists took over” the country. The physician maintained that “only a newly-elected government [inspired] hope for peace and political stability” because an “elected government is the best form of a free society. . . .” Dr. Nguyễn Đức lamented that three previous civilian governments had attempted to convene a national assembly capable of laying the foundation for an elected government but failed at this admittedly difficult task. He urged citizens to start building a democracy society. Unsatisfied with the potential existence of just an elected national assembly, an official constitution, and an elected government, he wanted democracy to “permeate all walks of life from the leader to the people.” His emphasis on building ‘true’ democracy stemmed from the existence of perceived inadequate democratic structures in the past. During the First Republic, an elected president, elected national assembly, and official constitution had all existed but “were not enough to protect the Democratic regime.”<sup>243</sup>

In early-August 1965, the *Saigon Post* reported that military leadership had no immediate plans to hold an election for a national assembly. On August 7, 1965, after 45 days in power, members of the National Leadership Committee convened a press conference to recognize their achievements. During a question and answer session, journalists raised the issue of holding elections and implementing democracy. Prime Minister General Nguyễn Cao Kỳ maintained that the appropriate atmosphere for holding elections had not materialized after such a short period of time. He attempted to assuage skepticism about the committee’s desire to organize elections by affirming, “Although I’m a serviceman, I advocate democracy.” Conceptualizing progress in terms of military statistics rather than elections, General Nguyễn Cao Kỳ noted a significant decrease in the number of monthly deserters from the military (from around 4250 to 1,250) and a major increase in the number of youths volunteering for the armed forces (from 4,500 to 7,500). Improved security marked better progress than national elections at this point in time, he told members of the press.<sup>244</sup> Military leaders provided no timeline for when they might organize elections for a national assembly.

Multiple months passed before military leaders showed receptiveness to the implementation of democracy. On November 24, 1965, an editorial in *Liberty* newspaper stated that military leadership

241 “Lập trường: Cảm nghĩ đầu tiên về chính phủ mới,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 22, 1965): 1.

242 “Tiến tới nếp sống dân chủ,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 24, 1965): 1.

243 Dr. Nguyễn Đức, “Sau ngày cách mạng,” *Tình Thương* (Sài Gòn: July 1965): 6-9.

244 “Press conference of the War Cabinet on August 7,” *Saigon Post* (Saigon: Aug. 10, 1965): 4.

had convened an “extraordinary” session the previous week to discuss how to lay the foundation for democracy. Editors earnestly expected the military to implement democracy because the fate of the nation purportedly depended on it. In the newspaper’s opinion, the best politicians in the world had the foresight to look ahead to ensure a smooth transition away from their leadership. Even though a civil war created difficult conditions for political advancement, the publication felt that “we” must raise holding elections and creating democratic institutions to authorities. Editors believed that when the military improved the security situation they would allow civilian leaders to take over and build a solid democratic foundation. As part of this nation building process, they called for the military to allow national parties and opposition elements to participate freely. Silenced or subsumed during the First Republic, national parties and opposition elements had, the newspaper opined, the ability to provide genuine, constructive input to a future government about its perceived mistakes and work together with leadership to find timely solutions.<sup>245</sup>

The 1966 push for South Vietnamese military leaders to implement democracy did not come exclusively from citizens. In early-February 1966, at a bilateral conference in Hawaii between South Vietnam and the United States, President Lyndon Johnson encouraged Prime Minister General Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Chief of State General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu to hold elections. Leading up to the Honolulu Conference, President Lyndon Johnson faced growing international calls to end the war in Vietnam, translated AP and UPI articles published in *Political Discussion* newspaper demonstrate.<sup>246</sup> On February 11, 1966, a few days after the conference’s conclusion, *Liberty* newspaper discussed the release of a joint South Vietnamese-American manifesto outlining the two country’s unified goals. In part, the document confirmed leaders’ purported shared intentions to “build a real democracy” in South Vietnam. Although vague, the two generals reaffirmed their commitment to legislating an election law “in the coming months” to allow a national assembly to convene and draft a constitution.<sup>247</sup>

In late-March and early-April 1966, mass demonstrations organized by student and Buddhist activists broke out across the country, particularly central Vietnam. The failure by military leaders to implement democracy partially provoked these uprisings, South Vietnamese archival documents show. A governmental communique sent to the Ministry of the Interior dated March 28, 1966 stated that around 150 male and female elementary, high school, and college students protested in Dalat. One of their banners read “Students fight for democracy and freedom.”<sup>248</sup> Another communique sent to the Ministry of the Interior dated April 3, 1966 stated that elementary, high school, and college students demonstrated for democracy in Hue.<sup>249</sup> In Saigon, one of the Unified Buddhist Church’s main leaders, the politically-moderate monk Tâm Châu, voiced support for these and other central Vietnamese protests. As reported by *Vietnam Press* on April 6, 1966, Tâm Châu, during a sermon to thousands of followers, called central Vietnam’s non-violent demonstrations “consistent with the Unified Buddhist Church’s stand.” The Church demanded the establishment of a national assembly, other basic democratic institutions, and guarantees for South Vietnamese sovereignty. He read an official Church document from March 5, 1966 that expressed hope for authorities to meet the people’s aspirations. Tâm Châu concluded that only when military leaders convened a national assembly would the country have stability.<sup>250</sup>

245 “Lập trường: Tiến dần tới dân chủ . . .”, *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Nov. 24, 1965): 1.

246 “Đức Giáo Hoàng Phao Lô đề nghị giải pháp hòa bình ở V.N.,” *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Feb. 1, 1966): 1.

247 “Nguyên văn bản tuyên ngôn chung Honolulu,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Feb. 11, 1966): 4.

248 Lê Văn Khuê, “Số 6-CD/CTSV/1/M,” Mar. 28, 1966, UBLĐQG, folder #320, TTLTQGII, 1; Other protest banners read “Servicemen unite against communism,” “The United States must respect [South] Vietnamese sovereignty,” and “We demanded a reduction in the cost of living in order to claim the right to self-determination.”

249 Lê Văn Khuê, “Số 1023/TT/NA/QV/A1M,” Apr. 3, 1966, UBLĐQG, folder #320, TTLTQGII, 1.

250 “Buddhist Church advises non-violence,” *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Arp. 6, 1966, evening edition): 3.

After eight months in power, the National Leadership Committee took a major step towards legislating the National Assembly election in mid-April 1966. According to *Vietnam Press*, eager to satisfy public aspirations for democracy, authorities convened a National Political Congress in Saigon to receive public suggestions about establishing democratic institutions. Military leaders invited 92 to 115 urban and rural delegates representing various political and religious groups, professional associations, and civic organizations from all parts of the country.<sup>251</sup> On April 12, 1966, the congress elected its president, the physician Dr. Phan Quang Đán, a former political opponent and prisoner of Ngô Đình Diệm's government. Through by-law, a standing executive committee entrusted the congress with advising military leaders on the formation of an elected assembly in charge of drafting an official constitution.<sup>252</sup> For three days, military and civilian leaders discussed the potential design of a national assembly capable of leading the country away from military leadership and towards legitimate governance. On day three, April 14, 1966, the conference ended on a promising note with General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu announcing plans by the National Leadership Committee to promulgate a decree-law legislating a popularly-elected Constituent Assembly. In a speech, the Chief of State maintained that military leadership, like the public, wanted permanent and genuine democratic institutions. He stated that the first phase of the long and difficult road to South Vietnamese democracy began with holding elections for a national assembly.<sup>253</sup>

The National Leadership Committee spent two months drafting legislation to create the Constituent Assembly election. As recorded by *Legal Reference Collection*, on June 19, 1966, Decrees 021/66 and 022/66 announced the creation of a Saigon-based Constituent Assembly comprised of 117 public servants locally elected from every province. Each province had between one and three designated seats on the assembly. The exception, Gia Dinh province, had two dozens designated seats. Four cities or towns (Cam Ranh, Dalat, Hue, and Danang) had between one and two designated representatives. Saigon, the most densely-populated city in the country, had 16 designated seats. Authorities announced September 11, 1966, a Sunday, as election day. To ensure relative diversity, legislators reserved seats on the assembly for 4 ethnic Khmer, 3 indigenous upland minorities, 3 ethnic Chăm, and 3 ethnic minority migrants from north Vietnam. Citizens at least 18-years-old had the ability to vote in the election. Potential candidates had to apply no later than July 11, 1966, with an unofficial list of candidates subject to revision by authorities released to the public on July 14, 1966. Like the candidacy requirements set by Phan Huy Quát's government for the 1965 town, city, and provincial elections, only people at least twenty-five-years old with citizenship continuously since birth, naturalized citizens for at least five years, and those who returned to South Vietnam at least three years before the election had the ability to run as candidates. Citizens in violation of their draft status, convicted criminals, those who directly or indirectly operated for the communists or neutralists, high-ranking servicemen, national police commanders, and various serving civil servants (mayors, district chiefs, etc.) did not have the ability to run in the election. Authorities mandated that campaigning take place between August 26, 1966 and September 10, 1966, with oversight provided by local authorities. Covered by the taxpayers, the cost of the election and the candidates' campaigns had a flexible budget equally distributed among the candidates. Legislators required local authorities to announce the results of the election by September 15, 1966.<sup>254</sup>

251 "National Political Conference opens," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Apr. 12, 1966, evening edition): 4.

252 "Dr. Phan Quang Dan elected NPC Chairman," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Apr. 13, 1966, morning edition): 8.

253 "Address by Lt-General Nguyen Van Thieu, Chairman of the Directory before the National Political Congress, April 14, 1966," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Apr. 14, 1966, evening edition): 13.

254 Phủ Chủ tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, "Sắc luật số 021/66 ngày 19 tháng sáu năm 1966 ấn định tổ chức Quốc hội lập hiến," *Quy Pháp Vựng Tập, Quyển IX*, 1966 (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1967): 99-104; Phủ Chủ tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, "Sắc luật số 022/66 ngày 19 tháng sáu năm 1966 ấn định thể thức bầu cử Quốc hội Lập hiến," *Quy Pháp Vựng Tập, Quyển IX*, 1966 (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1967): 104-130.

Leading up to the Constituent Assembly election, a number of newspapers discussed the potential significance of the scheduled event. *Call of the Mekong Delta (Tiếng Gọi Miền Tây)* newspaper, run by journalist-activists born and raised in the Mekong Delta, expressed a mix of skepticism and excitement for the Constituent Assembly election. On June 25, 1966, a front page editorial talked of a “crisis of democracy” going back twenty years. Leaders like Hồ Chí Minh and Ngô Đình Diệm had evoked the term democracy to obtain democratic legitimacy through the people, but, once in power, allegedly revealed their true power-hungry character. “[The] people have been fooled many times. . . We can only look at the situation and laugh, constantly laugh, because the challenge of democracy and its associated drama is present every second of every minute.” The newspaper believed that remedying the country’s democratic crisis meant building “true” or genuine democracy,” which South Vietnamese people purportedly wanted more than anything. Editors urged every person to contribute to the cause, because “democracy is not a charitable gift given by others.” They recognized that many citizens had skepticism for democracy and elections given Vietnam’s authoritarian history since the 1940s, but sought to reverse this trend. Perceiving the people, not leaders, as capable of creating true democracy, the newspaper appealed for mass public participation in the Constituent Assembly election. To convey the importance of grass-roots participation in the election, the editorial concluded that the advent of true democracy depended completely on the existence of an active, if not activist, electorate conscious of the “dangers of democracy.”<sup>255</sup>

Two weeks later, the journalist Hồ Nam talked about the importance of democracy for South Vietnam’s political development in the Buddhist, intellectual-oriented newspaper *Southeast Asia (Đông Nam Á)*. The eventual promulgation of a constitution backed by the people would give the country a legal foundation, he believed. Hồ Nam stated that when elected representatives finally promulgated the constitution “[w]e have achieved a fairly long step on the path of democracy.”<sup>256</sup> Another journalist, Điền Nguyễn of *Skyline (Chân Trời)* newspaper, run by activists, also believed that a Constituent Assembly had significance because of its responsibility to legislate a constitutionally-backed democratic government. On July 9, 1966, the journalist discussed the historical opportunity the election provided society in a front page editorial. Since the end of World War II, authorities had allegedly prevented Vietnamese people from expressing their democratic aspirations. In the Constituent Assembly election, Điền Nguyễn saw an opportunity for “new elements” to represent South Vietnam. These new elements included politicians with youthful vigor, courage, perseverance, and goodwill. If society elected such people to the Constituent Assembly, the journalist believed, the country’s future government will have the “full element of democracy” backed by the people, making the defeat of communist internationalism possible.<sup>257</sup>

In August 1966, a few weeks before the election, *Liberty* newspaper discussed similar expectations for the Constituent Assembly to provide South Vietnam governmental legitimacy. For some political circles, the election represented hope for political stability and lawfulness. These political circles believed that electing a large national assembly responsible for promulgating an official constitution and legislating elections would bar any single party or bloc from legally seizing power. Once a national assembly and legal government formed, in theory, lawfulness naturally followed. Radical groups that condoned agitation and civil disobedience tactics to overcome a lack of adequate political representation would have to stop such behavior. No longer able to cite an inability to

255 “Thách đố dân chủ,” *Tiếng Gọi Miền Tây* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 25, 1966): 1.

256 Hồ Nam, “Cuộc vận động dân chủ cần phải nối tiếp liên tục,” *Đông Nam Á* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 5, 1966): 1, 4.

257 Điền Nguyễn, “Có can đảm mở rộng cửa Quốc Hội Lập Hiến,” *Chân Trời* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 9, 1966): 1, 8; *Southeast Asia* newspaper also hoped for high participation rates from younger politicians in the Constituent Assembly election: “The young generation must take responsibility before history, [must take] responsibility to protect the nation, demand civil rights, and construct . . . the country” (Jul. 10, 1966: 1).

participate in the political process as justification for their behavior, agitators could potentially face arrest and incarceration. *Liberty* newspaper had a less optimistic attitude about the Constituent Assembly election compared to the aforementioned political circles. Hope existed for a democratic South Vietnam, but not “great hope.” To create a “true democracy,” the newspaper implored the Constituent Assembly’s hypothetical future members to heed the following advice. When creating the constitution, give the country a “strong executive power” but also independent legislative and judicial branches capable of investigating the executive branch for corruption or scandal. As important, no member of the assembly should have the right to temporarily abolish democratic freedom (e.g. freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, etc.). If the Constituent Assembly met these conditions, the newspaper believed that South Vietnam might have a prosperous future and no longer need fear the institution of democracy.<sup>258</sup>

The press reported extensively on the results of the September 3, 1966 election and the composition of the Constituent Assembly. Election day saw a major turnout. A little over 80 percent of registered voters, 4,274,812 out of 5,289,652 people, participated in the election, up 8 percent from the 1965 town, city, and provincial elections. In Hue, despite rain and calls for a boycott by radical Buddhists, a silent majority flocked to the polls. 85 percent of the electorate voted. The purported cheerful climate marked a stark contrast to the chaos of Buddhist protests three months earlier. In Thua Thien province, home to the former imperial capital of Hue, more than 90 percent of the electorate voted, “contrary to everyone's expectations.”<sup>259</sup> In Saigon, two-thirds of registered voters (66 percent) participated in the election. Phu Bon province in the Central Highlands saw the highest turnout, 95 percent.<sup>260</sup> The vast majority of appointed electoral college members responsible for electing indigenous upland minorities, Chàm ethnic minorities, and northern Vietnamese ethnic minority migrants to the Constituent Assembly also voted.<sup>261</sup> *Liberty* newspaper, which had expressed modest expectations for the Constituent Assembly, viewed the 80 percent national participation rate as evidence of the election’s success: “The results were well beyond the expectations of the government, the press, the people, [even] surprising foreign journalists and astonishing some skeptics.”<sup>262</sup>

The composition of the 117-person Constituent Assembly had relative diversity. According to *Liberty* newspaper, low-to-middle-ranking or retired servicemen won the second most number of seats, 20. Civilian leaders made up the majority of the assembly. 22 professors, including Lê Thành Châu, Vũ Đình Long, and Nguyễn Minh Đăng won assembly seats, more than any other profession. The professional backgrounds of the body’s other civilian members included civil servants (18), public servants (17), businessmen (11), farmers (8), doctors or pharmacists (7), lawyers (5), judges (3), engineers (2), FULRO representatives (2), and one journalist.<sup>263</sup> Geographically, the assembly had representation from each of Vietnam’s three major regions. A report identified 96 of the representatives’ region of birth: 44 from southern Vietnam, 28 from central Vietnam, and 24 from northern Vietnam. A majority of the 117-person Constituent Assembly identified as religious or philosophical. Buddhists won 44 seats, including 10 Hòa Hảo. Catholics won the second most seats, 30. Confucianists won 7 seats. Caodaists won the fewest seats, 5.<sup>264</sup> The age of every candidate did not appear in the press, but averaged 40-years-old. At least one 25-year-old won a seat, Professor Nguyễn Hữu Hiệp, an independent from Tuyên Đức province. Nguyễn Bá Lương, a former elected

258 “Hy vọng được gì ở cuộc bầu cử?”, *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 30, 1966): 3, 6.

259 “85% dân chúng Huế nô nức đi bầu dưới trời dâm mát,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 13, 1966): 1.

260 “Mặc dù Việt Cộng liên tiếp đe dọa và tung ra 140 vụ khủng bố: Số người đi bầu nhiều hơn số chính quyền dự liệu,” *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 13, 1966): 1.

261 “Đây! Thành phần 117 dân biểu,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 14, 1966): 1.

262 “Thành công của bầu cử tại miền Nam: Một cái tát vào mặt V.C và thế giới C.S.,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 14, 1966): 3.

263 “Đây! Thành phần 117 dân biểu,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 14, 1966): 1.

264 “Thành phần chánh đảng và giáo phái trong QHLH,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 15, 1966): 4.

member of the Phước Long Provincial Council, represented the other end of the spectrum at 66-years-old.<sup>265</sup>

The Constituent Assembly included a number of notable and well-known people. In Saigon, awarded 15 total seats, individuals like Phan Khắc Sửu, Trần Văn Văn, Lý Quý Chung, and Đặng Văn Sung emerged as representatives. Trần Văn Văn, a wealthy industrialist and longtime civil servant, comprised part of the assembly's influential southern-born bloc alongside friend Phan Khắc Sửu. Tortured as a political prisoner during the First Republic, Trần Văn Văn had an impeccable anti-communist reputation and greatly disliked military governance. Proof that opposition elements existed on the assembly, Trần Văn Văn hated General Nguyễn Cao Kỳ with a near-unrivaled passion. Lý Quý Chung, a 26-year-old journalist for *The Dawn* newspaper, comprised part of the southern-born bloc within the assembly, but did not necessarily identify with older members like Trần Văn Văn and Phan Khắc Sửu. He previously worked for Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's government but had Third Force characteristics. Another notable journalist, Đặng Văn Sung, founded *Political Discussion* newspaper, one of the country's most popular publications. Generally pro-government, he represented the northern-born faction of the once-powerful Đại Việt Party. In Gia Dinh province, Dr. Phan Quang Đán won 1 of the 24 seats awarded to the densely-populated areas beyond the capital. During the First Republic, Dr. Phan Quang Đán had opposed President Ngô Đình Diệm's leadership as a member of the National Assembly, leading to his incarceration. Another notable member of the Constituent Assembly from Gia Dinh province, Trần Thị Xá, formerly an elected member of the Gia Dinh Provincial Council like Phan Quang Đán, represented the lone elected woman out of 19 candidates.<sup>266</sup>

The Constituent Assembly election's most popular candidates had middle-to-upper-class backgrounds, wide geographic representation, and professional diversity, including professors, businessmen, lawyers, physicians, and public servants. The delta province of Chau Doc, located along the border with Cambodia, produced the candidate with the most votes, Thạch Sum. An ethnic Khmer businessman, Thạch Sum received 89,983 votes from the local electorate. In central Vietnam's Thua Thien province, awarded three seats on the assembly, the two-ticket slate of the Buddhist lawyer Nguyễn Văn Ngãi and Boy Scout leader Trần Điền received the second most votes, 85,209. Three candidates from Khanh Hoa province located along the country's south-central coast received more than 60,000 votes. Professors Hoàng Ngọc Cẩn and Vũ Đình Long, running on a two-ticket slate, received 68,061 votes while the military physician Phan Kế Toại garnered 62,942 votes. Dr. Phan Quang Đán, running on two-ticket slate with former Gia Dinh Provincial Council member Nguyễn Văn Thân, received 60,962 votes. In Tay Ninh province along the Cambodian border, home to many middle-and-upper-class followers of the Caodai religion, Professor Nguyễn Hữu Lương received 60,048 votes. No other candidate or two-ticket slate received more than 60,000 votes. Candidates and slates that received at least 50,000 votes included Trần Văn Văn and Phan Khắc Sửu (Saigon), La Thành Nghệ and Triệu Sơn Hoạch (Saigon), and Lương Thừa Hải (coastal Binh Dinh province).<sup>267</sup>

The public considered the Constituent Assembly election an important milestone for South Vietnam's development but skepticism and disappointment still existed. On September 15, 1966, *Democracy* newspaper, run by the longtime journalists Vũ Ngọc Các, published a front page editorial reminding readers that an elected National Assembly had existed during the First Republic but did not actually represent the people or respect democracy. While a "significant historical event," the recent Constituent Assembly election ensured nothing. The newspaper counseled members of the Constituent Assembly to learn from the mistakes of the First Republic's National Assembly by respecting the aspirations of the people and, when drafting an official constitution, choosing a new, more

265 "Đây! Thành phần 117 dân biểu," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 14, 1966): 1.

266 "Đây đủ danh sách dân biểu Quốc hội Lập hiến VN," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 14, 1966): 1, 8.

267 "Đây đủ danh sách dân biểu Quốc hội Lập hiến VN," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 14, 1966): 1, 8.

decentralized system of national governance.<sup>268</sup> Two days later, *Democracy* emphasized the uncertain nature of South Vietnam's political future in another front page editorial. The country's fate depended on a majority of Constituent Assembly members responsible for picking one of many political system, editors maintained. The publication did not make any suggestions about which system to implement but seemed open to a presidential system with a unicameral legislature as long as the legislature did not operate as a "puppet organization" of the government like during the First Republic. Even if elected representatives selected the 'right' system based on intelligent reasoning or theory, a true democracy remained contingent on the assembly remaining conscious of public opinion. "A monarchy with people-centered ethics is worth more than a democracy that disregards its people," editors quipped.<sup>269</sup>

The same week, *New Woman (Phụ Nữ Mới)* magazine complained about the virtual absence of female representatives on the Constituent Assembly. The editorial described the election as a "brilliant success" which "created an atmosphere of excitement and confidence among the general public." At the same time, amid this climate of joy, "our sisters" could not help but observe with sadness and exasperation the "too few" number of female representatives. The magazine talked with "many women" about this matter. In South Vietnam, women represented about half of the total population but represented less than 1 percent of the membership on the Constituent Assembly. Female editors and interviewees agreed that discrimination against women or incompetence did not explain why only 1 woman out of 19 candidates sat on the assembly. They identified another variable, the identity of women in society ("danh diện của người phụ nữ"). Many women carried an indifference towards politics and did not want to participate in the election. Editors did not speculate on why many women had this alleged indifference, but maintained that if a more active and eager female electorate had existed the assembly would have more female voices. They hoped women learned a valuable lesson from this regrettable experience when preparing for future elections.<sup>270</sup>

On September 24, 1966, *Southeast Asia* newspaper portrayed the Constituent Assembly election as a promising development but not a major accomplishment. The election had "fair and honest" conditions but it remained unclear if the assembly sought to create an official constitution reflective of the people's true aspirations for democracy. This path to legitimate governance had many hurdles and required members to constantly "fight hard" and "always put themselves on the front line, campaigning for democracy and civil rights." To make the process of building democracy less difficult, the newspaper urged the National Leadership Committee not to legally interfere in the assembly's duties by evoking Article 20 of Decree 021/66. This article gave military authorities the power to veto any aspect of the draft constitution they wanted. Their decision remained final unless at least two-thirds of the assembly voted against the veto.<sup>271</sup> Another editorial in the same edition of *Southeast Asia* newspaper discussed the high public expectations for the Constituent Assembly. Author Phuong Thanh claimed that Vietnamese people knew the meaning of personal sacrifice for freedom and democracy better than any other nation in the world. Continuous struggles for civil rights across generations going back to French colonial period (c. the late-nineteenth century) purportedly confirmed this fact. Since 1945, one government after another had failed to implement democracy. Claims by Hồ Chí Minh and Ngô Đình Diệm of implementing democracy amounted to nothing more than "fine words on paper only." This "tragic" situation caused the state of society to decline and created lasting political divisions. Phuong Thanh maintained that citizens expected much from the Constituent Assembly after years of exploitation and betrayal at the hands of politicians. Members of the assembly had the ability

268 "Dù muốn hay không muốn," *Dân Chủ* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 15, 1966): 1.

269 "Chính thế nào?", *Dân Chủ* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 17, 1966): 1.

270 "Ý kiến chúng tôi: Với kết quả bầu cử Quốc Hội Lập Hiến," *Phụ Nữ Mới* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 21-27, 1966): 3.

271 "Nẻo đường tiến tới một Chính phủ hợp pháp," *Đông Nam Á* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 24, 1966): 1.

to earn back the trust of the public, he believed, by “truly think[ing] about the common interests of the majority of the people” when creating a constitution.<sup>272</sup>

Per Article 16 of Decree No. 021/66, the Constituent Assembly had a six-month window to conceptualize and debate the contents of an official constitution. Before the late-March 1967 deadline expired, members hammered out a nine-chapter draft constitution, covering everything from the structure and duties of the executive and legislative branches to judicial rights and political parties. As reported by the *Saigon Daily News*, about halfway through the drafting process, lawyer Đinh Thành Châu, chairman of the Constitutional Drafting Committee, stated that “each and every detail of the Constitution is a matter of great importance.”<sup>273</sup> The Constituent Assembly ultimately decided on a presidential-style political system with an elected president and vice-president, elected bicameral legislatures (senate and house of representatives), and an appointed prime minister. Never before had a bicameral legislature existed in Vietnam, let alone a government with a president, vice-president, *and* a prime minister. Comments from Phan Khắc Sửu, chairman of the Constituent Assembly, spoke to the justification for creating this unique, decentralized presidential-style political system. He maintained that the South Vietnamese people had a “painful experience” when they handed national leadership over to a single individual, here referring to Ngô Đình Diệm. The Constituent Assembly did “not approve of a purely presidential system favored by the 1956 National Assembly because the situation in [South] Vietnam has changed and . . . we are opening up new prospects.”<sup>274</sup> Lý Quý Chung maintained that the constitution followed no other country’s constitution. “It is a constitution, specifically [South] Vietnamese, in conformity with Vietnamese realities.”<sup>275</sup>

The Constituent Assembly carried out its duties of drafting a constitution with relative autonomy. The National Leadership Committee had veto powers to potentially shape the draft constitution but did not use them. One of the most serious perceived acts of interference from the National Leadership Committee occurred three months after the assembly convened. In December 1966, some members of the Constituent Assembly falsely suspected Nguyễn Cao Kỳ of orchestrating the assassination of assembly member Trần Văn Văn, one of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ’s biggest critics. Police arrested a one-eyed man for the crime but many people doubted his role in the murder. Trần Văn Văn’s tragic death inspired many assembly members to draft the most democratic constitution possible. Once the Constituent Assembly finished drafting the constitution three months later, members met initial resistance from the Armed Forces Council. An informal policy group, the Armed Forces Council consisted of numerous senior army, navy, and air force leaders, including 45 general and senior field grade officers holding ranking command positions. The Armed Forces Council had to approve the draft constitution before the National Leadership Committee promulgated it. In late-March 1967, two rounds of voting took place behind close doors before the Armed Forces Council approved the constitution. According to the *Saigon Daily News*, reliable sources revealed that Generals Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu took to the podium after the first failed vote and successfully lobbied their peers to accept the draft constitution.<sup>276</sup>

On April 1, 1967, the National Leadership Committee officially promulgated South Vietnam’s new constitution. As recorded in *Legal Reference Collection*, the constitution’s designers sought to establish a republican form of government that ensured freedom, democracy, and justice for present and future generations. Chapter IV on the executive branch guaranteed the president a four-year term of office with the opportunity for reelection once. Powerful but not supreme, the president determined

272 Phương Thanh, “Nhân dân đang trông đợi gì ở Quốc Hội Lập Hiến?”, *Đông Nam Á* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 24, 1966): 1, 4.

273 “Constitution outline put on floor,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Jan. 4, 1967): 1.

274 “Constitution opens new prospects for Viet Nam,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Jan. 5, 1967): 1.

275 “No pressure on constitution writing, Speaker Suu assures,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Mar. 23, 1967): 1.

276 “Army polls twice to pass constitution,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Mar. 28, 1967): 1.



national policy, appointed the prime minister, represented the country internationally, and commanded the armed forces. The constitution checked the president's power in various ways. The president had the authority to introduce bills, but they first had to clear the Congress and then the Senate. The president had the authority to appoint chiefs of diplomatic missions and university rectors but only with approval of the Senate. The president promulgated treaties and international agreements if ratified by Congress. The constitution imbued the president with special powers in time of crisis, but specified that he or she needed the permission of Congress, which had the ability to modify these emergency powers.<sup>277</sup> Chapter III created a 30-60 person Senate and a 100-200 person Congress with legislative powers. Senators had a six-year term of office with no limit on reelection. To guard against stale and inadequate leadership, the public reelected half of the Senate chosen by random after three years of service. Members of Congress had a four-year term of office with no limit on reelection.<sup>278</sup> Another decree mandated that simultaneous elections for president and Senate take place in September 1967 followed by an election for Congress in October 1967, later moved back to December.<sup>279</sup> More than three years and multiple governments after the overthrow of President Ngô Đình Diệm, South Vietnam finally had an official, democratically-backed constitution directing the establishment of permanent democratic institutions at the national level.

The September 1966 Constituent Assembly election marked a major milestone in South Vietnam's political development post-November 1963. The 1965 town, city, and provincial elections legislated by Prime Minister Phan Huy Quát's government had established democratic institutions at the local and regional level, but the public remained unsatisfied and demanded more from the country's new leaders Generals Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu. While skepticism towards the institution of democracy existed, members of the public continuously encouraged and pestered the National Leadership Committee to legislate elections for a temporary national assembly responsible for drafting an official constitution and legislating national elections. The public's eagerness for elections largely stemmed from a perceived lack of true democracy in Vietnam going back to the 1940s. These ongoing public calls for national elections, combined with international pressure, and Generals Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's own receptiveness to democracy, eventually led to legislation. On June 19, 1966, the National Leadership Council passed Decrees 021/66 and 022/66, setting up a September 11, 1966 election for a 117-person Constituent Assembly. Reflective of the Constituent Assembly's perceived importance, more than 80 percent of registered voters participated in the election. After six months of drafting, the body produced a detailed constitution. Chapters III and IV gave South Vietnam a unique, decentralized political system with a president, vice-president, prime minister, and bicameral legislature. A significant accomplishment, the constitution set the stage for highly-anticipated races for the presidency and a 60-person Senate culminating with elections on September 3, 1967.

### **Democracy realized: The 1967 elections for president and Senate**

277 Phủ Chủ tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, "Hiến pháp Quốc hội Lập hiến chung quyết trong phiên họp ngày 18 tháng ba năm 1967," *Quy Pháp Việt Nam Tập, Quyển X, Phần I, 1967* (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1968): 53-60.

278 Phủ Chủ tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, "Hiến pháp Quốc hội Lập hiến chung quyết trong phiên họp ngày 18 tháng ba năm 1967," *Quy Pháp Việt Nam Tập, Quyển X, Phần I, 1967* (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1968): 45-53.

279 Phủ Chủ tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, "Sắc luật số 008/67 ngày 30 tháng ba năm 1967 ấn định ngày bầu cử Tổng thống, Phó tổng thống, Thượng nghị viện và Hạ nghị viện Việt Nam Cộng Hòa," *Quy Pháp Việt Nam Tập, Quyển X, Phần I, 1967* (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1968): 72; "HĐ. Quân lực họp chấp thuận toàn bộ hiến pháp, ra thông cáo qui định: 1-9 bầu tổng thống và thượng viện, 1-10 bầu hạ viện," *Chánh Đạo* (Sài Gòn: Mar. 29, 1967): 1, 4.

With the promulgation of an official constitution on April 1, 1966, the Constituent Assembly set South Vietnam on a path to legitimate governance through a decentralized presidential-style system with a bicameral legislature. Legislation passed by the Constituent Assembly officially set a September 3, 1967 date for the presidential and senatorial elections.<sup>280</sup> The 60-member Senate race featured 480 candidates divided into 48 10-person blocs, eight times the required number. These 48 blocs promoted a variety of platforms and represented different spheres of society (e.g. religious, professional, political, etc). The presidential race featured 11 male candidates, 10 civilians and 1 servicemen. Notable names included former chief of state Phan Khắc Sửu, former prime minister Trần Văn Hương, the Third Force lawyer Trường Đình Dzu, and Chief of State General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu. On election day, 83 percent of registered voters (5.8 million people) visited the polls, a slightly higher number than the 1966 Constituent Assembly election. The 60-person Senate had representation from the country's four major religions (Catholic, Buddhist, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai) and two major political parties (Đại Việt and VNQDD). In the race for president, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu beat out surprise runner-up Trường Đình Dzu by a respectable margin. Some candidates made allegations about campaign tampering by Generals Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ but never presented clear, compelling evidence to back their claims. For multiple reasons, the elections for president and Senate had major historical significance. The elections had a record turnout, established foundational, constitutionally-backed democratic institution, and signaled the beginning of the country's Second Republic era under the leadership of President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu.

Discourse about the constitution and presidential election pervaded the press leading up to September 3, 1967. On April 1, 1967, the day the National Leadership Committee promulgated the constitution, *Saigon Daily News* took a cautious approach to the achievement. The publication considered the constitution promising but providing no guarantees of "true democracy." When President Ngô Đình Diệm promulgated the 1956 constitution "the country also rode on high hopes for more freedom and justice which never came true." The 1956 constitution "read well," ensuring the protection of civil liberties and separation of powers, but Ngô Đình Diệm coveted supreme power and did not honor these promises. With a new constitution promulgated, realizing freedom and democracy meant guarding against a potentially power-hungry president. The legislative and judicial branches must not let the executive encroach on their duties, the newspaper pleaded.<sup>281</sup>

The same day, Quốc Ân of *Dawn* newspaper discussed the presidential election in the context of Ngô Đình Diệm's failed leadership. In a front page editorial, the journalist expressed excitement and skepticism about the presidential election. The journalist asserted that domestic political circles aggressively hunted for news about potential candidates. "People want to know because [the presidential election] is an important event." Quốc Ân believed that the "great attention" for the election shown by society derived from short memories of Ngô Đình Diệm's dictatorial rule as president. This regrettable history created hope among many people that the country's future president planned to implement or respect "true democracy," meaning at minimum showing a respect for public opinion and the separation of powers. The journalist lamented that Ngô Đình Diệm had failed at advancing democracy during the First Republic. Purportedly, his time as president "only made the people sadder." The level of dissatisfaction escalated to the point that many people did not recognize him as "our President."<sup>282</sup>

Further commentary about Ngô Đình Diệm and the country's new constitution appeared in the *Saigon Daily News* that same week. On April 6, 1967, the journalist Phương Anh articulated a common position towards the constitution and presidential election: cautious optimism. The people

<sup>280</sup> Time constraints do not allow for a discussion of the December 1967 congressional election.

<sup>281</sup> "Constitution Day," *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Apr. 1, 1967): 4.

<sup>282</sup> "Tổng thống ! Ông sẽ là ai ?", *Bình Minh* (Sài Gòn: Apr. 1, 1967): 1.

had a “good reason to rejoice” over the constitution’s promulgation, but this joy “should be tempered by sad remembrances and experiences of the past,” a clear reference to Ngô Đình Diệm’s government. The former president’s “strong and powerful personality” convinced the Constituent Assembly of the necessity to draft a constitution that prevented “by all means personal power from growing into dictatorship” at the executive level. The importance of not repeating the mistakes of the First Republic made a “fair appraisal” of the constitution necessary, the journalist maintained. This appraisal portrayed the constitution as relatively well-constructed, at least in theory. To safeguard citizens’ civil rights, the document took scrupulous measures to protect the people against possible encroachments by the State or police. The constitution aimed to secure independence of the judiciary, enabling judges to carry out their duties without any interference from other powers, including the executive and legislature. It placed importance on representative organs. “The essential powers of the regime will mainly rest on those elected by the people either at the central level or at the local level down to the village. . . . This is the most far-reaching step in the direction of administrative decentralization.” The design of the constitution carried an “unconcealed distrust toward the Executive.” This suspicion led to the division of executive prerogatives between the President and the Prime Minister and granting the legislative branch a right over the government when disputes arose.<sup>283</sup>

By early-May 1967, still more than three months away from the election, the presidential field of candidates began to take shape. On May 5, 1967, Nguyễn Trọng of *Liberty* newspaper stated that the preliminary list of civilian candidates grew longer by the day. At least six candidates had formally or informally announced their intention to run in the presidential election. Hà Thúc Ký, a central Vietnamese leader of the Revolutionary Đại Việt Party, declared first. Others candidates followed suit, including former Chief of State Phan Khắc Sửu, former Prime Minister Trần Văn Hương, the journalist Nguyễn Văn Tuổi, the industrialist Nguyễn Đình Quát, and the businessman Bùi Ngọc Phương. At least four of these candidates either faced arrest, spent time in prison, or experienced torture during the First Republic for opposing President Ngô Đình Diệm. Nguyễn Trọng expected some of these candidates to drop out of the race because they either had no chance to win or had achieved their alleged goal of gaining publicity for themselves or some unspecified group. In fact, Nguyễn Văn Tuổi and Bùi Ngọc Phương failed to register by the July 1, 1967 deadline. Discussing candidate appeal, the journalist opined that voters cared more about the candidates’ personal reputations than their religious, political, or geographical background. Speaking for the newspaper, he stated that “we believe that, on the part of civilian candidates, personal prestige is the deciding factor of the victory or defeat in the upcoming presidential election.”<sup>284</sup> Two days later, Nguyễn Trọng speculated about which servicemen might represent the military in the presidential election. The military, representing some 600,000 voters nationwide, planned to support only one candidate. To complicate matters, signs suggested that Generals Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu both planned to run for president, potentially dividing the military vote.<sup>285</sup>

The Constituent Assembly continued to play an important role preparing the country for the presidential and senatorial elections. Although the National Leadership Committee had legislated the Constituent Assembly to dissolve after drafting the constitution, military leaders allowed the elected body to persist as a provisional legislature responsible for designing election laws not included in the constitution. The National Leadership Committee allowed the National Assembly to operate with relative autonomy in this capacity, at least until late-May. According to multiple newspapers, upon submitting a draft of the election laws to the National Leadership Committee for approval, the Constituent Assembly met some resistance. Military leaders communicated a desire for some

283 Phương Anh, “The Constitution promulgated,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Apr. 6, 1967): 2.

284 Nguyễn Trọng, “Lập trường: Chung quanh chiếc ghế Tổng thống,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: May 5, 1967): 1.

285 Nguyễn Trọng, “Lập trường: Nên để cho quân nhân tự do ra tranh cử Tổng thống,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: May 7, 1967): 1.

alterations. The central criticism of the National Assembly concerned Article 10, Clause 7. This clause required presidential candidates to obtain recommendations from 30 popularly elected officials at either the city, provincial, or national level to qualify for the election. Military leaders stated that this clause unfairly excluded village leaders from the nomination process and also unfairly denied citizens their right to candidacy. Unclear if the National Leadership Committee's criticisms represented suggestions or demands, Chairman Phan Khắc Sửu voiced objections to potential outside interference and asked military leaders for official clarification. Military leaders responded that their comments about improving the election laws represented suggestions, not demands. With that clarification, the Constituent Assembly held a vote to determine if the body should accept or challenge the National Leadership Committee's suggestions. Conscious that military leadership had ultimate authority to refuse the election laws, if not equally swayed by the logic of their suggestions, the Constituent Assembly decided not to challenge military leadership by a vote of 45 to 39. If the committee wanted the assembly to change or improve the election laws, the latter would oblige. When promulgated the next month, the election laws did not include a requirement for presidential candidates to obtain recommendations from 30 public servants.<sup>286</sup>

As recorded in *Legal Reference Collection*, the National Leadership Committee promulgated the election laws drafted by the Constituent Assembly on June 15, 1967. Known officially as Decrees 001/67 and 002/67, the legislation collectively included more than 100 articles organized into 13 chapters. These election laws mandated that potential presidential, vice-presidential, and senatorial candidates submit their candidacy applications by no later than June 30, 1967, later changed to July 1, 1967, with a preliminary list of candidates subject to revision by authorities posted publicly a few weeks later. Only people at least 35-years old with Vietnamese citizenship continuously since birth and those who lived in Vietnam continuously for at least 10 years before the election had the ability to run in the presidential election. In the senatorial election, only people at least 30-years old with citizenship continuously since birth, naturalized citizens for at least 7 years, individuals with restored Vietnamese citizenship at least 5 years before the election, and those with legal residence at any time in Vietnam at least 3 consecutive years before the election had the ability to run as candidates. Civil servants and military personnel wishing to campaign in any of the races had to apply for unpaid leave. Election laws barred citizens in violation of their draft status, convicted criminals, and those who directly or indirectly operated for the communists or neutralists from participating. The campaign for president would commence on August 3, 1967 and end on September 2, 1967, one day before the elections. The senatorial race started one week later.<sup>287</sup>

On July 1, 1967, the final day to file for the presidential race, an interesting field of candidates emerged. Before the midnight deadline, Prime Minister General Nguyễn Cao Kỳ suddenly dropped out of the campaign and agreed to become Chief of State General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's running mate. The *Saigon Daily News* stated that the Armed Forces Council held an intense, last-minute meeting with Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu. There, members of the body expressed fear that if the two generals ran against each other in the election they might split the armed forces vote. When the midnight deadline passed, 17 two-person tickets or consortiums had registered for the presidential-vice-

286 "Quốc hội yêu cầu T. Thiệu xác định lại xem có phúc nghị 2 điểm trong luật bầu cử T. Thống không?", *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 1, 1967): 1; "Trung tướng Thiệu trả lời," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 2, 1967): 3; "Objection sustained, Assembly told," *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Jun. 3, 1967): 1; "Cuộc thảo luận thông điệp của UBLDDQG chưa kết thúc: Ủy ban Lãnh đạo Quốc gia tránh né thì Quốc hội cũng lại né tránh," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 5, 1967): 1, 12.

287 Phủ Chủ tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, "Luật số 001/67 ngày 15 tháng sáu năm 1967 ấn định thể thức bầu cử Tổng thống, Phó Tổng thống," *Quy Pháp Việt Nam Tập, Quyển X, Phần I*, 1967 (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1968): 102-23; Phủ Chủ tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, "Luật số 002/67 ngày 15 tháng sáu năm 1967 ấn định thể thức bầu cử Thượng nghị viện," *Quy Pháp Việt Nam Tập, Quyển X, Phần I* 1967 (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1968): 124-43.

presidential election.<sup>288</sup> This list, which remained subject to revision by authorities, put the Thiệu-Kỳ ticket at a theoretical advantage. Informally representing the armed forces, the ticket stood out from an almost exclusively civilian field, which had no clear favorite. Although the retired general Dương Văn Minh filed for candidacy, *Political Discussion* newspaper wrote that the Constituent Assembly ruled him ineligible a few weeks later because his running mate Trần Ngọc Liễng held French citizenship during the 1950s.<sup>289</sup>

In late-July 1967, South Vietnam authorities sought to add legitimacy to the September 3, 1967 presidential and senatorial elections by welcoming international scrutiny. On July 29, 1967, *South Vietnam* newspaper reported that Foreign Minister Trần Văn Đổ requested for the United Nations to send an election observation team. In a letter sent to the intergovernmental organization, he promised to coordinate with any observation team sent by the United Nations to make its job as easy as possible. Trần Văn Đổ described the elections as “an important development in the process of real democracy in the history of the Republic of Vietnam.” The perceived historic importance of the elections necessitated the United Nations “take this opportunity to grasp some images in order to clearly identify the actual situation in Vietnam.”<sup>290</sup> An unstated motivation for this invitation derived from an ongoing war of words between South Vietnamese political leaders and the longtime secretary-general of the United Nations U Thant. Many South Vietnamese considered the United Nations’ plans for ending the Vietnam War through another Geneva Conference a threat to South Vietnam’s existence and a direct violation of its national sovereignty.

The campaigns for president began on August 3, 1967, one month before election day. By this time, authorities had officially approved or rejected all the candidates who applied back in early July. The race for president had 11 total candidates.<sup>291</sup> Hindsight allows for a brief discussion of the most promising and popular presidential candidates in no particular order. Trần Văn Hương, the 63-year-old southern-born Buddhist and former mayor of Saigon, promised to establish a dignified civilian government, build a prosperous society, and, like most of the other candidates, strive for conditional peace with Hanoi that did not violate national sovereignty or run contrary to South Vietnamese interests.<sup>292</sup> General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, a quadragenarian Catholic born on the country’s south-central coast, campaigned on a platform of building a legitimate democracy and improving quality of life with an emphasis on economic recovery and land reform.<sup>293</sup> The outspoken Third Force lawyer Trương Đình Dzu, born on the south-central coast during World War I, had the most radical platform. During the campaign, the opposition figure and self-proclaimed Peace candidate vociferously criticized military leadership and expressed a willingness to negotiation with the Southern Liberation Front as a political party, not as a legitimate government.<sup>294</sup> All of the other presidential candidates refused to recognize the Liberation Front as a party or government. Hà Thúc Ký, the middle-aged central Vietnamese leader of the Revolutionary Đại Việt Party, promised to build a diverse government of the people, fight corruption, and allow opposition forces to exist.<sup>295</sup> Phan Khắc Sửu, a southern-born Cao daist and agricultural engineer in his sixties, campaigned for land reform, the mechanization of the

288 “11<sup>th</sup> hour switch: Thieu, Ky link-up,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Jul. 1, 1967): 1.

289 “Quốc hội lưu nhiệm họp trọn ngày đầu đêm để kịp thời công bố lần thứ 2 danh sách ứng cử TT và phó TT,” *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 20, 1967): 1.

290 “Ngoại trưởng Đổ yêu cầu LHQ đến quan sát cuộc bầu cử ở VN,” *Miền Nam* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 29, 1967): 1.

291 The entire list of presidential candidates included Trần Văn Hương Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, Trương Đình Dzu, Hà Thúc Ký, Phan Khắc Sửu, Nguyễn Đình Quát, Nguyễn Hòa Hiệp, Vũ Hồng Khanh, Hoàng Cơ Bình, Phạm Huy Cơ, Trần Văn Lý.

292 “Platform of the Tran Van Huong-Mai Tho Truyen Ticket,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Aug. 27, 1967): 8.

293 “Nat’l policy plan of the Nguyen Van Thieu-Nguyen Cao Ky slate,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Aug. 9, 1967): 2.

294 “The ‘White Dove’ ticket,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Aug. 6, 1967): 8.

295 “Highlights of Monday’s collective electoral press conference,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Aug. 16, 1967): 2.

agricultural sector, supporting ethnic minorities, freedom of the press, and improving foreign relations in the Free World and neighboring countries.<sup>296</sup>

The opening of the campaigns represented a promising moment for the country. Thiên Lý Kính of *South Vietnam* newspaper stated that skeptics who had predicted that no elections would ever take place “missed the train” and needed to start reassessing their expectations. Presidential and Senate nominees worked “vigorously” to lobby voters for their support. Printers “frantically” published materials for the election. Representatives of the different presidential and senatorial consortiums set out for the provinces to organize their campaigns. “At this rate,” the journalist wrote, “the election atmosphere has become more and more intense.” Per usual, cautious optimism accompanied this historic accomplishment in the country’s long march towards the creation of constitutionally-backed, democratically-elected institutions at the national level. The newspaper feared that some “unrighteous” candidates may participate in the elections who did not deserve the people’s support. Editors hoped that the candidates saw the election as an opportunity to serve and improve the country rather than a competition for office.<sup>297</sup>

The same week, the country’s burgeoning presidential race experienced a major incident which almost derailed the election. On August 7, 1967, the race’s ten civilian consortiums embarked on a barnstorming tour of central Vietnam separate from the Thiệu-Kỳ consortium. When the ten civilian consortiums arrived at Dong Ha airport in Quang Tri province, no representatives of the local government or the local Election Campaign Committee awaited them, reported *Liberty* newspaper. Without the means to travel to their scheduled public talks, located some distance away from the airport, the civilian consortiums canceled the talks, abandoned their entire central Vietnamese barnstorming campaign, and returned to Saigon.<sup>298</sup> Most of the consortiums blamed Generals Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ for orchestrating the “Dong Ha incident,” but it remained unclear what exactly happened. The perceived lack of good faith by military leadership upset the civilian consortiums and raised public concerns about the fairness of the elections. Four days later, Chính Thành of *Liberty* newspaper wrote that all the civilian consortiums threatened to boycott the election if authorities did not admit their alleged guilt and pledge better coordination with their campaigns. The journalist maintained that “the people in general are very confused” about what happened in Dong Ha. He wondered if military leaders had sincerity for holding free elections or if they planned to stage the elections “like all the previous elections in the time of Ngô Đình Diệm’s government. . . .” Suddenly, many people began to have doubts about the presidential election taking place.<sup>299</sup>

The next week, the civilian presidential consortiums ceased their boycott of the campaign. On August 13, 1967, the *Saigon Daily News* informed readers that the civilian consortiums agreed to resume their barnstorming campaign in central Vietnam. They changed their minds after receiving a letter from the Special Commissariat for Administrative Affairs, an organization representing the military government in the organization of the electoral campaigns. “Although this letter does not give complete satisfaction,” the civilian candidates stated, “. . . we felt that in the present situation, with the country need an elected government to bring about stability, we should continue our campaigns.” The next day, Nguyễn Trọng of *Liberty* newspaper categorized the Dong Ha incident as “just a small misunderstanding that people are deliberately inflating into a campaign topic.”<sup>300</sup> Two days later, Phương Anh of the *Saigon Daily News* called the Dong Ha incident a “disheartening mishap” and “tragicomedy.” He did not know if foul play or circumstances beyond anyone control explained the

296 “Bầu cử Tổng thống và Phó tổng thống: Giới thiệu liên danh ‘Trâu cày,’” *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 30, 1967): 4.

297 Thiên Lý Kính, “Bình luận: Bầu cử hay không bầu cử?,” *Miền Nam* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 3, 1967): 1, 4.

298 “Chuyến đi vận động không tiền khoáng hậu,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 8, 1967): 1.

299 Chính Thành, “Những thử thách đầu tiên,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 12, 1967): 1.

300 Nguyễn Trọng, “Thế giới nghĩ sao vụ Đông Hà,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 14, 1967): 1.

absence of a reception committee at the airport. The highest administrative authorities in Central Vietnam maintained their innocence. They allegedly had scheduled a reception committee for the consortiums but the candidates' plane encountered strong winds during the flight which delayed their arrival and disrupted the schedule. The Commissariat admitted that "unsatisfactory coordination between the Central Committee for the electoral campaign and its local counterpart" took place. Phương Anh maintained that authorities "should feel morally obligated to do all that is possible to make the present electoral campaign a success."<sup>301</sup>

On the campaign trail, civilian consortiums continued to criticize military leadership supplemented by more serious but unsubstantiated allegations of interference or sabotage. Quang Dũng of the *Saigon Daily News* reported on August 20, 1967 about allegations made by Trần Văn Hương that some of his representatives in the provinces "have been the victims of heavy pressure and intimidation" by government officials. These "representatives . . . however, refused to identify themselves" because of alleged threats made against them, the journalist wrote. "The charges could be false, but they could be true, too." The journalist wondered if any of the "[t]housands of government officials in the provinces, from province chiefs down to mayors and village chief, might do some rough politicking on their own to ensure the continuity of their jobs." Another candidate, Dr. Phan Quang Đán, Phan Khắc Sửu's vice-presidential running mate, accused the Thiệu-Kỳ ticket of using government funds to campaign. Nguyễn Cao Kỳ described the allegation as "not true." Speaking to some 2,000 transportation union workers in downtown Danang, the general asserted that "at no time have I committed an act of dishonesty."<sup>302</sup> In the same August 20, 1967 edition of the *Saigon Daily News*, the journalist Văn Minh commented that the allegations and accusations by leading candidates "have yet to be substantiated." He called the charges of intimidation by Trần Văn Hương "rather vague." Some of Trần Văn Hương's official representatives in the provinces where alleged government pressures took place refused to verify the charges.<sup>303</sup>

Presidential candidate Trương Đình Dzu hurled a number of allegation against Generals Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. As detailed by Thanh Thương Hoàng of *Political Discussion* newspaper, the Third Force lawyer delivered his most serious allegations at an August 23, 1967 bilingual press conference held in Saigon. The journalist called Trương Đình Dzu's press conference the most "inflammatory" ("cây lửa") of all the press conferences organized during the races for president and Senate so far. To start, Trương Đình Dzu accused Nguyễn Văn Thiệu of having membership in the Cần Lao Party, a semi-secret political organization of Ngô Đình Diệm loyalists run by Ngô Đình Nhu during the First Republic years. In his opinion, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu had "eaten rice" with Ngô Đình Diệm but then allegedly played a role in his 1963 death, making him a "kind of cowardly, inhuman, meaningless person." Following these comments, if not personal insults, Trương Đình Dzu made some shocking allegations about electoral fraud and tampering perpetuated by Generals Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. The presidential candidate stated that he had "witnessed many election fraud schemes" of the Thiệu-Kỳ consortium over the past few days. He maintained that military authorities had orchestrated five newspapers, *Community (Cộng Chúng)*, *Construction (Xây Dựng)*, *Peace (Hòa Bình)*, *Progress (Tiến)* và *Life (Sống)*, to libel his character. Another alleged scheme involved physical intimidation, if not attempted murder. A representative of the Dzu-Chiêu consortium, Lê Đình Diệm, said that someone threw a grenade at his Dalat home on August 15, 1967. He reported the crime to police and Central Election Committee but the grenade-thrower escaped capture, making the culprit's identity and motive impossible to determine. Trương Đình Dzu further alleged that Generals Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ met with the

301 Phương Anh, "Saigon Diary," *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Aug. 16, 1967): 2.

302 Quang Dũng, "Weekly press review," *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Aug. 20, 1967): 2.

303 Văn Minh, "Weekend talker: The coming election in perspective," *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Aug. 20, 1967): 4.

commanders of all four tactical regions and ordered them to tell civil servants operating beneath them, from district chiefs to commune councils, to vote for the Thiệu-Kỳ consortium. Unfortunately, Trương Đình Dzu provided no evidence to back up any of his claims, leaving only unanswered questions.<sup>304</sup>

The next day, August 26, 1967, an editorial in *Political Discussion* newspaper portrayed the presidential election as still having much potential. Editors maintained that the people of South Vietnam, “more than anything,” wanted the future president’s government to provide political stability and remedy an “embarrassing situation” concerning control over the war and South Vietnamese-United States relations. They expressed concern that the United States “has gradually taken on more responsibilities, from a supportive position that has progressed to an active position, both strategically and politically. . . .” The newspaper did not observe any major improvements from this gradual increase of American control over the war. “So far the results have clearly not been much.” Editors asserted that once the election declared a presidential victor many people hoped that his government would take over greater responsibility for the war from the United States.<sup>305</sup>

On September 2, 1967, one day before the election, the French-language daily *New Vietnam (Le Viet Nam Nouveau)* run by Phạm Văn Nhơn alluded to the palpable atmosphere of excitement and anticipation in a front page editorial. “Despite everything that has been said about these elections, both in Vietnam and abroad,” editors wrote, “the [elections] will, in any case, mark an important step towards democracy.” The fact that the country could even hold these elections in the middle of a war made the event remarkable, they emphasized. The elections had “too large a number” of candidates but “most citizens, aware of their duty, will have thought carefully before depositing the ballot in the ballot box.” The newspaper maintained that no one had any idea who might win the presidency, let alone the senatorial race. Many voters debated if they should vote based on a candidate’s background or their proposed policies. The month leading up to the election purportedly provided the public with enough time to deepen their understanding of the elections’ various platforms and better know the candidates’ backgrounds, qualities, and faults. Apparently, many people preferred to vote for a presidential candidate “free from all foreign interference.” The newspaper clarified this preference did not mean the public wanted the future president to cut ties with the Free World. In the senate election, editors asserted a need for the public to vote for a majority of technicians, which war-torn South Vietnam “needs to survive and develop” more so than religious or political leaders.<sup>306</sup>

On election day, the *Saigon Daily News* offered several predictions about the outcome of the presidential election. The newspaper expected about 80 percent of the country’s 5,853,251 voters to visit the polls despite increasing attempts by communists forces to disrupt the elections. Terrorist activity in the capital city heightened as election day drew closer. Authorities reported eight terrorist incidents, including three shootings and five hand grenade attacks, between the night of August 31 and September 1, 1967. 1 person died and 11 people sustained injuries. South Vietnamese and American troops guarded polls across the country to protect voters from kidnappings, shootings, and other attacks. Once voting took place, political observers expected Nguyễn Văn Thiệu to emerge the victor by a close margin. They based this conclusion on the assumption that the Thiệu-Kỳ consortium carried the support of a majority of the one million people serving in the military and civil service, theoretically giving them enough votes to defeat any one candidate’s base of support. Nguyễn Văn Thiệu’s biggest perceived threats to the presidency came from three candidates: former Saigon mayor Trần Văn Hương, agricultural engineer Phan Khắc Sửu, and Revolutionary Đại Việt Party leader Hà

304 Thanh Thương Hoàng, “Trong cuộc họp báo để đã kích LD 9, ông Dzu tiết lộ,” *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: August 25, 1967): 1.

305 “Bầu cử và vấn đề thương thuyết,” *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 26, 1967): 4.

306 “Editorial: Votons “national” et “réaliste”!”, *Le Viet Nam Nouveau* (Saigon: Sep. 2, 1967): 1, 4.



Thúc Ký.<sup>307</sup> Another article published in the same edition of the *Saigon Daily News* offered more detailed predictions about the election's results. Political observers expected Nguyễn Văn Thiệu to finish in first place with between 45 and 50 percent of the total votes. They expected Trần Văn Hương to finish second with about 35 percent of the votes, followed by Phan Khắc Sửu in third place. More than 600 journalists and visitors from more than 40 countries planned to observe the electoral process on election day to ensure fairness.<sup>308</sup>

Covered extensively by the press, the results of the election released a few days later did not deliver too many surprises. According to *Political Discussion* newspaper, 83 percent of registered voters participated in the elections, up slightly from the 1966 Constituent Assembly election. Nguyễn Văn Thiệu won the election with 1,638,902 votes (35% of the electorate). He did not poll as well as predicted but won by a respectable margin.<sup>309</sup> *New Vietnam* wrote, "With the support of almost all the 600,000 combatants and their families, supported by a faction of Buddhists, by Catholic refugees and by other parts of the population, this consortium won an easy victory in almost all regions of the provinces and municipalities of [South] Vietnam."<sup>310</sup> The biggest surprise of the election centered around who placed second. Defying the expectations of many, the socialist lawyer Trương Đình Dzu received 800,285 votes (17% of the electorate).<sup>311</sup> The *Saigon Daily News* pointed out that Trương Đình Dzu carried several provinces directly affected by the war: Quang Ngai, Dinh Duong, Tay Ninh, Hau Nghia, and Kien Phong.<sup>312</sup> *Liberty* newspaper wrote, "It can further be deduced that people living in insecure areas where the war often wreaks havoc are hungry for peace . . ." and have voted for Trương Đình Dzu.<sup>313</sup> *New Vietnam* compared the Trương Đình Dzu "phenomenon" to the unexpectedly strong performance of the socialist candidate Francois Mitterrand in France's 1965 presidential election. Phan Khắc Sửu, Trần Văn Hương, and Hà Thúc Ký rounded out the top five with 502,732, 464,638, and 346,573 votes.<sup>314</sup>

The results of the Senate election created a 60-person body perceived as anti-dictatorial and independent in spirit from the executive branch. This relatively diverse body had representation from the four major religions (Catholic, Buddhist, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai) and two major political parties (Đại Việt and VNQDD). *New Vietnam* considered Catholics "the big winners of the day" because they "will undoubtedly have a comfortable majority in the future Senate."<sup>315</sup> Some political observers considered the Senate's Catholics a divided bloc and potentially unable to find agreement on many issues, the *Saigon Daily News* wrote.<sup>316</sup> The ten-person consortium led by retired generals Trần Văn Đôn and Tôn Thất Đính, campaigning under the slogan "Peasant, Worker, Soldier," received the most votes, reported *Political Discussion* newspaper.<sup>317</sup> As active generals serving under the command of General Dương Văn Minh, the two men had orchestrated the overthrow of Ngô Đình Diệm's government in November 1963. *New Vietnam* considered the consortium's popularity proof that the people still greatly disliked Ngô Đình Diệm and "voted for their heroes, their idols from 11-1-63." By electing those who opposed dictatorship, the people voted for democracy in the Senate race, the

307 "Polling day today: Close race foreseen," *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Sep. 3, 1967): 1.

308 Quang Dũng, "Weekly press review," *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Sep. 3, 1967): 2.

309 "Kết quả sơ khởi toàn quốc bầu cử Tổng thống và Thượng viện," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 6, 1967): 1.

310 "Editorial: Le Sud-Vietnam a voté jeunesse, continuité, stabilité," *Le Viet Nam Nouveau* (Saigon: Sep. 6, 1967): 1, 4.

311 "Kết quả sơ khởi toàn quốc bầu cử Tổng thống và Thượng viện," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 6, 1967): 1.

312 "Presidential election returns," *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Sep. 6, 1967): 1.

313 "Bất ngờ bầu cử ông Dzu về thứ hai trước cả ông Sửu," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 6, 1967): 1.

314 "Kết quả sơ khởi toàn quốc bầu cử Tổng thống và Thượng viện," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 6, 1967): 1.

315 "Editorial: Lecon d'un vote," *Le Viet Nam Nouveau* (Saigon: Sep. 9, 1967): 1, 4.

316 "Senate to be independent," *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Sep. 8, 1967): 1.

317 "Kết quả sơ khởi toàn quốc bầu cử Tổng thống và Thượng viện," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 6, 1967): 1.

newspaper maintained.<sup>318</sup> The same day, the *Saigon Daily News* stated that well-qualified political observers viewed the results of the Senate race as a “victory for Revolution and independence of spirit.” The body had several people who had exhibited independence from or revolted against Ngô Đình Diệm’s leadership. Besides Trần Văn Đôn and Tôn Thất Đính, these representatives included publisher Đặng Văn Sung (Peasant, Worker, Soldier), Professor Trần Điền (Peasant, Worker, Soldier), former ambassador Mai Văn Hàm (Public Interest and Equitable Society), former Governor of the National Bank Trần Hữu Phương (Public Interest and Equitable Society), and Nguyễn Gia Hiền (Great Solidarity), a former high-ranking official of the Ministry of Rural Reform. Political observers maintained that the Senate “will act as a real upper house to uphold the separation of powers and will not be rubber stamp assembly at the beck and call of the President” like the National Assembly during the First Republic.<sup>319</sup>

On September 10, 1967, Văn Minh of the *Saigon Daily News* broke down perceptions about the fairness of the election into three categories. Foreign observers, “regarded as having little understanding of the intricacies of Vietnamese politics,” generally considered the electoral process as fair and honest as possible. The domestic press, much more knowledgeable about local dynamics, maintained a cautious approach. Members of national press corps lacked “sufficient concrete evidence to state that the elections were rigged or more or less unfair. . . .” Unsuccessful presidential candidates like Phan Khắc Sửu and Trương Đình Dzu, and groups like the militant Buddhists and the Student Association, made up the third category. These opposition elements directly accused the government of bad faith and fraud, and wanted the election results thrown out.<sup>320</sup> Văn Minh did not share the opinion of those demanding another presidential election. The “concept [of democracy] is never expected to be perfectly realized,” he said. “Perfection does not exist in this world of relativity. Perfectionism is most often a curse, and the systematic insistence on perfection is certainly a neurotic trait.” The journalist found Nguyễn Văn Thiệu winning over one-third of the votes an “acceptable percentage to qualify” him as the country’s president. He maintained, “The state of insecurity throughout the country, especially in the teeming countryside, coupled with the utter diversity and amorphous [nature] of the population’s political credos and allegiances, makes it difficult for any candidate to muster up to 50 percent of the votes.” If any irregularities existed, as long as they did not have a major impact on the results, the election should stand, the journalist wrote. “Even countries with a long-standing democratic experience, such as the US or Great Britain, do not expect to have elections which are absolutely clean and universally accepted.” He found it “noteworthy” that some domestic and foreign critics who constantly insisted on South Vietnam having a perfectly legal and democratic government “never question the legitimacy of the communist regime in Hanoi.”<sup>321</sup>

The same week, *Political Discussion* published a long, cautiously optimistic editorial about the election and South Vietnam’s political future by Trần Văn Tuyên, a lawyer and former political prisoner of Ngô Đình Diệm’s government. Trần Văn Tuyên criticized some of the legislation and decision-

318 “Les vedettes du jour,” *Le Viet Nam Nouveau* (Saigon: Sep. 7, 1967): 1.

319 “Senate to be independent,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Sep. 8, 1967): 1.

320 The *Saigon Daily News* reported that police arrested opposition figure Trương Đình Dzu a few weeks after the election on charges of signing a bad check, illegally transferring money abroad, infringing exchange and customs regulations, and swindling 150,000 piasters. All the alleged crimes took place before the presidential election. At the trial’s conclusion, Judge Nguyễn Thị Ve found Trương Đình Dzu guilty of three of the four charges and sentenced him to nine months in prison. His lawyer planned to appeal the convictions. Justice Minister Trần Minh Tiết maintained that the charges had nothing to do with politics. Purportedly, the Courts had set Trương Đình Dzu’s trial date long before anyone knew about his aspirations to run for president. “It is simply according to court procedures that his case is up for judgment today.” Trương Đình Dzu asserted that the government wanted to humiliate him but only “humiliated the Vietnamese system of justice” (Sep. 16, 1967: 1).

321 Văn Minh, “Wanted: Reasonably acceptable government,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Sep. 10, 1967): 4.

making leading up to the September 3, 1967 elections. For example, he found the constitution and election laws rushed and believed that the dismissal of candidates Dương Văn Minh and Âu Trường Thanh from the presidential race back in July had an anti-democratic quality. On the other hand, the less-than-perfect elections brought new hope for society. “[I]n the chaotic scene of a disorderly election, one sees a great prospect: many people who have historically refused to engage in politics, this year have been ‘committed’ . . .” He believed that the “relatively free election” had “opened the door for a new political life.” The gravity of the situation mandated that the public capitalize on this momentum and succeed at building democracy. Trần Văn Tuyên did not agree with those who believed that the 1967 elections represented a “last chance” for South Vietnam to realize democracy, but described the Second Republic as “seriously threatened from the moment it is born.” To survive and flourish, he counseled President-elect Nguyễn Văn Thiệu’s future government to immediately implement a policy of national reconciliation and depend less on foreign allies to fight the war. “Up to now, we depend on people too much, so we have to complain about the infringement of sovereignty.”<sup>322</sup>

The September 3, 1967 presidential and senatorial received official validation from the Constituent Assembly a few weeks later. The election laws legislated by the Constituent Assembly back in June 1967 specified that the Constituent Assembly had to convene by no later than October 2, 1967 to either approve or cancel the September 3, 1967 presidential election. Chapter VII, Article 56 of Decree 001/67 specifically stated that the Constituent Assembly had the right to annul the election if significant, election-altering violations or irregularities occurred. As part of their duties, the body gathered to discuss alleged violations and irregularities during the election, determine what evidence existed to verify or refute these allegations, and make a final decision on whether to approve or throw out the results. According to the Buddhist-oriented newspaper *Right Path (Chánh Đạo)*, over the course of three days from September 03, 1967 to October 2, 1967, the Constituent Assembly hotly debated the fairness of the election. Members like Phan Khắc Sửu and Lý Quý Chung wanted the entire election canceled. By this time, Phan Khắc Sửu had returned to the Constituent Assembly from unpaid leave and re-assumed his position as the body’s speaker. Other members of the Constituent Assembly wanted the election upheld. As the climate intensified, some member accused other members of taking bribes from the Thiệu-Kỳ consortium but presented no solid evidence. When the time came to vote, a majority of the body demanded the right to vote by secret ballot instead of a show of hands. Leadership agreed and brought out two ballot boxes. Voting took place between 11:15 and 11:45 at night. They announced the outcome shortly thereafter. By a vote of 58 to 43, the Constituent Assembly approved the results of the presidential election.<sup>323</sup> This vote officially declared the presidential election as legal and final, bringing a symbolic and fittingly democratic end to the interregnum period. After almost four years of provisional governance, the South Vietnam finally had a democratically-elected, constitutionally-backed administration.

## Conclusion

South Vietnam’s political development during the interregnum period saw major structural changes and democratic strides following years of perceived failed leadership under a strong, virtually-unchecked executive and his out-of-touch, rubber stamp unicameral legislature. The November 1, 1963 military coup against President Ngô Đình Diệm, while failing to provide immediate political stability, set the country on a long, fragmented path to constitutionally-backed democratic governance. Starting in November 1963, multiple governments tried and failed to convene a national assembly, the

322 Trần Văn Tuyên, “Diễn đàn ‘hậu bầu cử’: Vài ý nghĩa về cuộc bầu cử 3-9,” *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 16, 1967): 4.

323 “Đêm 2-10, Quốc hội đã chấp nhận sự đắc cử của liên danh hai tướng Thiệu-Kỳ, với 58 phiếu thuận, 44 bác, 1 trắng,” *Chánh Đạo* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 4, 1967): 1, 4.

first step in the process of drafting a constitution and holding national elections. A public eager for but understandably skeptical of democracy and elections continuously called for their implementation. Citizens experienced the first taste of democracy through the 1965 town, city, and provincial elections organized by Phan Huy Quát's administration. A small step in the direction of administrative decentralization, the election created dozens of councils across the country responsible for representing the public in local and regional affairs. 72 percent of registered voters, 3,411,482 people, participated in the election of over 550 public servants. The next year, the Constituent Assembly election legislated by the National Leadership Committee represented another milestone in South Vietnam's political development. The 117-person Constituent Assembly had the responsibility of drafting a constitution to determine the country's political structure and character indefinitely. 80 percent of registered voters cast a ballot in this long-awaited election for a national assembly. Over the course of six months, the provisional body drafted an official constitution. Chapters III and IV gave South Vietnam a unique, decentralized political system with a president, vice-president, prime minister, and bicameral legislature. The April constitution and subsequent election laws set in motion the September 3, 1967 elections for president and a 60-person Senate. 83 percent of registered voters participated in these elections, a significant turnout reflecting their national importance. General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu emerged victoriously from the presidential race. The Senate-elect had relative diversity and a perceived independent spirit from the executive branch. These elections capped off a tumultuous but significant four years of nation building. Increasingly high rates of political participation, major efforts by authorities to promote administrative decentralization, and the political stability and legitimacy provided by constitutionally-backed democratic institutions made the interregnum period one of the most dynamic periods of political development in South Vietnamese history.

## Chapter Three

The Body Beautiful: Changing Women's Fashion and Gender Norms

With the overthrow of the Ngô family Catholic dictatorship on November 1, 1963, South Vietnam emerged from a relative dark age of popular culture and social development during which authorities had increasingly stunted entertainment, art, and personal expression. Following the November coup, with the rise of new leaders and a more open, less culturally conservative social atmosphere, the public enjoyed greater freedoms than ever before, engendering much social-cultural development and some controversy among cultural conservatives. As part of this socio-cultural renaissance, a more Western-oriented era of women's fashion commenced in South Vietnam. Marked by beauty contests and foreign fashion trends like shoulder-strap dresses, blue jeans, and miniskirts, this vibrant era of women's fashion and gender norms differed greatly from women's fashion and gender norms during the First Republic years. Under the leadership of President Ngô Đình Diệm and his sister-in-law Trần Lệ Xuân, a more socially conservative era of women's fashion and gender norms had prevailed. Western women's fashion trends existed in South Vietnam, but they did not proliferate. The modern áo dài, as it had for at least the past decade, dominated women's fashion. Worn over loose-fitting pants, this national uniform literally meaning "long dress" covered roughly eighty to ninety percent of the body, exposing only the hands, feet, and head. While Trần Lệ Xuân herself pushed boundaries by wearing a collarless áo dài, giving the áo dài a more Western look, she strongly and somewhat hypocritically opposed the influence of Western women's fashion, even legal rights, on South Vietnamese women. In May 1962, as recorded by the yearly government publication *Legal Reference Collection (Quy Pháp Vựng Tập)*, the Moral Protection Laws (Decree 12-62) backed by Trần Lệ Xuân in the National Assembly banned abortion, birth control pills, and beauty pageants to "protect the custom and capacity of the people."<sup>324</sup> Prior to the ban, beauty pageants existed but only in small social and artistic circles. With the passage of Decree 12-62, practitioners, organizers, and attendees of beauty contests faced a fine of 200 đồng (about \$3.00) to 50,000 đồng (over \$650.00) and imprisonment from eleven days to three months. Implemented on February 22, 1962, the Moral Protection Laws delivered a clear message to South Vietnamese women about what constituted proper behavior and the perceived immoral dangers of embracing Western rights, fashion, and gender norms.

Beyond the 1962 Moral Protection Laws, press and film censors working for Ngô Đình Diệm's government contributed to the First Republic's more restrictive social climate towards women by tightly regulating images of women perceived to be lewd or offensive. In mid-November 1964, not long after the anniversary of the November 1963 coup, the entertainment magazine *Drama (Kịch Ảnh)* complained that the French film star and pinup girl Brigitte Bardot had "scared" the country's Censorship Board (Hội Đồng Kiểm Duyệt) during the First Republic years.<sup>325</sup> Censors in America had this same problem during the 1950s.<sup>326</sup> With President Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow, a more Western period of women's fashion had the opportunity to emerge and develop. In January 1964, editors at *Drama* magazine celebrated this development by publishing a seductive picture of Brigitte Bardot in a low-cut, strapless top on its front cover.<sup>327</sup> Besides signaling a new era of film and entertainment in South Vietnam, the photo indirectly criticized Ngô Đình Diệm's former government for its paternalistic attitudes toward's women's fashion, gender norms, and sexuality.

324 Phủ Chủ tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, "Luật số 12/62 ngày 22 tháng năm năm 1962 'Bảo vệ luân lý,'" *Quy Pháp Vựng Tập, Quyển V*, 1962 (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1963): 62-6.

325 Trần Nhã, "Diệt Trừ Bịnh Sợ," *Kịch Ảnh* (Sài Gòn: Nov. 14, 1964): 17.

326 In Wisconsin, Milwaukee censors heavily edited Bardot's 1956 film ". . . And God Created Woman." The *Milwaukee Sentinel* referred to Bardot as the "deep breathing exponent of the low-neckline school of acting" (Prigge, 2016: 122). That same year, authorities in Providence, Rhode Island did not allow theaters to show ". . . And God Created Woman" because they perceived it as a "challenge to traditional values." In the film, Bardot played a "liberated" woman "not afraid to 'pursue her own passions,'" (Geltzer, 2017: 161). In Kansas, Brigitte Bardot's "shapely figure" represented one of the "major challenges" facing the Board of Review between 1958 and 1959 (Butters, 2007: 284).

327 Brigitte Bardot photo, *Kịch Ảnh* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 28, 1964): cover.



French film star Brigitte Bardot on the cover of *Drama* magazine, January 28, 1964.<sup>328</sup>

The proliferation of Western fashion trends like sleeveless dresses, high heels, and miniskirts in South Vietnam also departed sharply from the non-majority traditional Confucian belief that South Vietnamese women should behave conservatively and not expose their bodies. Going back centuries, most Vietnamese women wore long, loose-fitting dresses that hid most of the wearer's body. According to the journalist Hà Quyên in 1971, as the áo dài developed over the years, particularly amid increasing acceptance of Western individualism post World War One, the garment became more form-fitting and influenced by the designer Nguyễn Cát Tường of the Self-Strengthening Cultural movement.<sup>329</sup> This more form-fitting and immodest áo dài violated pro-family Confucian taboos about women wearing immodest dress and showing the body's curves. The scholar Martina Nguyen wrote that "[w]omen [of the colonial era] were afraid to don the new fashions because they were afraid of the public opinion of conservative Vietnamese."<sup>330</sup> Beyond the colonial period, Confucianism and its patriarchal teachings retained some of their influence. While less influential in southern Vietnam, where most South Vietnamese lived, Confucianism did have some relevance. At least a few articles from the interregnum period mentioned the perceived influence of Confucian philosophy on attitudes towards female behavior. On August 5, 1964, the columnist Lan Hương of the activist-oriented newspaper *White Star* (*Sao Trắng*) published "The Ideal Woman." Discussing what constituted the ideal woman, she wrote: "Not to mention that women also know that the Vietnamese people are educated in the spirit of Confucius. Although we prefer beauty on the outside, we need to have the beauty of the soul to be considered perfect."<sup>331</sup> The next year, in June 1965, one of the country's most popular newspapers, *Political Discussion* (*Chính Luận*), run by northern Vietnamese émigrés Đặng Văn Sung and Từ Chung, published an editorial discussing the rising popularity of blue jeans among

328 Brigitte Bardot photo, *Kịch Ảnh* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 28, 1964): cover.

329 Hà Quyên, "Ever Fashionable 'Áo Dài,'" *Vietnam Magazine*, Vol. IV, No. 10, 1971 (Saigon): 12.

330 Martina Thuc Nhi Nguyen, "Wearing Modernity: Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường, Fashion, and the 'Origins' of the Vietnamese National Costume," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 11.1 (Winter 2016): 85; Hữu Ngọc and Lady Borton, *Frequently Asked Questions About Vietnamese Culture: Áo Dài—Women's Long Dress* (Hà Nội: Thế Giới, 2006): 23-4.

331 Lan Hương, "Người phụ nữ lý tưởng," *Sao Trắng* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 5, 1964): 3.

South Vietnamese women. Its author, a male soldier, rhetorically asked, “Do women make their own decisions . . . ?” Speaking generally, he replied, “I do not believe that they have reached that level [because] male opinions continue to dominate women's attitudes [about female behavior], though not as clearly as Confucian writings have advised.”<sup>332</sup> The real but limited influence of Confucianism and its more paternalistic values on South Vietnamese society made the rise of Western women’s fashion trends post-November 1963 an important symbol of female liberation. Similar to the áo dài during the colonial period, Western women’s attire like sleeveless dresses, low-cut tops, and the miniskirt shunned traditional society’s rigid, paternalistic social order by embracing female sexuality and the spirit of Western individualism over South Vietnamese collectivism.



The 18-year-old singer Diễm Thúy, February 1964.<sup>333</sup>

Three sections frame this chapter on South Vietnamese women’s fashion during the interregnum period. The first section examines public discourse on women’s fashion in the months following the November 1963 coup until mid-1964. This period coincided with the growing popularity of New Wave Western women’s fashion trends and, parenthetically, a mid-1964 public debate over whether topless fashion belonged in South Vietnam. The second section surveys the evolving state of women’s fashion in the context of the 1965 Ms. South Vietnam Beauty Contest. The first national beauty contest in South Vietnamese history, this historic event included contestants from all over the country. Generating public commentary from a variety of publications, some expressed criticism for the contest and others support. The third section, covering years 1966 and 1967, focuses on the miniskirt. Officially arriving in mid-1966, the provocative European garment’s rising popularity caused one of the greatest fashion controversies in South Vietnamese history. Leading up to the country’s September 3, 1967 presidential election, discourse on the miniskirt took on added depth when the garment’s legality became a political talking point between candidates. Collectively, these three sections demonstrate a new, more Western period of women’s fashion and gender norms in South Vietnam.

<sup>332</sup> “Những chiếc quần Jean và người đàn bà,” *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 4, 1965): 4.

<sup>333</sup> “Beauty and freshness,” *Saigon Post* (Saigon: Feb. 1, 1964): 7.



Save this chapter, no scholarship on South Vietnamese women's fashion exists based on a close reading of primary source print materials in the Vietnamese-language. While various scholars have discussed Vietnamese women's fashion during the colonial period, particularly the áo dài, the post-colonial era remains almost completely unexplored for scholars with Vietnamese-language skills. Unfortunately, Western sources inform most of humankind's conceptions of South Vietnamese women's fashion. Many of these accounts portray the landscape stereotypically. For example, Western fictional literature and film strongly suggest that only bar girls and prostitutes wore mini-skirts. On the silver screen, Stanley Kubrick's 1987 Vietnam War film *Full Metal Jacket* bears the most responsibility for perpetuating this misconception. The second half of the movie, set in South Vietnam, begins with a Saigon prostitute in a miniskirt strutting down the street to Nancy Sinatra's pop hit "These Boots Were Made For Walking." A lesser-known Vietnam War film from the late-1980s, "Off Limits" similarly depicts South Vietnamese urban woman who wore short skirts as bar girls or prostitutes. In literature, examples appear more readily. Many works of fiction, written by both men and women, highlight this perceived exclusive relationship between bar girls, prostitutes, and the miniskirt. Novels and short stories set during the Vietnam War era like *Saigon Gold*, *The Sage of Saigon*, *Like Another Lifetime in Another World*, and *A Saigon Party: And Other Vietnam War Short Stories* all feature descriptions of bar girls or prostitutes wearing miniskirts but not other women.<sup>334</sup> As South Vietnamese sources show, contrary to most Western depictions, the miniskirt phenomenon had broader appeal in society.

### **New Wave and Topless Fashion**

Discourse about this dramatic evolution of women's fashion domestically and internationally pervaded the South Vietnamese press post-November 1963. One of the earliest examples discussing the Westernization of women's fashion internationally appeared six weeks after President Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow. On December 13, 1963, *Vietnam Press*, a pro-government news agency published in Vietnamese, French, and English, reproduced a UPI report discussing the professional rise of Emmanuelle Khanh, a twenty-six-year-old French-Vietnamese fashion designer in Paris. At that time, men dominated Paris' fashion design industry. The only "major [female] power" in the fashion world, excluding dress-makers, Emmanuelle Khanh complained that male designers "have forgotten the body of the woman." Women's suit jackets designed by men purportedly looked like outdated male suits. "[Not] one male designer started making youthful clothes but now he designs for women," she complained. Influenced by her modeling background, she aspired to design more feminine clothing for women. Shunning the high fashion houses and their custom clothing, which had dominated the fashion and clothing industry industries pre-1960s, Emmanuelle Khanh designed garments for ready-to-wear manufacturers. All the rage with youths, the ready-for-wear trend had several new young designers, including many women. The fashion designs of Emmanuelle Khanh, known for their youthfulness, fresh tones, and occasional wildness, sold in London, Paris, and New York.<sup>335</sup>

On January 4, 1964, an editorial discussing the evolving nature of South Vietnamese women's fashion appeared in the activist-oriented newspaper *Solidarity (Đoàn Kết)*, founded by Huỳnh Thiệp Môn in the months after the November 1963 coup. Author Tran Việt Anh began the editorial by disagreeing with an anonymous citizen's claim that women had progressed under the leadership of National Assembly member Trần Lê Xuân. "Too wrong!", he asserted. Her conservative influence and the Women's Solidarity Movement, founded in the early-1960s to direct, if not control, female society,

<sup>334</sup> Hugh Scott, *Saigon Gold* (Sedona: Pressage Press, 2008): 20; Steve Crews, *The Sage of Saigon* (Bloomington: Trafford Publishing, 2014): 164; Mike Shepherd, *Like Another Lifetime in Another World* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2014): 18; Diana J. Dell, *A Saigon Party: And Other Vietnam War Short Stories* (Lincoln: iUniverse, 1998): 23.

<sup>335</sup> "A Vietnamese Woman Emerging In The Fashion World," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Dec. 13, 1963): 8.

had caused women “to be lowered to the lowest level.” Five weeks after the fall of President Ngô Đình Diệm, “we see that women seem to have taken a very long step,” the author maintained. One major aspect of this perceived dramatic step forward appeared through Western fashion. The phenomenon of “beauty enhancement is very progressive, in line with the movement of foreign cosmetic products flooding the Vietnamese market.” These imported products included numerous brands of perfume, lipstick, and face powder. Urban women’s clothing trends and hair styles “changed completely.” Women’s clothing now “highlighted” the body instead of covering it up. Merchants started importing expensive fabrics of all styles and colors. Many women no longer observed traditional hair styles (e.g. long flowing hair, hair pulled into a topknot, etc.). They had curly hair, coiled hair, frizzy hair, shoulder-length hair with flat bangs, “dress hair” (shoulder-length hair that emulated the shape of a bell or dress), and other non-traditional hair styles.<sup>336</sup>

Two days later, the daily newspaper *Civil Rights (Dân Quyền)*, founded by the veteran journalist and promoter of the performing arts Trần Tấn Quốc, published an editorial asserting that South Vietnamese women now had the “freedom” to perform partial stripteases at nightclubs. These striptease culminated with women wearing underwear (“xì líp”) and a bra-type garment or provocative shirt (“áo lòi vú”). During the First Republic years, authorities had legally barred women from performing partial stripteases at nightclubs. *Civil Rights* newspaper wanted the ban reinstated, a somewhat ironic position given its emphasis on civil rights. Opposed to women having the legal right to expose parts of their bodies in a sexual fashion at nightclubs, *Civil Rights* newspaper maintained that women who performed partial stripteases misunderstood and “distorted” the meaning of the freedoms afforded to the public by Ngô Đình Diệm’s overthrow. The editorial informed readers that, on the night of January 3, 1964, a dancer from the Vietnam Performing Arts group gave a partial striptease at Victory nightclub in Cholon (District 5). Shocked by the act, the author emphasized that an “unmarried Vietnamese woman [had] danced the Twist on stage . . . with half of her breasts revealed. “[I]f the government does not promptly stop such abusive behavior presented on stage,” the editorial warned, other people will “dare to compete to attract viewers!” The author concluded by asserting that “Vietnam is always Vietnam” and cannot turn a blind eye to foreign art styles that defy the customs of a people.<sup>337</sup>

The next week, on January 10, 1964, *New Day (Ngày Mới)* newspaper, managed by the Đại Việt nationalist party member Nghiêm Kế Tổ, published part one of a serialized fictional story written by Thanh Quê titled “Concluding a Heartfelt Story.” When introducing the story’s female protagonist Loan, the narrator stated, “Everyone who knows Loan thinks that she follows the New Wave movement” (“Tất cả mọi người biết Loan, đều cho rằng Loan là một cô gái thuộc vò thành phần Đợt Sống Mới”). Although she did not wear Western clothing (“mặc đồ tây phương”), a trend synonymous with New Wave youths, she did challenge traditional expectations by wearing tight-fitting áo dài. That same day, *Public Opinion (Dự Luận)* newspaper, co-run by the respected journalist Từ Chung, alluded to the period’s more open social atmosphere in an article discussing the release of director Nguyễn Long’s movie “Thúy Has Gone” (“Thúy Đã Đi Rồi”). Depicting a love story gone awry between two artists “midst the hustle and bustle of contemporary society,” the film featured realistic images of love enacted by protagonists over the age of twenty, including passionate kissing. In one scene, an actress donned a two-piece bikini, likely the first time in history that domestic audiences had the opportunity to see a South Vietnamese actress wear the garment. Intended for adult audiences, the movie ended tragically with the love-obsessed male artist kidnapping and killing the female artist. Originally filmed in 1961, Ngô Đình Diệm’s government banned the release of “Thúy Has Gone,” pushing its debut back until after the President’s late-1963 overthrow. *Public Opinion* newspaper

336 Tran viet Anh, “Phụ nữ đã tiến hay đã thoái trong thời mụ Ngô Đình Nhu?”, *Đoàn Kết* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 4, 1964): 4.

337 “Trở lại ‘tự do’ đua tranh thoát y trên sân khấu,” *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 6, 1964): 4.

seemed unsure about the film's artistic merits. It asserted that "Thúy Has Gone" exhibited more "New Wave" ("đợt sống mới") and cinematic ("xi nê") qualities than any South Vietnamese film produced before but concluded by asking readers whether the film "is a porno movie? Depraved? Or just about Love?"<sup>338</sup>

On January 12, 1964, *New Day* newspaper indirectly acknowledged the advent of New Wave women's fashion trends in a front page cartoon chastising urban youths for dancing at night clubs.<sup>339</sup> The anonymous newspaper cartoonist considered the phenomenon of youths dancing to Western music at nightclubs improper and socially unacceptable. This same mentality had inspired the National Assembly during the First Republic era to ban dancing the Twist and other foreign dance crazes as part of the Moral Protection Laws (Article 4).<sup>340</sup> With Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow, General Dương Văn Minh's government rescinded the prohibition on dancing the Twist, Samba, and Tango at night clubs with some restrictions, spawning a dancing resurgence among youths and young adults. One of the two youths depicted dancing in the 1964 newspaper cartoon, a young woman, embraced Western fashion completely. She wore a sleeveless, low-cut, knee-length dress held up by two thin shoulder straps with a pair of black high-heeled shoes. She also had shoulder-length stylized hair, rebelling against the traditional definition of beautiful as having long, flowing hair.<sup>341</sup> A caption directly above the dancing female youth read: "Let's Twist again" ("Lét Tuýt Ở Ghen").<sup>342</sup> In the imagined background, the cartoonist juxtaposed scenes of rural poverty and battlefield sacrifice to express disapproval of this burgeoning social practice and, by association, New Wave women's fashion trends.



Cartoon from *New Day* newspaper, January 12, 1964.<sup>343</sup>

The next week, further evidence of the New Wave fashion movement's increasing stylishness among women appeared in the press. On January 16, 1964, *Echo (Tiếng Vang)* newspaper, edited by

338 "Nguyễn Long trả lời bạn đọc Dư Luận," *Dư Luận* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 10, 1964): 3, 2.

339 "Tranh thời sự," *Ngày Mới* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 12, 1964): 1.

340 Phủ Chủ tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, *Quy Pháp Vựng Tập, Quyển V*, 1962 (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1963): 63.

341 "Hair: VN Style," *Vietnam Magazine, Vol. III. No. 6, 1970* (Saigon: Vietnam Council of Foreign Relations): 17.

342 "Tranh thời sự," *Ngày Mới* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 12, 1964): 1.

343 "Tranh thời sự," *Ngày Mới* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 12, 1964): 1.

the chairman of *Drama* magazine Quốc Phong, published a front-page cartoon acknowledging the transformation taking place in women's fashion since the November 1963 coup. This single-scene image depicted two women embracing Western fashion trends from head to toe. Set in a private residence, one of the two women wore a Western heart-patterns dress that exposed most of her arms and legs. Her hair style resembled the British actress Audrey Hepburn's hairstyle in "Breakfast At Tiffany's." Appearing to wear make-up, she also had accentuated eyelashes, lips, and a beauty mark. Her beauty mark, located on the left side of her face, matched the beauty mark on the left side of American actress Marilyn Monroe's face. The other young woman in the cartoon stood before a large vertical mirror primping her hair. She wore a tight-fitting striped blouse or sweater, tight-fitting blue jeans, and black high-heeled shoes. Admiring herself in the mirror, she commented to her friend that, "If I dress like this, who would dare to tell me that I used to be a commander of paramilitary women?" This humorous comment communicated that the young woman had previously occupied a high-ranking position in an all-female non-combat military unit founded by Trần Lệ Xuân. No longer a member of the organization following its disbandment by authorities post-November 1963, she appeared delighted with the country's more open social atmosphere and her emergence as a new woman.<sup>344</sup>



Cartoon from *Echo* newspaper, January 16, 1964.<sup>345</sup>

The growing popularity of Western fashion garments soon clashed with the expectations of South Vietnamese court authorities. On May 1, 1964, *Civil Rights* newspaper reported that a woman named Nguyễn thị Hoàng Mai recently ran afoul of legal authorities when she wore a low-cut (in both front and back), knee-length, sleeveless dress to court. The previous day, a judge had summoned Nguyễn thị Hoàng Mai, a hostess on Nguyễn Đình Chiểu street (District 2), to give testimony as a witness in a robbery case. Her choice of "revealing" fashion exposed the top half of her "buoyant" breasts, the newspaper wrote. The perceived inappropriate act of "showing off [her body] to the world made "everyone [in court] murmur and look at her as if watching an exhibition." At around ten o'clock in the morning, Chief Justice Lý Bình Huệ passed by and saw Nguyễn thị Hoàng Mai's outfit. Displeased by the sight, the Chief Justice ordered her detained for several hours at the District Court

344 "Cartoon," *Tiếng Vang* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 16, 1964): 1.

345 "Cartoon," *Tiếng Vang* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 16, 1964): 1.

jail. Eager to bring further public shame to the hostess, *Civil Rights* newspaper published a photo of Nguyễn thị Hoàng Mai wearing the ‘provocative’ white dress while detained in jail on its front page.<sup>346</sup>

With New Wave women’s fashion trends proliferating in South Vietnam, the increasingly sexualized nature of women’s fashion abroad sparked off a major controversy in South Vietnam two months later. It centered around topless beach fashion (áo tắm hở ngực) and topless formal dresses (áo hở ngực), two garments not available for sale in South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese press published various articles about the advent of the topless Western fashion movement abroad and whether it belonged in South Vietnam. On July 3, 1964, the front page of *Liberty* newspaper carried a translated AP report from Italy stating that police in Palermo had confiscated topless swimsuits known as monokinis on display in two shops. In Rome and Milan, curious onlookers and critics gathered in front of shops selling the garment. Italian police tried to quell such behavior by declaring that people should not pay attention to how many monokinis a shop sold.<sup>347</sup> The next day, the *Saigon Daily News*, an English-language daily run by South Vietnamese journalists, published a report from Reuters claiming that Greek police kicked a French dancer out of the country for wearing a monokini in an Athens night club.<sup>348</sup>

On July 5, 1964, *Solidarity* (Đoàn Kết) newspaper reported that topless formal dresses had arrived in non-communist East Asia. In Hong Kong, a mannequin wearing a topless long formal dress appeared in a store’s window display. *Solidarity* published a picture of this mannequin on the front page. The owner of the clothing store said that she had yet to sell one to a customer. Meanwhile, in Taiwan, a budding topless swim suit movement already existed but faced imminent eradication following a police ban on topless fashion.<sup>349</sup> The next day, *Solidarity* reported that authorities in Venezuela and Thailand had spoken out against topless fashion. The government of Venezuela banned topless garments. Thai police threatened to “immediately arrest” (“bắt tức khắc”) women who embraced this fashion. In association with the story, the newspaper published a photograph of an Australian model wearing a black monokini on the front page.<sup>350</sup> Framed from a posterior angle to avoid revealing any frontal nudity, the photo remained in line with South Vietnam’s ambiguous censorship regulations.

On July 7, 1964, *Liberty* newspaper, one of the country’s most popular and respected newspaper, reported that the monokini had “jumped” into Soviet society. Critics there considered the garment a bourgeois symbol.<sup>351</sup> The next day, this daily publication carried a translated UPI report from a Vatican newspaper condemning topless fashion. Catholic leaders described the garment as outdated, from a time when “humans were naked as animals.”<sup>352</sup> On July 10, 1964, the *Saigon Daily News* carried a UPI article about the Italian film star Sophia Loren. Known for her more sophisticated fashion sense, the popular actress criticized the monokini in the article: “There are more important things than those. I don’t even like to talk about them.”<sup>353</sup> Two days later, on July 12, 1964, *Liberty* newspaper reported on the monokini in America. In Washington DC, a female proponent of the monokini hoped to gain support from President Lyndon Johnson by leaving a poster of a woman wearing a monokini in front of the White House gates. In Chicago, the City Council banned topless fashion at beaches and places of leisure.<sup>354</sup>

346 “Một bài học cho các cô ăn mặc hở hang ăn mặc thế này mà đi hầu tòa!”, *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: May 1, 1964): 1.

347 “Áo tắm không che ngực đã bị cảnh sát tịch thu,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 3, 1964): 1.

348 “To Leave Greece After Appearing Bare-Bosomed,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Jul. 4, 1964): 7.

349 “Áo hở ngực lan tràn đến Hương Cảng,” *Đoàn Kết* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 5, 1964): 1.

350 “Lấy áo tắm hở ngực làm quốc phục,” *Đoàn Kết* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 6, 1964): 1, 4.

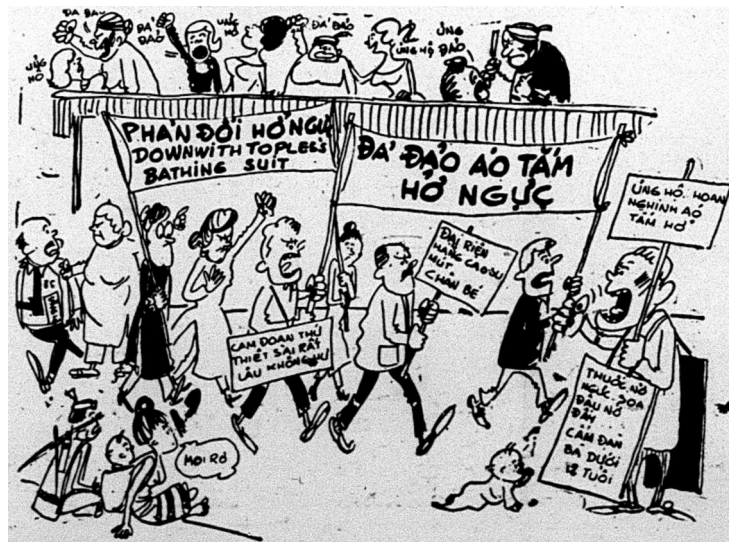
351 “Áo hở ngực đã nhảy vào xã hội của Xô viết,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 7, 1964): 1.

352 “Báo của Tòa Thánh và áo tắm hở ngực,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 8, 1964): 1.

353 “Sophia Loren Causes Bumpers In Rome,” *Saigon Daily News* (Jul. 10, 1964): 5.

354 “Áo tắm hở ngực và Tổng Thống Johnson,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 12, 1964): 1.

The spread of topless fashion trends abroad and their possible imminent arrival in South Vietnam engendered much conversation. In the press, one of the earliest examples discussing the potential domestic arrival of Western topless fashion appeared on the front page of *Liberty* newspaper. On Jul 7, 1964, the paper's anonymous cartoonist depicted three men and three women staging a protest march against topless fashion through the streets. Four of the protesters carried a large banner reading: "Oppose Formal Topless Wear" ("Phản đối hở ngực") and "Down with the monokini" ("Đả đảo áo tắm hở ngực"). Another protester, a presumed clothing salesman or manufacturer, held a smaller sign that read, "We ensure our products are genuine, of good quality, and hold up over time" ("Cam đoan thứ thiệt, xài rất lâu không hư"). In the background, eight people standing on a balcony argued over whether they supported or opposed the monokini. Three declared their support for the monokini. Five expressed opposition. A young boy quickly changed his opinion after a parental figure objected. Adding a sense of irony and cultural relativity to the debate, in the foreground, an upland minority woman in traditional topless attire observed the protest from the side of the street. For many upland minorities in South Vietnam, the social taboo against exposed chests did not exist. To elucidate the perceived ethnocentric nature of the street protest against topless fashion, the caricatured ethnic minority woman responded by calling the shirt-wearing protesters "Savages."<sup>355</sup>



Cartoon from *Liberty* newspaper, July 7, 1964.<sup>356</sup>

On July 12, 1964, the activist-oriented newspaper *Action* (Hành Động) published a front page article announcing the arrival of another, head-turning fashion style in Saigon: Tops that covered the breasts but exposed the stomach. The newspaper reported that denizens of Saigon had recently spotted a young woman of Vietnamese-French descent crossing Tôn Thất Đạm Street (District 1) wearing a thin, white top garment that "exposed much skin." This burgeoning urban fashion trend of showing the midriff "dazzled" crowds on the street, who focused their eyes on the passing women. Somewhat embarrassed by all the attention, the woman and her male companion ducked into the Thành Công rice shop. When the couple finally exited the shop, they hopped in a taxi and departed the area.<sup>357</sup>

The next day, *Solidarity* (Đoàn Kết) newspaper weighed in on the topic of topless fashion abroad in a front page editorial titled "Certainly, the government will not allow topless formal wear to

355 "Cartoon," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 7, 1964): 1.

356 "Cartoon," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 7, 1964): 1.

357 "Một áo tắm hở ngực xuất hiện tại Saigon," *Hành Động* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 12, 1964): 1, 4.

enter Vietnam.” For several months, topless fashion has caused “agitation” in many countries, causing ongoing debates about the controversial nature of the two-piece bikini to subside.<sup>358</sup> The author noted that Western topless fashion had already arrived in parts of Asia. This development allegedly went against traditional Asian values: “In the ancient civilized countries of the East [topless fashion was] not only considered too revealing, but absolutely influenced the concept of traditional morality.” The author, only identified by the initials T.H., hoped that the monokini remained abroad and unavailable in South Vietnam because “Vietnam is a religious country respectful of morality.” Portraying topless fashion in the worst light possible, the editorial maintained that such “evil behaviors” jeopardized South Vietnam’s, if not human kind’s, very existence.<sup>359</sup>

Over the next two days, multiple South Vietnamese newspapers rebuffed local critics of Western topless fashion movement abroad by highlighting the existence of traditional topless fashion trends in the highlands of central Vietnam where many ethnic minorities lived. On July 14, 1964, *Liberty* newspaper wrote that topless fashion had caused “turbulence” abroad and stirred up public opinion. “But what do we think about the ‘revealing’ outfits of ethnic minorities here?”, the author quipped, challenging those critics who considered the Western fashion trend immoral.<sup>360</sup> The next day, *Construction* newspaper published a satirical cartoon crediting highland women with founding the global topless fashion movement. Set in the rural highlands, the cartoon featured two caricatured topless ethnic minority women discussing European women’s fashion. “I heard that European women have just created a new type of topless swimsuit,” said one of the two women. The other woman responded, “Really! So, we now know that foreign women can keep up the momentum and progress in their own country.”<sup>361</sup>

South Vietnamese journalists continued to report on the topless fashion movement abroad for at least a few more months. On September 5, 1964, *Discourse (Nghị Luận)* newspaper, run by the Đại Việt nationalist party member Nghiêm Kế Tổ, published an editorial stating that European and American women continued to discuss topless fashion, a “rather delicate” issue. Of those foreign women debating the trend, some favored the practice and other opposed it. The author of the editorial had no issue with topless fashion domestically or its hypothetical arrival in South Vietnam. Like other South Vietnamese journalists, the author disagreed with domestic critics who argued that topless fashion violated traditional Asian customs and did not belong in the region. The journalist pointed out that, “for a long time,” women in other parts of Asia have appeared topless and no one has objected. This late-1964 article about topless fashion brought a symbolic close to the three-month-long South Vietnamese debate on the international phenomenon. By late-1964, monokinis and topless formal dresses had failed to catch on with mainstream consumers around the world.<sup>362</sup> This mercurial international phenomenon retreated into relative obscurity, and with it the need for South Vietnamese to debate the appropriateness of topless fashion in South Vietnam.

The months following the November 1963 coup against President Ngô Đình Diệm’s government marked the advent of a more Western period of women’s fashion. Defined by New Wave

358 T.H., “Chắc chắn chính quyền sẽ cấm không cho loại áo hở ngực du nhập Việt Nam,” *Đoàn Kết* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 13, 1964): 1; At this time, many people in the West still considered the two-piece bikini a controversial garment, according to the American journalist Gay Pauley. By at least July 1964, San Francisco authorities had banned bikinis at public pools (Pauley, 1964: 7).

359 T.H., “Chắc chắn chính quyền sẽ cấm không cho loại áo hở ngực du nhập Việt Nam,” *Đoàn Kết* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 13, 1964): 1.

360 “Cũng ‘tóp lét’ như ai!,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 14, 1964): 1.

361 VDat, “Cartoon,” *Xây Dựng* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 15, 1964): 1.

362 In mid-1965, the *Saigon Post* reported that “No topless suits or ‘monokinis’ are seen on European beaches this summer.” Garments like the minikini, multikini, and Bondkini popularized by women from the James Bond film series replaced this 1964 fashion trend (Jul. 19, 1965: 6).

fashion trends, this new period saw many women move away from the more socially conservative climate under President Ngô Đình Diệm and National Assembly member Trần Lệ Xuân. The arrival of Western fashion trends like shorter dresses, lipstick, face powder, low-cut tops, and jeans signaled greater social freedoms for women but divided society for challenging traditional concepts about gender norms. As this debate over New Wave fashion trends and the sexualization of South Vietnamese women developed, the topless fashion movement broke out abroad around mid-1964, further accelerating concerns about the influence of Western culture on South Vietnamese women for some people. Critics maintained that topless fashion did not belong in South Vietnam and disrespected traditional customs. Other journalists questioned the selective outrage of those who opposed foreign women wearing topless fashion but not ethnic minority women in the Central Highlands. The growing popularity of Western women's fashion trends in South Vietnam post-November 1963 represented an important opening stage of development for female society that foreshadowed and set the tone for future developments and debates about gender norms and national identity.

### **The 1965 Miss South Vietnam Beauty Contest**

Western women's fashion trends continued to have an influence on South Vietnamese women beyond 1964. In 1965, this growing influence manifested through the national beauty contest, a subjective competition between young women based on physical appearance and personality that promoted an idealized, Western standard of beauty.<sup>363</sup> On October 21, 22, 1965, a grassroots network of members from the sports, beauty, and health communities organized a national beauty contest known as Miss Vietnam to identify the country's most attractive woman. Taking place at Saigon's Hung Dao theater in District 1, numerous women from various parts of the country participated in the pageant. The first major beauty contest since the National Assembly had banned beauty contests as part of the 1962 Moral Protection Laws, the Saigon-based event marked a milestone in the social and cultural development of female society post-1963.

Public reports about the foundation of a 1965 Miss Vietnam Beauty Contest first appeared in September 1965. On September 21, 1965, *Liberty* newspaper announced that the Vietnam Cycling Board had formed a committee to organize the beauty contest. The Vietnam Cycling Board took responsibility for organizing the event in response to an invitation from the Philippine Cycling Board. In Luzon, the Philippine Cycling Board planned to organize the first Miss Asia Beauty Contest later that year and invited South Vietnam to participate in the competition. In Saigon, hoping to identify a beauty queen to represent South Vietnam at the Asian competition, the Vietnam Cycling Board took up the body's call. The organizing committee set up by the Vietnam Cycling Board wanted to attract the most impressive field of contestants possible from which to select the country's first national beauty queen. At a mid-September press conference, the Cycling Board announced that potential contestants must meet a specific set of aesthetic, moral, and social criteria before applying. Only respectful, unmarried women at least four foot eleven inches tall between the ages of 16 and 25 with at least a high school education and no children had the ability to enter.<sup>364</sup> Organizers set a September 30 deadline for women to apply.

Organizers of the Miss Vietnam Beauty Contest divided the competition into two parts: a formal wear competition in traditional áo dài and a casual wear competition in Western swimsuits. A panel of judges graded contestants according to face, body, and personality, including "national appearance." The ideal contestant had smooth, natural, even skin, did not wear a wig or jewelry, and had "regular

363 As discussed by Colleen Cohen, et. al., in *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage*, the Western beauty pageant acted as "conduit for proliferating western styles, values, and expectations" abroad (1996: 10).

364 "Hoa hậu VN 1965 để tham dự giải Hoa Hậu Á Châu tại Phi luật Tân?", *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 21, 1965): 1.



Asian features.” This latter rule excluded biracial South Vietnamese women with European backgrounds from participating in the competition. A panel of judges critiqued the body according to international standards, including posture, straight legs, and balance proportionality, particularly body length relative to the length of the head. Judges measured a contestant’s personality based on their charm, speech, mature manner, and character. Part of the character evaluation process took during the formal wear competition, when contestants exhibited their “national beauty” in an áo dài of their choice. Organizers required potential contestants to submit a consent form from a parent or guardian along with their application.<sup>365</sup> To make the event more socially acceptable, the Vietnam Cycling Board planned to donate twenty percent of the contest’s proceeds to the Ministry of the Interior, some of which earmarked to support soldiers.<sup>366</sup>

At the conclusion of the press conference held by the Vietnam Cycling Board in September 1965, President Trần Văn Toản and Treasurer Trần Minh Mẫn invited the press corps to ask questions and make constructive comments to the organizing committee. A representative of *Liberty* newspaper offered up multiple comments and questions. The journalist considered the deadline for accepting applications too short a time period. He or she wondered how many contestants might actually participate.<sup>367</sup> Committee member Phan Như Mỹ lamented the admittedly short time frame women had to apply but promised to extend the due date. Phan Như Mỹ revealed that the Ministry of the Interior took some time approving their license to hold the beauty contest.<sup>368</sup> The remaining issues raised by the journalist concerned the stated criteria for denying applicants and matters related to scoring the contest. He or she questioned why the committee barred women with children from participating.<sup>369</sup> Phan Như Mỹ clarified that the committee based the contest’s rules on the standards set by the Miss Asia Organizing Committee.<sup>370</sup> If the standing committee allowed a mother to enter the competition, and she won, she could not represent South Vietnam at the Miss Asia Beauty Contest. Next, the journalist raised issue with the lack of clarification regarding what constituted proper female conduct and how many total points judges awarded contestants for physical beauty compared to personality.<sup>371</sup> Phan Như Mỹ remained somewhat mum on matters of personal conduct for “fear of a bribery problem,” but clarified that personal conduct (“personality and mature manner”) made up one third of the total point scale compared to face and body.<sup>372</sup> The journalist reserved his or her most sophomoric questions for last. If a candidate met all the conditions of the committee, but she had a sexually transmitted disease, what course of action would it take? What impact might having hairy armpits have on the judges’ scoring?<sup>373</sup> Phan Như Mỹ did not respond to the question about sexually transmitted diseases. To the latter question, he remarked that professional salon workers working on site had the ability to assist contestants with any potential body hair.<sup>374</sup>

The next week, on September 25, 1965, the cartoonist at *Political Discussion* newspaper, known by the pen name ‘Twist,’ indirectly ridiculed Western women’s fashion trends and the upcoming Miss Vietnam Beauty Contest.<sup>375</sup> In line with other ‘Twist’ cartoons, the illustrator perceived the impact of

365 “Hoa hậu VN 1965 để tham dự giải Hoa Hậu Á Châu tại Phi luật Tân?”, *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 21, 1965): 1.

366 “Hoa hậu VN 1965 để tham dự giải Hoa Hậu Á Châu tại Phi luật Tân?”, *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 21, 1965): 4.

367 “Hoa hậu VN 1965 để tham dự giải Hoa Hậu Á Châu tại Phi luật Tân?”, *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 21, 1965): 1.

368 “Hoa hậu VN 1965 để tham dự giải Hoa Hậu Á Châu tại Phi luật Tân?”, *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 21, 1965): 4.

369 “Hoa hậu VN 1965 để tham dự giải Hoa Hậu Á Châu tại Phi luật Tân?”, *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 21, 1965): 1.

370 “Hoa hậu VN 1965 để tham dự giải Hoa Hậu Á Châu tại Phi luật Tân?”, *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 21, 1965): 4.

371 “Hoa hậu VN 1965 để tham dự giải Hoa Hậu Á Châu tại Phi luật Tân?”, *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 21, 1965): 1.

372 “Hoa hậu VN 1965 để tham dự giải Hoa Hậu Á Châu tại Phi luật Tân?”, *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 21, 1965): 4.

373 “Hoa hậu VN 1965 để tham dự giải Hoa Hậu Á Châu tại Phi luật Tân?”, *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 21, 1965): 1.

374 “Hoa hậu VN 1965 để tham dự giải Hoa Hậu Á Châu tại Phi luật Tân?”, *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 21, 1965): 4.

375 ‘Tuýt,’ “Cartoon,” *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 25, 1965): 4.

Western culture on South Vietnamese women as bad for South Vietnamese society.<sup>376</sup> The cartoonist depicted three urban women in Western attire encountering three pestering males with stereotypical attitudes about Western women's fashion and those who planned to participate in the country's upcoming beauty contest. Minding their own business, the three urban women walked side by side in public. One of the three women wore black slacks, high-heel shoes, sunglasses, and a tight-fitting spaghetti-strap shirt while carrying a purse. The second woman had stylized shoulder-length hair and wore a low-cut, sleeveless dress that terminated around the knees with a pair of high heel shoes. The third woman had flowing shoulder-length hair and wore a low-cut, horizontally-krimped dress that terminated above the knee with a pair of high heel shoes. As the women walked past the three male youths, one of the males snidely interjected: "Are you participating in the beauty contest? Have been checked for venereal diseases, yet?" ("Mấy cô đi thi Hoa Hậu xe đạp đó hả??? Đã khám bệnh hoa liễu chưa?"). One of the women succinctly responded, "Jerk!"<sup>377</sup> Ironically, each of the three pestering males wore Western pants and shirts, exposing a double-standard. By a significant margin, South Vietnamese men observed Western fashion trends more closely than women during the post-1963 years but did not receive the same amount of public criticism for their non-traditional behavior.<sup>378</sup>



Cartoon from *Political Discussion* newspaper, September 25, 1965.<sup>379</sup>

376 'Twist,' "Cultural headache," *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Apr. 1, 1966): 4; In this cartoon, a South Vietnamese woman wearing Western attire stares obsessively at a large sack labeled "\$ Dollars." In the foreground, four males (in Western attire) standing next to a much larger sack labeled "Four thousand years of [traditional] culture" express disappointment at her behavior. The caption reads: "Cultural headache."

377 'Tuýt,' "Cartoon," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 25, 1965): 4.

378 Pre-World War I, most Vietnamese men wore a long dress similar to women. After World War I, save for ceremonial and traditional occasions, Vietnamese men started wearing the long dress less and less. By the 1960s, pants and collared shirts had dominated men's fashion for decades. Few, if any, stigmas remained attached to this Western attire. The biggest male fashion controversy of the interregnum period concerned hair length. Urban male youths grew their hair longer than ever before. Associated with the international rise of The Beatles and the French pop star Johnny Hallyday, men's hair reached four to five shaggy inches long. This more feminine 'beatnik' or 'cowboy' fashion trend, which preceded 'hippie' hair of the late-1960s into the 1970s, generated some criticism, but not as much as women's New Wave fashion trends.

379 'Tuýt,' "Cartoon," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 25, 1965): 4.

The film and entertainment magazine *Drama (Kịch Ảnh)* did not share ‘Twist’s’ negative, stereotypical attitude about Western women’s fashion trends. Unlike the satirical newspaper cartoonist, the publication considered the beauty contest an important opportunity for South Vietnamese women and national cultural development locally and internationally. On October 2, 1965, less than one month before the competition, an article titled “Please film the beauty contest” encouraged women who qualified to participate in the competition. “[What] are you waiting for . . . because here is an opportunity for women to exhibit the proud beauty of [South] Vietnamese women at the Miss Asia contest. . . .” The magazine also perceived the Miss Vietnam Beauty Contest as an opportunity for contestants to “bring beauty to the cinematic arts.” Organizers of the pageant planned to invite representatives from local and foreign film studios to the event. Film makers in the audience might sign Miss Vietnam to a contract, giving the winner a chance to become an international film star. At that time, South Vietnam lacked female celebrities in the film industry, the author admitted. *Drama* magazine expressed some concern about how many contestants might actually participate in the competition. It perceived South Vietnamese women as having a somewhat reserved nature. Previous photo-taking contests held by *Drama* did not produce major results. “The reason is not because our country lacks beautiful people but because our beautiful people are too shy and do not want to present their beauty in front of the masses.” Whomever the winner of the national beauty contest, she must dispel all shyness, the magazine insisted.<sup>380</sup>

The next month, on October 12, 1965, *Political Discussion* newspaper reported that at least sixty-six women had applied to participate in the beauty contest before the extended October 10, 1965 deadline expired. Organizers speculated that the total number of contestants may increase beyond sixty-six because mail from other provinces in the country had not yet arrived. In Saigon, contestants awaited the culmination of twice-daily, closed-door practice sessions under the supervision of organizers and instructors at the Capital Youth Company. The newspaper reminded readers that the winner of the pageant would represent South Vietnam at the Miss Asia Beauty Contest in late-November or December. Beauty queens from at least twelve different countries planned to participate in the international event.<sup>381</sup>

Three days later, *Liberty* newspaper revealed additional details about the Miss Vietnam Beauty Contest. Organizers required the pageant’s contestants to meet with the Examination Committee for a preliminary interview starting on October 17, 1965, during which the judges gave marks for grace and maturity. Following the interview, the Examination Committee took official measurements of the contestant’s chest, waist, and buttocks. Organizers scheduled the first practice and instruction session later that same day, requiring contestants to bring a swimsuit and áo dài. Rules did not prohibit contestants from wearing a two-piece bikini, but none did. The opening practice session allowed participants to begin familiarizing themselves with the format and demands of the contest. On October 19, 1965, organizers planned to hold a second practice and interview session. Those who did not attend this practice session disqualified themselves from the contest. On October 20, 1965, organizers scheduled a dry run practice session at Hung Đạo theater. On October 21, 1965, organizers planned to hold the semi-final competition at Hung Đạo theater in front of a live audience, leaving sixteen contestants remaining. The final of the Miss Vietnam Beauty Contest would take place on the night of October 22, 1965 at Hung Đạo theater. The article concluded with a reminder from pageant organizers that contestants must behave politely towards their assigned pageant guides leading up to and during the competition or risk a loss of points.<sup>382</sup>

380 Viễn Kính, “Xin mời hoa hậu đóng phim,” *Kịch Ảnh* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 2, 1965): 3.

381 “66 người đẹp đã dự thi Hoa hậu Việt Nam,” *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 12, 1965): 3.

382 “Chương trình chấm thi hoa hậu,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 15, 1965): 1.



Contestants rehearsing for the formal wear competition at the Capital Youth Company.<sup>383</sup>

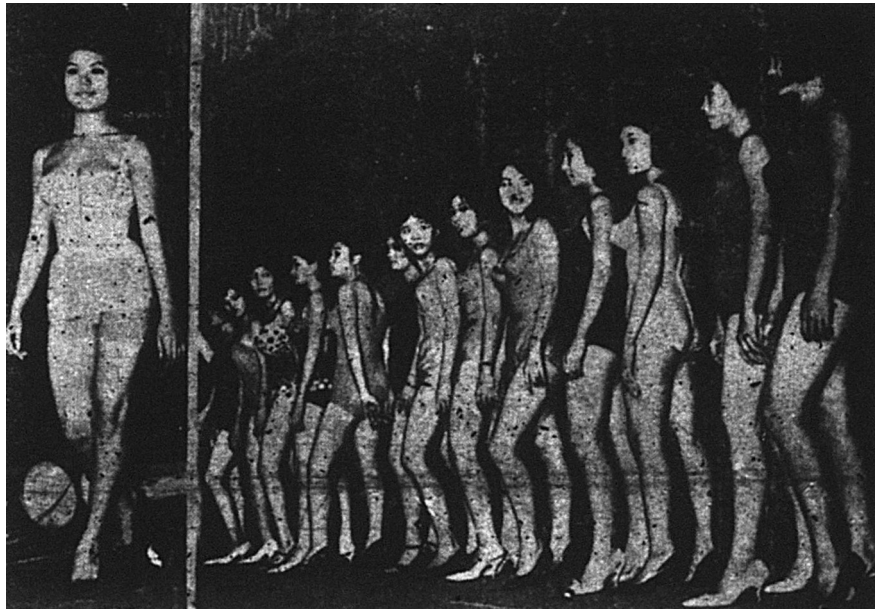
On October 20, the day before the semi-final round of the Miss Vietnam Beauty Contest, *Political Discussion* newspaper published a long article about the pageant and its significance. It wanted readers to know that the “elaborate” contest had legitimacy. In the past, beauty pageants existed but only at the level of fairs and artistic circles, making the 1965 Miss Vietnam Beauty Contest the first national beauty pageant in South Vietnamese history. In the past, organizers of pageants had only considered physical appearance when crowning a winner. Showing support for the national contest, the newspaper highlighted that the competition considered more than beauty. Expanding the criteria to include personality purportedly made the pageant popular with people throughout the country. Organizers of the competition assured the publication that they did not take their job lightly. Selecting Miss Vietnam “is not an act of randomness by a group of people irresponsible to” the country. They stated that an invitation from an allied nation, the Philippines, had inspired the contest. The Miss Asia Beauty Contest in Luzon provided South Vietnam an opportunity to introduce the “beauty and elegant personality of Vietnamese women” to not only Asian countries but the whole world. The newspaper had confidence in the legitimacy of South Vietnam’s first national beauty contest. Dozens of people worked behind the scenes organizing and running the pageant. The Examination Board had ten male and five female judges, including doctors, painters, sculptors, stage directors, salon specialists, athletes, and intellectuals. Chu Thị Phước, a beautician who studied in Paris, handled all the contestants’ makeup. Soldiers and military engineers with musical backgrounds made up the house band.<sup>384</sup>

*Political Discussion* newspaper provided more details about the Miss Vietnam Beauty Contest. Organizers disqualified two of the contestants because of some unspecified violation, leaving sixty-six women. These sixty-six contestants included forty-four high school students, four graduate students, and fifteen civil servants. Many of the women lived in Saigon, but some came from Vung Tau on the southern coast, My Tho in the Mekong Delta, and Da Lat in the Central Highlands. The representatives from Vung Tau and My Tho emerged from regional beauty contests held on October 7 and October 10, respectively. An eighteen-year-old woman named Đặng Phương Thảo signed up for the pageant first. The final contestant, a nineteen-year-old actress named Trần Thị Ngọc Tuyết, had filmed in Cambodia and once won second prize in a “Beautiful Driver” contest. Each of the sixty-six women received an

383 Photo, *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 21, 1965): 4.

384 “Lần đầu tiên phái đẹp Việt Nam gửi đại diện ra ngoài quốc,” *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 20, 1965): 4.

identification photo, a hairdresser card, a swimsuit receipt, and a discounted facial mask. Organizers announced their intention to award the top six finalists of the competition with prize money. The winner won 50,000 đồng (about \$680.00), the runner-up 25,000 đồng, third place 25,000 đồng, fourth place 10,000 đồng, fifth place 7,000 đồng, and sixth place 5,000 đồng. Much responsibility and training potentially awaited the winner of the pageant. She had to follow the Examination Board's program of living until leaving for the Philippines. This program included attending facilities for health and beauty care, foreign language training, and etiquette classes. The director of Alpha Films, one of South Vietnam's leading film companies, promised to cast Miss Vietnam in a movie and invite her to attend the 1966 Asian Film Festival in Malaysia.<sup>385</sup>



Contestants rehearsing at Hung Đạo theater the day before the competition.<sup>386</sup>

The semi-final round of the Miss Vietnam Beauty Contest took place on October 21, 1965. According to *Political Discussion* newspaper, a record audience attended the 9:00 PM event. Contestants participated in the formal wear competition first followed by the Western swimsuit contest. The swimsuit contest did not end until 10:40 PM. A majority of the women wore low-cut, form-fitting designer swimsuits that exposed all of their legs and thighs. At this late hour, the Examination Board retreated behind closed doors to deliberate the sixteen finalists. It did not want to make any hasty decisions. The fifteen-person Examination Board announced plans to release the list of finalists by 10:00 AM the next day.<sup>387</sup> Revealed in full by *Drama* magazine the next week, this list included Tăng Tuyết Hạnh, Trần Lê Nguyệt, Đỗ Trang Đài, Châu Thanh Vân, Nguyễn Thị Thanh Phụng, Lâm Tuyết Oanh, Lương Thị Mỹ Dung, Hoàng Thị Thơ, Trần Thị Ngọc Tuyết, Lê Thị Kim Lai, Ngô Thị Thủy, Hoàng Kim Uyên, Tống Minh Ngọc, Thái Kim Hương, Châu Thanh Thủy, and Lê Kim Mai.<sup>388</sup>

On October 22, 1965, the beauty pageant's sixteen finalists gathered at Hung Đạo theater for the concluding round of competition. *Political Discussion* newspaper wrote a long article about this final

385 "Lần đầu tiên phái đẹp Việt Nam gửi đại diện ra ngoại quốc," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 20, 1965): 4.

386 Photo, *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 22, 1965): 3.

387 "Đêm đầu cuộc bầu hoa hậu," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 23, 1965): 3.

388 Trần Quân, "Tất cả những diễn biến và dư luận trong cuộc tuyển lựa hoa hậu 1965," *Kịch Ảnh* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 30, 1965):

round of the Miss Vietnam Beauty Contest. Similar to the night before, the pageant's contestants participated in the formal wear competition and a Western swimsuit contest. When the swimsuit contest ended, a music and dance program entertained the audience while the fifteen-person Examination Board deliberated. At 11:00 PM, the judges approached the audience and announced the contest's winner, Thái Kim Hương, who scored a total of 396 points. Born in Bình Dương Province over thirty miles north of Saigon, the eighteen-year-old high school student came from a family of middle-to-upper-class merchants. Winning by a narrow margin, Thái Kim Hương beat out the pageant's runner-up Trần Ngọc Tuyết from Tây Ninh Province by one and a half points. Hoàng Kim Uyên from Danang and Đo Trang Đài tied for third place with 394 points, half a point behind Trần Ngọc Tuyết. The fifth place contestant Lê Kim Mai finished more than twenty points behind third-place contestants Hoàng Kim Uyên and Đo Trang Đài. With the winner and runner-ups announced, organizers presented winner Thái Kim Hương with a crown, queenly scepter, sash, and trophy. To add greater ceremony and pomp to the historic occasion, Thái Kim Hương sat on a golden coronation throne while posing for photographs. *Political Discussion* newspaper described this final night of the contest as "jubilant."<sup>389</sup>



Winner Thái Kim Hương (second from left) following her victory.<sup>390</sup>

*Liberty* newspaper published a brief interview with South Vietnam's first national beauty queen Thái Kim Hương following her victory. She commented that she felt "proud" and "lucky enough" to have won the contest. Much interest surrounded Thái Kim Hương's professional future. The reporter asked what she planned to do next: "If a film studio offers you a job, will you accept it? If not, what do you intend to do?" Thái Kim Hương responded that she did not know what she might do next. Exhibiting filial piety, she stated that it depended on her parents. The reporter asked Thái Kim Hương whether god-given talent explained her victory, or if she worked at cultivating and maintaining her beauty. She believed that the heavens had "blessed" her with good looks, but acknowledged that she still had to work to increase her beauty. A novice on the beauty pageant scene, she expressed appreciation to the judging committee for teaching her how to properly walk and stand. At midnight, following the interview, a platoon of servicemen escorted Thái Kim Hương to an awaiting car.

389 "Đã kết thúc cuộc thi hoa hậu," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 24, 1965): 3.

390 Trần Quân, "Tất cả những diễn biến và dư luận trong cuộc tuyển lựa hoa hậu 1965," *Kịch Ảnh* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 30, 1965): 31.

Reflective of the public interest in Thái Kim Hương, a crowd of people surrounded the vehicle eager to catch a glimpse of the newly-crowned beauty queen.<sup>391</sup>

Questions soon arose within the Examination Board about whether or not to give Thái Kim Hương the opportunity to compete at the 1965 Miss Asia Beauty Contest in Luzon, Philippines. As reported by *Drama* magazine, before the end of the month, the Examination Board announced its intention not to send Thái Kim Hương or any other representative to the international contest late that year. Since the top four contestants had all finished with nearly the same number of total points, the contest did not reveal a clear winner, representative Dr. Trương Ngọc Hôn stated. Additional comments from the doctor revealed from that the organizing committee did not want to send Thái Kim Hương to the contest for another reason; her height. She only stood one and half meters tall. While beautiful and charming, “compared to Beauty Queens of other Asian countries [her height] is certainly inferior, and that is also the reason for Miss Vietnam to stay at home.”<sup>392</sup> A reporter working for *Echo* (*Tiếng Vang*) newspaper complained that “no one [on the organizing committee] would answer or explain [the decision] at all.”<sup>393</sup> The Examination Board eventually backed down from its position and followed through on its promise to send Thái Kim Hương to the Miss Asia Beauty Contest. Proving the Examination Board wrong about her chances in the international competition, she finished in second place.<sup>394</sup>

The first national beauty contest in South Vietnamese history, the 1965 Miss Vietnam Beauty Contest reflected the growing influence of Western fashion and gender norms on South Vietnamese society post-November 1963. Before November 1963, the perceived immoral influence of Western culture on South Vietnamese women had led the National Assembly to criminalize the beauty pageant through the 1962 Moral Protection Laws. With the overthrow of President Ngô Đình Diệm and the exile of Trần Lệ Xuân, a more open social atmosphere towards women emerged, creating the conditions for the Miss Vietnam Beauty to eventually take place in late-October 1965. Although the pageant promoted a more traditional dynamic through a formal wear competition in áo dài, the Western swimsuit contest allowed contestants to challenge conservative expectations by flaunting their bodies in low-cut, skin tight outfits. An antithesis to the áo dài, the one-piece swimsuit directly challenged societal expectations about women exposing their bodies and consciously acknowledging their sex appeal.

### The Miniskirt

A final example demonstrating the proliferation of Western women’s fashion trends and changing gender norms during South Vietnam’s interregnum period appeared in 1966 through the miniskirt. Popularized internationally by the British fashion designer Mary Quant starting around May 1966, the miniskirt had a hem line that terminated several inches above the knee, showing off the legs and thighs. In *Clothing: A Global History*, Robert Ross maintained that Quant’s designs “contributed to and reflected the broader shift in clothing codes which for the first time celebrated . . . young female sexuality and sexual availability.”<sup>395</sup> It did not take long for this Western fashion trend to find its way to South Vietnam, known to citizens by the Franco-Anglo word “mini-jupe” or in Vietnamese “váy ngắn” (“short skirt”). Rife with anti-traditional overtones, the fashion garment sparked major controversy with many traditionally-minded South Vietnamese, as it did with many people throughout

391 “Cô Thái Kim Hương đã chiếm ngôi Hoa Hậu Việt Nam,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 24, 1965): 1, 6.

392 Viễn Kính, “Hoa hậu Việt Nam không được đi dự thi Hoa hậu Á châu,” *Kịch Ảnh* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 30, 1965): 3.

393 “Chăm thi Hoa Hậu,” *Tiếng Vang* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 27, 1965): 1.

394 “Miss Vietnam back home from Manila beauty contest,” *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Dec. 18, 1965): 9.

395 Robert Ross, *Clothing: A Global History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008): 148.

the world. Leading up to South Vietnam's 1967 presidential election and the creation of South Vietnam's Second Republic, the miniskirt remained a topic of debate. During the presidential campaigns, one of the election's more socially conservative candidates, a former mandarin under Bảo Đại named Trần Văn Lý, promised to ban the miniskirt if elected president. The emergence and growing popularity of the miniskirt, which coincided with but did not necessarily materialize exclusively because of the war's Americanization, engendered the last great women's fashion controversy of the interregnum period.

The arrival of the miniskirt and its sharply abbreviated hemline in South Vietnam adhered to the natural progression of hemlines domestically and internationally. When the Western garment first appeared in the country, by no later than June or July 1966, its thigh-high hem line followed a 1960s trend of increasingly shorter skirts and dresses. According to the author Emmanuelle Dirix in *Dressing the Decades: Twentieth-century Vintage Style*, hemlines during the first three years of the 1960s kept rising in London and Paris, partially inspired by “young people trying to find a different, rebellious style.”<sup>396</sup> In South Vietnam, hemlines rose in concert with the rise of New Wave, ‘cowboy’ (“cao bò”), and Beatnik fashion trends. Many of the Western skirts and dresses worn by women in 1964, 1965, and 1966 had hemlines that terminated around or above the knee.

On May 4, 1965, a female-run column in *Present Day* (*Ngày Nay*) newspaper discussed shorter hemlines under the headline “I want a nice set of legs” (“Em muốn có bộ giò đẹp”). The column began by acknowledging a “new ‘fashion’” (“thời trang’ mới”) trend in South Vietnam: Women wearing short skirts and dresses with hemlines terminating at the knee (“thứ ‘Jupe ngắn’ để hở cả từ đầu gối xuống”). Signaling growing acceptance of Western culture and comfort with exposing the body, knee-skirts and dresses allowed many women to show their legs for the first time in public. With the proliferation of short skirts came an implied expectation for wearers to have the right body type and style of walking. The column noted that knee-length garments “forced women to have very beautiful legs,” meaning that their shape “has to be round, . . . white, . . . straight, and long. . . .” It added that the wearer’s knees must touch when standing up straight. When walking, “you must pay attention to keep your feet straight . . . , your legs must be close to each other, not wide,” and you should not “take broad steps.” To obtain the ideal set of legs for wearing knee-length garments the column made several suggestions: swimming, running, stationary leg exercises, elevating the feet above the head when lying down, etc. The column closed by alluding to the fashionability of knee-length garments on girls. It implored readers with daughters to make sure that their children had enough calcium supplements to develop hard and straight shin bones.<sup>397</sup>

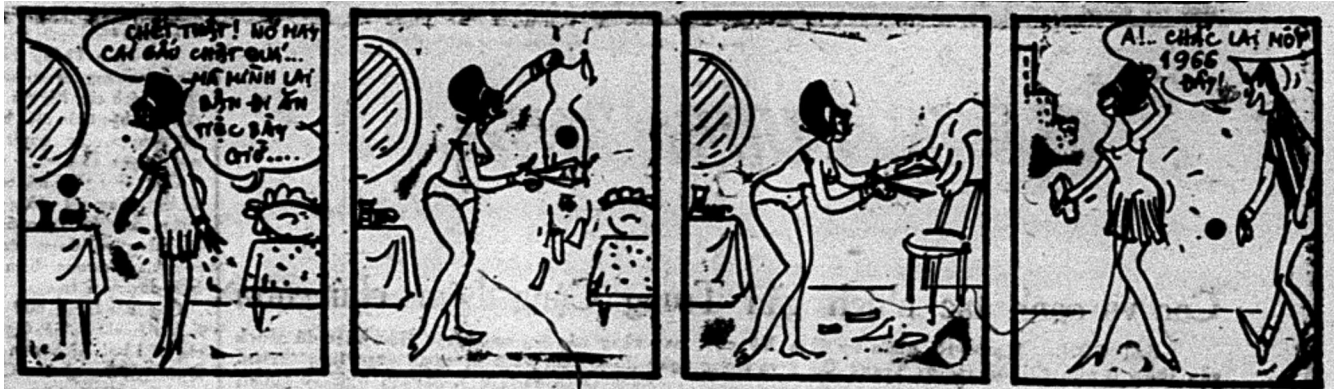
Three months later, a comic strip series from *Political Discussion* newspaper called “Ly Ly’s Family” alluded to the phenomenon of shrinking hemlines. Drawn by Đức Khánh, this daily comic strip series focused on the life of its titular protagonist Ly Ly, a young, hip, unmarried urban South Vietnamese woman navigating family, romance, and a host of satirical social situations. Published starting no later than early-1964 until late-1966, the comic strip series highlighted women’s fashion to a significant degree. Đức Khánh regularly depicted Ly Ly wearing Western women’s attire, including checkered pants, sleeveless polka dot dresses, and two-piece bikinis. During the summer of 1965, the character sought to push the progression of the hemline even further, from at to above the knee. In a comic strip published on August 26, 1965, Ly Ly donned a low-cut spaghetti-strap dress terminating in fringe at the knee with a pair of high-heeled shoes. Standing near a mirror, she expressed dissatisfaction for the garment’s perceived long hemline. Over the next two panels, she removed the dress, grabbed a pair of scissors, and cut off all the fringe, at least a few inches of fabric. To create new

396 Emmanuelle Dirix, *Dressing the Decades: Twentieth-Century Vintage Style* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016): 155.

397 “Em muốn có bộ giò đẹp,” *Ngày Nay* (Sài Gòn: May 4, 1965): 2.



fringe, she made numerous deep vertical cuts at the hemline. Eager to assess the results of her alterations, she changed back into the garment. The hemline now terminated at least a few inches above the knee, to her satisfaction. At that point, Ly Ly's boyfriend walked into the room. Upon seeing Ly Ly in the dress, he expressed approval for the modified hemline, predicting: "Oh! That's such a 1966 craze!" ("À! Chắc lại một 1966 đây!").<sup>398</sup>



Cartoon from *Political Discussion* newspaper, August 26, 1965.<sup>399</sup>

By December 1965, the Westernization of South Vietnamese women's fashion, including raising hemlines, evoked a moderately supportive reaction from Hoàng Tân at *Political Discussion* newspaper. In an editorial titled "Women and Fashion Craze," the journalist claimed that Vietnamese men in the past conceptualized female beauty differently than men did today. Previously, men sought modest, naturally beautiful women. In 1965, South Vietnamese men sought "sexy" women. The proliferation of Western women's fashion trends raised some concerns within society. The growing popularity of Western fashion among women led some people to question the future of the áo dài, believing that the national costume might gradually disappear. Hoàng Tân did not seem concerned. He found the dramatic changes happening in women's fashion somewhat refreshing. "If you hold on to things, there is no innovation." Many men also purportedly liked coming home after work to see their wife or girlfriend wearing beautiful outfits and trendy hairstyles. The journalist believed that the áo dài must adapt to the changing social climate, but gave no specific recommendations. To support his position about adapting the áo dài to contemporary times, he courted further controversy by rhetorically questioning the domestic origins of the traditional áo dài: "Can we be sure that the woman's áo dài is purely Vietnamese?" He did not elaborate on this implied accusation, but likely referred to French and Chinese cultural influences on the garment. In further defense of changing fashion trends, the journalist compared the perceived vibrant state of fashion in Saigon to the perceived underdeveloped state of fashion in North Vietnam's capital of Hanoi. Based on pictures and reports of life in Hanoi, colorful áo dài no longer fluttered in the wind around Hoàn Kiếm Lake. Shirts and pants dominated women's fashion in the capital. Using fashion as a metric for gauging a nation's health and vitality, Hoàng Tân opined that a "city lacking colorful shirts is like a spring without flowers. . . ." He considered Saigon's thriving fashion scene important for morale and quality of life. The extravagant phenomenon allegedly gave men "much joy" and "fondness for life."<sup>400</sup>

In mid-1966, hemlines throughout much of the world receded further above the knee with the growing popularity of the miniskirt. Multiple South Vietnamese publications discussed this foreign

398 Đức Khánh, "Gia Đình Ly Ly," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 26, 1965): 2.

399 Đức Khánh, "Gia Đình Ly Ly," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 26, 1965): 2.

400 Hoàng Tân, "Người đàn bà và những một thời trang," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 15, 1965): 5.

fashion trend, not yet announced as existing in the country. On June 25, 1966, the film magazine *Silver Screen (Màn Ảnh)* published “Miniskirt on film,” a short article about the 1966 French gangster film “Joë Caligula: Du suif chez les Dabes.” Directed by José Bénazéraf, this action film narrated the fictional protagonist Joe Caligula’s conquering of the Parisian underworld and eventual arrest by police. Jeanne Valerie, a twenty-four-year-old actress, played the part of Joe Caligula’s girlfriend. In one scene, Valerie wore one of the most “brutal” outfits of the season: a miniskirt paired with a tight-fitting red shirt and matching red hat. A fashion trend among female Parisian “Beatniks,” the miniskirt’s hemline terminated over eight and half inches above Jeanne Valerie’s knee, exposing much of her thighs. The magazine asserted that the actress probably set the world record for wearing the shortest skirt in the history of cinema.<sup>401</sup>

Two weeks later, on July 3, 1966, Văn Vội Thuật of *New Times (Thời Mới)* newspaper, run by Ms. Nguyễn Thị Phong, wrote a long article about youth fashion trends in France. “As you know,” the article began, “in some European countries such as France, new ‘fashion’ trends have emerged almost exclusively for the young.” Males grew their hair longer while females donned shorter skirts. Many young European males had long hair, sometimes down to the base of the neck, and even thick, “virgin promissory hair” (“tóc thề”) that extended over the shoulders. The popular French rocker and fashion rebel known by the mononym Antoine epitomized this phenomenon. Meanwhile, fashion trends in female society favored the miniskirt (“mi ni giúp”). The garment’s hemline terminated about four inches above the knee. Văn Vội Thuật provided no additional details about the miniskirt phenomenon in Europe, focusing instead on Antoine’s long hair, but did reveal his personal support for the garment by referring to it as “beautiful” and “convenient.”<sup>402</sup>

Official confirmation of the miniskirt’s arrival in South Vietnam appeared a few weeks later. On July 23, 1966, *Silver Screen* magazine published “To miniskirt or not to miniskirt.” The article began by acknowledging that Mary Quant, the “mother of the miniskirt,” had recently received the Order of the British Empire award from Queen Elizabeth II for her outstanding contribution to the fashion industry. By this time, the miniskirt had existed in parts of Europe for a few months. In the precarious fashion world, some trends lasted for a few months and others a few years. *Silver Screen* magazine believed that the miniskirt may have lasting mainstream appeal internationally, including South Vietnam. “A few months ago, people regarded [the miniskirt] as a fleeting fad just like a spring breeze, but it still lives up to now, and it is found on the streets everywhere, from Paris to Tokyo, from London to Saigon.” In Saigon, authorities had not passed any legislation banning “trendsetters” from wearing the garment. Despite its legality, the court of public opinion still loomed large. Those who decided to wear the garment needed to have “courage,” because they would likely face insults about their dignity, the magazine wrote. Editors of the publication defended the miniskirt’s place in South Vietnamese society by reminding readers that controversy had surrounded the modern áo dài. Many people had criticized the more form-fitting áo dài promoted by the Self-Strengthening Cultural movement as indecent and suitable only for unsophisticated, immodest women. *Silver Screen* did not suggest that the miniskirt would go on to replace the áo dài as the national costume, but did believe that the “bias” against it may lessen over time, similar to the modern áo dài during the colonial era.<sup>403</sup>

A few weeks later in early August, the women’s page of *Liberty* newspaper published a letter to the editor from an anonymous female reader asking about the miniskirt. A resident of Saigon’s District 1, the young woman stated that friends in her inner circle had suggested that she wear a miniskirt. “[S]hould I copy them,” she asked the newspaper, conscious that people may laugh at her. The responding editor took a middle-of-the-road position on the miniskirt. She did not prefer the garment

401 “Mini-jupe trên màn ảnh,” *Màn Ảnh* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 25, 1966): 5.

402 Văn Vội Thuật, “Thanh niên tóc dài,” *Thời Mới* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 3, 1966): 1.

403 “Mini hay không mini-jupe?,” *Màn Ảnh* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 23, 1966): 15-6.

herself but kept an open mind. She considered the miniskirt “nothing special” and a “fad” because of the “discreet” nature of Vietnamese women. That said, she did not advise the young woman against wearing the garment as long as she had beautiful legs. She concluded, “[O]f course there will be ridicule, . . . but it's fine if you wear it. . . .”<sup>404</sup>

On August 12, 1966, Th  Thanh at *Political Discussion* newspaper wrote a long column about the controversy surrounding the miniskirt domestically and abroad. In France, the wife of a high-ranking member of President Charles De Gaulle’s administration wore a miniskirt to a governmental function, sparking loud protests from some citizens. Around this same time, Britain’s Princess Margaret wore a miniskirt during her official visit to the United States, purportedly marking the first time a member of the Royal Family dared to wear the garment in public. Many people criticized her, others voiced their support. On the streets of London, young women in miniskirts appeared all over the place. Many husbands ran into trouble with their wives when they gazed at a young women wearing the garment for too long. In Saigon, the miniskirt generated controversy because it did not qualify as what many people considered “proper” attire. Critics reserved particular animosity for bar girls, who allegedly wore the garment because they wanted to sexually attract unspecified “others,” likely meaning foreigners. Th  Thanh clarified that bar girls may only represent a minority of those women wearing the garment. Like in Britain and France, the miniskirt divided South Vietnamese society between supporters of the fashion trend and critics who believed that it reduced female dignity. Defending the miniskirt, the journalist played down the controversy by mentioning that European women wore skirts terminating inches above the knee back in the Middle Ages. He believed that the criticism surrounding the miniskirt would subside. “It’s all just fashion. Gradually people will look at it and get used to it.” He pointed out that when the first F105 planes appeared in South Vietnam following the introduction of American combat troops everyone noticed these aircraft, but now people rarely paid attention to them. He did not know what developments awaited the miniskirt, maybe the “super ultra miniskirt” in a few years, but asserted that many South Vietnamese men “cheered” the new fashion trend.<sup>405</sup>

The South Vietnamese press continued to discuss the miniskirt phenomenon through late-1966, particularly in an international context. A *Liberty* newspaper article about Parisian women’s fashion trends published on August 17, 1966 commented that the “very short skirt [phenomenon] is now very popular and it continues.”<sup>406</sup> A few days later, the newspaper reported that women in New York City had already started ordering the garment from tailors.<sup>407</sup> That same week, editors translated an Associated Press article from London about an all-girl British rock band scheduled to entertain American troops across South Vietnam in November. Members of the band planned to wear miniskirts while performing.<sup>408</sup> On September 29, 1966, *Democracy (D n Ch )* newspaper, run by the longtime journalists V  Ngọc C c, translated the first of a three-part Reuters report about the controversy surrounding miniskirts in the predominantly Muslim North African country of Tunisia. The news agency considered the miniskirt a symbol of Tunisian women’s liberation after centuries of paternalistic oppression and having to wear a veil.<sup>409</sup> In late-October, *Silver Screen* magazine informed readers that photographers recently spotted the British-American actress Elizabeth Taylor wearing a short skirt, if

404 “Thời trang,” *Tự Do* (S i G n: Aug. 8, 1966): 5.

405 Th  Thanh, “Mini-Jupe,” *Ch nh Lu n* (S i G n: Aug. 12, 1966): 5.

406 “Tr nh di n thời trang,” *Tự Do* (S i G n: Aug. 17, 1966): 5.

407 “Khi chiếc v y leo thang,” *Tự Do* (S i G n: Aug. 19, 1966): 1.

408 “13 thiếu n r Anh s  mặc v y ngắn sang VN,” *Tự Do* (S i G n: Aug. 20, 1966): 1.

409 “Chiếc jupe ngắn bị đ  kích k ch liệt tại Tunisie (I),” *D n Ch * (S i G n: Sep. 29, 1966): 2; “Chiếc jupe ngắn bị đ  kích k ch liệt tại Tunisie (II),” *D n Ch * (S i G n: Sep. 30, 1966): 2; “Chiếc jupe ngắn bị đ  kích k ch liệt tại Tunisie (III),” *D n Ch * (S i G n: Oct. 1, 1966): 2.

not a miniskirt, while in Rome. Her choice of fashion made headlines because she had previously stated an objection against exposing her ugly knees.<sup>410</sup>

Starting around mid-1967, commentary about local and foreign women wearing miniskirts gradually increased in the local press. This discourse coincided with warmer seasonal temperatures and increasing public debate about the state of the country leading up to the country's September 3, 1967 presidential election. On May 19, 1967, the pro-government newspaper *Frontline (Tiền Tuyến)* discussed the future of the miniskirt locally and internationally in a column titled "Where will the miniskirt go?" It began by acknowledging that the miniskirt craze existed on five continents. Recently, the Vatican condemned the garment and its growing popularity. Proponents of the miniskirt countered these criticisms by asserting that short skirts symbolized increased freedom for women. Remaining neutral, the newspaper admitted that it did not know which side would emerge victorious from this culture clash, those who supported "aesthetics" or those who supported "morals." Nor did it know whether the trend of shortening hemlines might reverse itself or escalate from almost four inches to, if possible, over fifteen inches above the knee. Showing potential support for aestheticism, the column only commented that old women with wrinkled knees or those with short, round thighs should not wear the garment.<sup>411</sup>

One week later, on May 28, 1967, *New Woman (Phụ Nữ Mới)* magazine commented on the growing popularity of the miniskirt locally and internationally. Author Vạn Thái stated that miniskirt had spread throughout Europe and even existed in South Vietnam. Most of the article highlighted the controversy surrounding the garment in Europe and North America. In Scotland, the headmaster at an elite private boarding school for girls banned the miniskirt at a co-ed dance organized by Prince Charles, then a teenager studying in Scotland. She believed it improper for young aristocratic women to show their thighs, breaking with some members of the Royal Family, like Princess Anne, who often wore the miniskirt. Across the Atlantic Ocean, Montreal authorities barred workers in the cleaning industry from wearing miniskirts at religious sites.<sup>412</sup> The next month, on June 18, 1967, Vạn Thái said that "moralists" and proponents of the miniskirt hotly debated the garment. Critics perceived it as too sexy and having a corrupting influence on teenagers. A Catholic bishop in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia expressed personal hatred for the miniskirt. Speaking hyperbolically, he believed that "all Asian men certainly agreed with him," which they absolutely did not.<sup>413</sup>

With the launching of South Vietnam's 1967 presidential election campaign in August, the debate over the miniskirt took an interesting turn. *Liberty* newspaper reported that civilian candidate Trần Văn Lý promised to ban the miniskirt if elected president. Born in central Vietnam at the turn of the century, the colonial-era mandarin and longtime supporter-turned critic of President Ngô Đình Diệm also campaigned for a complete withdrawal of American troops from the country before beginning any potential negotiations with Hanoi. The oldest presidential candidate in the election at sixty-six years old, Trần Văn Lý and his sexagenarian running mate Huỳnh Công Dương, a southern Vietnamese landowner and businessman, claimed no affiliations to any party or religious group. One of eleven people running for president in the election, at Trần Văn Lý first press conference held in Saigon on August 5, 1967, the veteran anti-communist politician emphasized his total devotion to criminalizing the Western garment. Attempting to tap into existing public dissatisfaction for Western culture and its perceived corrupting influence, he stated that he did not accept the miniskirt

410 "Liz và váy ngắn," *Màn Ảnh* (Sài Gòn: Oct. 29, 1966): 1.

411 "Chiếc mini jupe sẽ đi về đâu?," *Tiền Tuyến* (Sài Gòn: May 19, 1967): 4.

412 Vạn Thái, "Phụ nữ mới sừ tâm," *Phụ Nữ Mới* (Sài Gòn: May 28, 1967): 15.

413 Vạn Thái, "Phụ nữ mới sừ tâm," *Phụ Nữ Mới* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 18, 1967): 9.

“movement” in South Vietnam because it had an “anti-ethnic” character.<sup>414</sup> No other presidential candidate called for a ban on the garment during the campaign.

A few days after Trần Văn Lý’s nativist declaration, the *Saigon Daily News* published a cartoon of the elderly politician pestering a South Vietnamese woman with Western fashion tastes on the street. In the foreground, an unsuspecting young woman wearing a miniskirt dress, jewelry, and high-heeled boots walked towards a decrepit-looking Trần Văn Lý standing hunched over in the background. Reflective of the veteran politician’s old-fashioned mentality, he wore a black tunic with white trousers, the traditional costume of Vietnamese males. Offended by the young woman’s choice of fashion, Trần Văn Lý braced himself for the ‘frightening’ public encounter by bringing his right hand over his spectacles to partially shield his eyes. He left a small horizontal opening between his fingers to maintain a narrow line of vision. With his left hand, Trần Văn Lý begrudgingly pointed his wooden walking cane at the woman’s outfit and threatened, “I’ll ban [the] mini.”<sup>415</sup>



*Saigon Daily News* cartoon, August 9, 1967.<sup>416</sup>

Candidate Trần Văn Lý’s campaign-trail promise to ban the Western miniskirt if elected president compelled journalists to seek out a response from the country’s de facto First Lady Đặng Tuyết Mai. The next day, on August 10, 1967, *South Vietnam (Miền Nam)* and *Dawn (Bình Minh)* newspapers wrote that Đặng Tuyết Mai, the twenty-five-year-old wife of vice-presidential candidate Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, had briefly commented on Trần Văn Lý’s proposed miniskirt ban while visiting Saigon’s Hospital for Children on August 8, 1967. One of the country’s most fashionable women, in response to a question from a reporter at the hospital, Đặng Tuyết Mai casually affirmed her opposition to criminalizing the miniskirt, at least in its current form. “[W]ith youths, I think that it should not be banned as long as they do not overdo it.” She did not clarify the conjunction, but possibly alluded to women potentially wearing the even-shorter microskirt. She added that there “are many other [fashion trends in existence] that are more forbidden” than the miniskirt. Another journalist at the hospital quietly pointed out that they had recently spotted Đặng Tuyết Mai wearing a miniskirt in Da Lat. Đặng Tuyết Mai did not address this comment, but clarified to reporters that her views about

414 “Ứng cử viên Trần Văn Lý: Tôi sẽ cấm mini-jupe,” *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 8, 1967): 3.

415 “Cartoon,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Aug. 9, 1967): 4.

416 “Cartoon,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Aug. 9, 1967): 4.

the miniskirt did not reflect an attempt by her to personally represent or campaign for Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. She had her own opinions, which may or may not align with those of her husband.<sup>417</sup>

The next day, Vạn Thái at *New Woman* magazine attempted to dissuade South Vietnamese women from wearing miniskirts through fear mongering and borderline victim-blaming. On August 11, 1967, the journalist wrote the column “Girls who like to wear miniskirt beware!”, about sexual assault crimes against women in France. According to information publicized by French police, criminals had raped nearly twenty women over the previous few weeks. “[A]ll of the causes . . . are due to the issue of women wearing miniskirts,” French police maintained. They warned young women not to wear miniskirts in isolated places because the garment aroused the “pig heart” in men. Vạn Thái pleaded with South Vietnamese women who liked wearing miniskirts to “please learn from the experience” of women in France. The journalist never directly blamed any of the French sexual assault victims for causing their own rape based on their attire, but did indirectly imply, if not suggest, that women in South Vietnam may ‘invite’ rape by wearing the miniskirt.<sup>418</sup>

The same week, Lê Trang of the *Saigon Daily News* wrote a column critical of Trần Văn Lý titled “Mini-skirt and the candidates.” The journalist asserted that women’s knees “are more important than any [other event or phenomenon] in the world, be they earthquakes or wars.” Their perceived importance manifested through the miniskirt becoming a topic of discussions among politicians. Trần Văn Lý had recently kicked off his electoral campaign for president by promising to take a hard line position against the miniskirt. The candidate did not explain his critical position against the miniskirt but Lê Trang attributed this perceived “grudge” to old age. She commented that “it is understood that old people often forget that they were once young and . . . once loved what they are now hating.” “Some people do not know how to keep to themselves what they do not like,” she added. The journalist found Trần Văn Lý’s position on female fashion “regretful” and believed that it may end up causing him “great damage” in the election. She claimed that hundreds of thousand of miniskirt wearers, advocates, and sympathizers had already sworn not to vote for him. An unnamed female proponent of the Western fashion trend told the journalist that she firmly believed that the number of people supporting the miniskirt in South Vietnam outnumbered the membership of any single political party. “If any candidate dare come out [in] defense of mini-skirts, we will give him full support, and he will surely win,” she told Lê Trang. Other candidates in the election looked to capitalize on the situation by appealing to young voters. In response to political mobilization around the miniskirt by youths and young adults, a number of tickets allegedly contemplated changing their representative campaign symbol to the miniskirt. Since every slate had already started printing and distributing its posters and leaflets to the public, none decided to make the change.<sup>419</sup>

On August 15, 1967, *Liberty* newspaper published a long, nationalistic letter to the editor about South Vietnamese women and the áo dài. Written by female high school student Hoài Phương, it strongly promoted the áo dài while implicitly condemning the miniskirt. Hoài Phương began by asserting that women in every country had a national costume suitable for their shape. In Vietnam, women wore the áo dài, a “gentle,” “aristocratic,” “discreet” garment that “adds graceful proportions when walking and sitting.” Concealing the body purportedly afforded women a seductive appearance that piqued the interest of men. The garment’s declining popularity in Saigon concerned the high school student. She found the proliferation of “dresses, skirts, ‘cowboy’ [fashion trends], and, even more tragically, the miniskirt” a “sad” event. The teenager criticized the phenomenon of people wearing clothing designed in foreign countries. Showing her frustration, she rhetorically asked “why

417 “Trả lời ông cụ già Trần văn Lý,” *Miền Nam* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 10, 1967): 1; “Bà Nguyễn Cao Kỳ: Không cấm mini-jupe,” *Bình Minh* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 10, 1967): 1.

418 Vạn Thái, “Những bạn gái thích mặc mini jupe hãy coi chừng!”, *Phụ Nữ Mới* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 11, 1967): 33.

419 Lê Trang, “Mini-skirt and the candidates,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Aug. 13, 1967): 2.

don't we worship our national costume" instead of following Western fashion trends? Showing some tolerance of Western fashion, she categorized "ordinary dresses" as "acceptable" but emphasized that "miniskirts can't be worn!" Hoài Phương complained that "brazen" women who wore miniskirts and those who cut their hair short "like a boy" greatly jeopardized the "protection of our ethnicity." She concluded that social deprivation caused by war and a vibrant movement responding to an age of decreasing morality explained the decline of the áo dài and the rise of the miniskirt.<sup>420</sup>

On September 3, 1967, almost 4,500,000 people made their way to polling stations across the country to cast their vote in the presidential election. When collected and counted, the ballots declared presidential candidate Chief of State Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and his vice-presidential candidate Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ the winners. Their military-oriented ticket received more than one-third of the total votes, over 1,500,000. Presidential candidate Trần Văn Lý and his running mate Huỳnh Công Dương, supporters of criminalizing the miniskirt, finished in eleventh place with less than 100,000 votes ( $\approx .02$  % of voters), dead last.<sup>421</sup> Across Saigon's nine main districts, home to more than half a million registered voters and many supporters of Western fashion trends, less than 10,000 people ( $\approx .01$  %) voted for the Lý-Dương ticket.<sup>422</sup> Nationwide, the Lý-Dương ticket finished last or second-to-last in almost every province.<sup>423</sup>

Three days after the election, a *Liberty* newspaper column written by Ms. Lê Thị Trường An titled "Our women and the miniskirt" reminded readers of the national political debate surrounding the miniskirt leading up to the election. Trần Văn Lý had called for a ban on the miniskirt. His position allegedly made moralists happy but displeased many youths. Candidates Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, both generals in the armed forces, had expressed mild support for the miniskirt. Chief of State Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, a forty-four-year-old Catholic known for wearing a Western baseball cap, called the miniskirt "beautiful." Speaking hypothetically as a general citizen, he stated that he had no problem letting his daughter wear the garment. That said, speaking as South Vietnam's President, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu clarified that he would not allow his young daughter to wear one. Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, a thirty-six-year-old Buddhist already well-known for his flamboyant 'cowboy' fashion sense, reasoned that women who wanted to wear a miniskirt should have the freedom to wear one.<sup>424</sup> The column's co-authors did not discuss the historical and cultural significance of Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's support of the miniskirt, but this much seems clear. The presidential election represented a milestone and symbolic victory for the miniskirt and changing gender norms. Less than two years after its controversial introduction in South Vietnam, the anti-traditional miniskirt had reached mainstream status through its basic approval of all but one of the eleven presidential candidates. The acceptance shown for the miniskirt shown by these candidates, including victors Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, did not translate to an automatic acceptance of the garment throughout society, but did help to normalize and legitimize the Western fashion trend and changing female gender norms.

## Conclusion

The post-November 1963 period of South Vietnamese history leading up to the September 1967 presidential election witnessed major changes in female society. More than ever before, women embraced Western conception of fashion, reflecting shifting feelings about gender norms, sexuality, and

420 Hoài Phương, "Người đàn bà Việt Nam với chiếc áo dài," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 15, 1967): 5.

421 "Bản tổng sắp (không chính thức)," *Bình Minh* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 6, 1967): 1.

422 "Kết quả bầu cử tổng thống tại Đô Thành," *Bình Minh* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 6, 1967): 1.

423 "Kết quả tạm thời bầu cử tổng thống và phó TT," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 8, 1967): 4.

424 Lê Thị Trường An, "Phụ nữ chúng ta với mini duýp," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 5, 1967): 5.

national identity. Shorter skirts, low-cut tops, high-heeled shoes, cosmetics, tight-fitting blue jeans, and other New Wave fashion trends became en vogue following the November 1 1963 coup. The historic 1965 Miss South Vietnam beauty contest crowned the country's first beauty queen, Thái Kim Hương. The 1966 advent of the miniskirt allowed women to expose their legs to a greater degree than any previous period in history. These dynamic developments from 1963 to 1967 flew in the face of traditional values and the more socially conservative leadership exhibited by former President Ngô Đình Diệm and his sister-in-law Trần Lệ Xuân during the First Republic years. Like the more form-fitting áo dài designed by Nguyễn Cát Tường after World War One, women's fashion trends post-November 1963 helped liberate women from the patriarchy and signaled increasing acceptance of Western individualism over South Vietnamese collectivism. This phenomenon of growing acceptance for Western popular culture set the stage for the more widespread 'hippie' fashion trends of the late-1960s into the 1970s.



## Chapter Four

Renaissance Era:  
South Vietnamese sports development

South Vietnamese sports history during the interregnum period, from years 1963 to 1967, ranks as one of the country's most dynamic and notable periods of national athletic development domestically and internationally. Under Ngô Đình Diệm, sports had failed to thrive. This regression stemmed from a near-ban on multiple sports for perceived moral reasons by Trần Lệ Xuân and the levying of steep taxes on the sports community by Youth and Sports Minister Cao Xuân Vỹ. Following President Ngô Đình Diệm's 1963 overthrow, new, more qualified leaders within the private sports community and less controlling and moralistic politicians across multiple short-lived civilian and military governments exhibited greater, more genuine passion for sports and their development. Showing much developmental national coherence, these efforts by elite and non-elite actors engendered a more administratively decentralized, economically-viable, and internationalized sports culture. Supported by various South Vietnamese print media, particularly leading sports publications like *Vietnam Press*, *Civil Rights (Dân Quyền)* newspaper, and *Training Grounds (Thao Trường)* magazine, this chapter narrates this historic period of sports development.

Three sections frame this chapter on South Vietnamese sports history. The first section examines sports development in the first six months following the November 1963 coup against Ngô Đình Diệm. Following years of perceived neglect under former President Ngô Đình Diệm and Youth and Sports Minister Cao Xuân Vỹ, the sports community saw significant changes, from the resurrection of multiple dilapidated sports to the election of new leadership on various national sports federation boards. The second section discusses sports development during the first half of 1965. Owing to divergent forces, the state of sports improved significantly. Prime Minister Phan Huy Quát and his Minister of Youth and Sports Colonel Nguyễn Tấn Hồng repealed government taxes on sports events and imported sports equipment. Elsewhere across the sports landscape, basketball, soccer, table tennis, track and field, and combat sports all improved. The third section delineates the South Vietnamese national team's historic victory at the 1966 Merdeka soccer championship, Asia's preeminent annual tournament. South Vietnam's nine previous attempts to win this tournament had all ended in failure. Led by Western German coach Karl-Hienz Weigang and team captain Phạm Huỳnh Tam Lang, the men's national squad emerged from the group of play stage to beat regional Southeast Asian power Burma in the final, claiming the Merdeka cup trophy for the first and final time. This championship run at the 1966 Merdeka tournament arguably ranks as South Vietnam's greatest sports accomplishment.

Existing scholarship sheds little light on the history of sports in South Vietnam. An absence of organized sports in South Vietnam does not explain this oversight. More than a dozen different sports existed in South Vietnam, at least by the 1960s.<sup>425</sup> A general disinterest for popular culture by scholars of Vietnam and lackluster performances by South Vietnam's athletes internationally, particularly at the Olympic and Asian Games, arguably explain this lack of attention. What scholarship does exist on South Vietnamese sports culture remains cursory or superficial. George Hickey's 1964 study on Khánh Hậu village in South Vietnam's Mekong delta during the late-1950s and early-1960s mentioned sports several times. The anthropologist observed or learned through assisted interviews that males played soccer during the dry season and volleyball during the rainy season.<sup>426</sup> Two years later, the Research and Development (RAND) Corporation consultant Edward Britton wrote an article about South Vietnamese youth and social revolution between 1964 and 1965. One paragraph without citations noted a change in attitude within the Ministry of Youth and Sports. When a new, unnamed minister took over in 1965—here referring to Colonel Nguyễn Tấn Hồng—the ministry developed a new rapport

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425 These sports included soccer, tennis, ping pong, volleyball, badminton, basketball, track and field, swimming, cycling, go kart racing, horse racing, martial arts, boxing, and body building. The French introduced many of these sports to Vietnam during the colonial period.

426 Gerald Hickey, *Village in Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964): 194, 226, 241, 270, 271.

with youths. Võ Long Triều took over as Minister of Youth and Sport in 1966. A former youth activist, he engineered a youth movement within the ministry and launched a number of new sports programs.<sup>427</sup> In 1977, San Diego State University graduate student Barbara Noonkester wrote her thesis on physical education, games, leisure, and sports in South Vietnam. The work's sixth chapter partially covered sports in South Vietnam from 1954 to 1975. Encyclopedic in nature, the chapter included ephemeral sections on sports philosophy, female athletes, rural sports, and urban sports. The author, a masters student of physical education who did not read or speak the Vietnamese-language, based her understanding of South Vietnamese sports on foreign sources, personal observations while living in South Vietnam during the 1970s, and personal interviews with several California-based South Vietnamese refugees in July and August 1975.<sup>428</sup> In 2017, the University of Washington Ph.D. student Hương Thị Dịu Nguyễn wrote a social history of Hue city from years 1957 to 1967. The work's second chapter covering daily urban life briefly discussed sports development in the former imperial capital, particularly the late-1950s. She maintained that years 1957 to 1962 saw a rise in entertainment options, including sports, because Hue "became more open and connected with the outside world."<sup>429</sup> Vietnamese-language archival sources from the period and a contemporary interview with an elderly Hue resident informed her research.

### **Starting Over: Sports development during South Vietnam's early-Interregnum period**

South Vietnam's national sporting culture made significant strides in months following the November 1, 1963 overthrow of President Ngô Đình Diệm's government. A provisional government led Prime Minister Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ and Chief of State General Dương Văn Minh took administrative power in the aftermath of the coup. The men inherited a competitive but highly governmentally regulated sports culture. In office for only a few months, Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ's government ingratiated itself with the sports community by repealing the country's ban on holding combat sports and body building competitions for profit, which became illegal with the 1962 Moral Protection Laws. The decision to repeal this ban marked the first step in a long process by authorities to administratively decentralize and rebuild the national sports culture. Within South Vietnam's private sports federation system, based out of Saigon, widespread changes of leadership took place post-November 1963. Most of the country's various national sports federations dissolved their managerial boards and voted in new, more passionate people. Coups did not stop this momentum. When General Nguyễn Khánh overthrew Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ's government in late-January 1964, the state of sports continued to improve. General Nguyễn Khánh exhibited great enthusiasm for sports and preached administrative decentralization of sports to afford the federations greater autonomy to operate. Beyond politics, the men's national soccer team showed flashes of potential greatness. In March 1964, the squad advanced past Israel in the semi-final match of the Olympic qualifying tournament, rounding out this milestone period of sports development.

Some of the earliest examples delineating drastic changes to South Vietnam's national sports culture appeared through the country's semi-official press agency *Vietnam Press*. This twice-daily pro-government publication reported on South Vietnam's post-1963 sports transformation regularly. On November 9, 1963, the country's provisional national Soccer Federation announced plans to elect a

427 Edward Britton, "Vietnamese Youth and Social Revolution," *Vietnam Perspectives* 2.2 (Nov., 1966): 24-5.

428 Barbara Noonkester, *Physical Education and Sport in the Republic of Vietnam* (San Diego: San Diego State University, thesis, 1977).

429 Hương Thị Dịu Nguyễn, *Eve of Destruction: A Social History of Vietnam's Royal City, 1957-1967* (Seattle: University of Washington, dissertation, 2017): 85.

new board.<sup>430</sup> Several months earlier in January 1963, the country's Soccer Federation had declared bankruptcy.<sup>431</sup> Since that time, only a provisional soccer federation existed. At the provisional Soccer Federation's November 9, 1963 meeting, members maintained that the body's former chairman Nguyễn Phúc Vọng had taken a partisan position towards the government but did not elaborate, leading many "competent people" to refuse to participate on the board. Soccer officials promised to have wider representation moving forward.<sup>432</sup> The next week, for-profit organized boxing had the opportunity to return. The 1962 Moral Protection Laws backed by Congresswoman Trần Lê Xuân banning for-profit boxing, martial arts, and body building contests had greatly reducing profit margins for private organizers. Those found in violation of this law face up to three months in prison.<sup>433</sup> The ban devastated the combat sports and body building communities. In mid-November 1963, *Vietnam Press* stated that the former government justified the decision to ban for-profit boxing by claiming that boxing contributed to juvenile delinquency. Citing sports circles, the publication maintained that "the ban on boxing had no effect at all on delinquency." On November 15, 1963, the well-known retired boxer Nguyễn Sơn called on the sports community to set up a new national boxing federation.<sup>434</sup>

Ngô Đình Diệm's government had alienated members of the table tennis community, according to *Vietnam Press*. Three weeks after the coup, on November 19, 1963, the Table Tennis Federation invited former members Đinh Văn Ngọc and Nguyễn Văn Bích to rejoin the organization's board. The former Minister of Youth and Sports General Cao Xuân Vỹ, appointed by Ngô Đình Diệm in 1957, had "blackballed" these men from all sports associations for unspecified reasons.<sup>435</sup> Two weeks later, in late-November, the sporting community re-established the Federation of Physical Training and Weight Lifting.<sup>436</sup> This organization had disbanded following the passage of the 1962 Moral Protection Laws.

The next month, *Vietnam Press* continued to report on society's efforts to re-shape South Vietnam's sports culture. On December 2, 1963, the Vietnamese Tennis Federation elected a new board. Its board, led by the director of Saigon's Tennis Club Huỳnh Văn Đây, stated a desire to concentrate on training a new generation of youths.<sup>437</sup> Several days later, Lim Kee Siong, a visiting member of the Federation of International Football Association (FIFA), witnessed increased interest in sports by the country's new government. Encouraged by this observation, he commented, "This is a good thing which makes me believe in a greater development of sports in Vietnam in the future."<sup>438</sup> On December 13, 1963, the South Vietnamese National Olympic committee met and announced its intention to elect a new board. Like other sports circles, this committee felt that Ngô Đình Diệm and the private sports federation system did not value athletics at the international level during the First Republic. General-Secretary Võ Trí Kỳ said, "The consequence of such negligence . . . was the conspicuous absence of Vietnamese athletics in international competitions over the past few years."<sup>439</sup> Within the First Republic's martial arts community, some prominent members had actively opposed

430 "Football federation to elect new board Dec 22," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Nov. 9, 1963, morning edition): 10.

431 "Japan, Singapore soccer teams to play here, federation board threatens to resign," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Jan. 10, 1963, morning edition): 6.

432 "Football federation to elect new board Dec 22," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Nov. 9, 1963, morning edition): 10.

433 Phủ Chủ Tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương, "Luật số 12/62 ngày 22 tháng năm năm 1962 'Bảo vệ luân lý,'" *Quy Pháp Việt Nam Tập, Quyển V, 1962* (Sài Gòn: Sở Công Báo Ấn Hành, 1963): 64.

434 "Boxing to return to Vietnam," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Nov. 15, 1963, morning edition): 10.

435 "Two former officials return to table tennis federation board," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Nov. 19, 1963, evening edition): 6.

436 "Federation of physical training and weight lifting resumed activity," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Nov. 30, 1963, morning edition): 6.

437 "Tennis Federation elects new board," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Dec. 2, 1963, morning edition): 6.

438 "Vietnam has 'great chance' to win Asia Cup competition, says FIFA official," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Dec. 10, 1963, morning edition): 11.

439 "National Olympic committee to meet December 29," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Dec. 13, 1963, evening edition): 6.

President Ngô Đình Diệm, faced arrest, and remained imprisoned until gaining their freedom after the November 1963 coup. Two prominent members included the Judo instructor Phạm Lợi and the Buddhist monk Thích Tâm Giác, a third degree black belt. On December 23, 1963, the Judo Friendship Association announced its intention to celebrate the November coup at a gala party. The association planned to invite Phạm Lợi and Thích Tâm Giác, recently freed from prison.<sup>440</sup> Three days later, the Table Tennis Federation elected a new board. Its new chairman Đinh Văn Ngọc, known for leading the South Vietnamese men's table tennis team at the 1958 Asian Games, had clashed with sports authorities in the early-1960s, quit the Table Tennis Federation board, and, until Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow, refused to return.<sup>441</sup>

On January 3, 1964, *Cây Vợt Già* of *Civil Rights* newspaper, founded by the longtime journalist and promoter of popular culture Trần Tấn Quốc, wrote an editorial imploring the sporting community to place greater importance on the selection of quality sports mentors, such as team captains and coaches. The sports journalist intimated that leadership during the First Republic had undervalued the role of mentors. Observations suggested that the country's new sports leaders, while more enthusiastic about sports, might make the same mistake. He asserted that South Vietnam needed better, more hands-on, technically-trained coaches in this new era. Improved performance at the international level and nationalist pride served as a major motivation behind *Cây Vợt Già*'s desire to see change. He perceived South Vietnam's participation in international sports competitions important for the country's development and reputation. He lamented that past sports leaders had failed to recognize the crucial role coaches played in improving athletic performance. "What is even more unfortunate is that . . . sports coaches have a heavy [but unappreciated] responsibility, [playing] a key role in the success or failure of the athletes when competing to win the tournament in foreign countries." The journalist urged sports leaders to pay as much attention to hiring quality coaches as they did to selecting quality players. "[M]easures need to be implemented thoroughly, resolutely and rigorously in order to create worthy mentors." He pointed out that "advanced" nations like Japan had already employed this approach to create a successful national sports culture. In his opinion, the importance of protecting the "honor of the country" internationally made a paradigm shift in attitudes towards sports leadership and mentoring "all the more necessary."<sup>442</sup>

A few days later, the Soccer Federation took unprecedented steps to set South Vietnamese soccer on a path to gradual improvement. As reported by the *Saigon Post*, an English-language daily published by Đại Việt Party affiliate Bùi Diễm, soccer officials established three permanent men's all star squads from which to select the country's men's national and junior national squads. These three all star teams had membership according to age: 20-years-old and younger, 20 to 25-years-old, and 25 to 30-years-old. Previously, the country had no permanent all star teams. The former Soccer Federation had simply gathered together the best perceived players from various club teams for training a few weeks before a given tournament started. This casual attitude toward training men's national and junior national squads by the former Soccer Federation, asserted Vice Chairman Lt. Col. Trần Văn Xôi, made it "impossible" for the men's national and junior national teams to play well. "The formation of permanent All Star teams will meet this shortcoming," he believed, because it helped improve team chemistry, leading to better, more consistent and competitive play at international tournaments. As important to the development of South Vietnamese soccer, the Soccer Federation sought Western assistance, a major shift from the First Republic years. It planned to send a few coaches to France for training and sought to hire a retired European player to coach the men's national soccer team. Lt. Col.

440 "Judo assn. to hold gala party," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Dec. 23, 1963, evening edition): 9.

441 "Two former officials return to table tennis federation board," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Nov. 19, 1963, evening edition): 6.

442 *Cây Vợt Già*, "Chúng ta thử đặt lại vấn đề," *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 3, 1964): 2.

Trần Văn Xôi disclosed that the federation had asked the Cultural Service of the German Embassy in Saigon to help the federation hire a West German expatriate living in South Vietnam to coach one of the national teams.<sup>443</sup> In fact, the West German expatriate the federation eventually hired to coach the junior national team, Karl-Heinz Weigang, went on to lead the men's national squad to victory at the 1966 Merdeka soccer tournament as head coach.

Other efforts by the soccer community to improve the quality of South Vietnamese soccer soon followed. On January 7, 1964, the *Saigon Post* reported that the Prefectural Sports Service in Saigon commenced a four-month-long youth soccer training course at Công Hòa Stadium, the capital's main outdoor sports complex. The Prefectural Sports Service's director Captain Nguyễn Ngọc Nhung and Huỳnh Vũ, a veteran sportswriter and regular contributor to *Sacred Torch* magazine during the First Republic, opened the training course. Two former players with international experience managed the course, Lê Hữu Đức and Đỗ Quang Thạch. The Prefectural Sports Service said that more than 700 youths signed up for the course, but a lack of facilities and staff only allowed for 100 to participate. Holding this course functioned "to improve training methods for Vietnamese sportsmen in different branches" of society. At the end of the course, the best of the 100 participants had the opportunity to try out for some of the city's different soccer clubs and junior teams.<sup>444</sup>

A few days later, the Cycling Federation announced its plans to elect a new board by the end of the week. According to *Civil Rights* newspaper, the Cycling Federation had major internal leadership problems going back multiple years. During the late-First Republic, Cycling Federation Chairman Trần Minh Mẫn resigned his position because the sport took too much time away from running his business. Division among the cycling community prevented the election of new leaders to guide the sport. Two congresses organized by the cycling community during the late-First Republic ended in failure. *Civil Rights* believed that the third congress scheduled for January 12, 1964 "would surely succeed, because after the outbreak of revolution to overthrow [Ngô Đình Diệm's] corrupt regime, all sports as well as all other activities are strong." In this new era, the cycling community purportedly witnessed increased enthusiasm from many people desirous to more effectively participate in the sport and its management. The newspaper pondered who might win the election for chairman of the federation. The federation needed a "well-intentioned and knowledgeable" person in charge; someone capable of inspiring a sporting spirit ("tinh thần thể thao") and instilling greater discipline within and among racers. Editors correctly speculated that Lâm Ngọc Huấn may or should emerge victorious from the upcoming election. He had much knowledge about the sport and a reputation for volunteering to help the cycling community solve any issues, even those that arose at the last minute. They further speculated that Captain Ung Dzu may or should win the position of vice-chairman. The serviceman recently organized a cycling event welcoming the advent of new political leadership, which "achieved great results." The newspaper hoped that passionate cyclists of goodwill prepared to take an active role in the sport filled out the rest of the board.<sup>445</sup>

On January 14, 1964, the sports journalist Võ Công at *Liberty (Tự Do)* newspaper, one of the country's most respected publications, wrote the first of many articles on the state of South Vietnamese sports and his desire to see significant improvements. Under the guidance of former Minister of Youth and Sport Cao Xuân Vỹ, from 1957 to 1963, the country's sports movement had "gone downhill." Võ Công criticized that Ngô Đình Diệm's government had failed to create a thriving sports culture with mass appeal. In other countries like Britain, the United States, France, and Japan, countless youths adored and emulated professional athletes, he maintained. In South Vietnam, this same passion for professional sports among youths did not exist, seemingly because local athletes did not make much

443 "3 permanent all star teams to be formed," *Saigon Post* (Saigon: Jan. 6, 1964): 8.

444 "Soccer course opens," *Saigon Post* (Saigon: Jan. 7, 1964): 8.

445 "Tổng cuộc xe đạp triệu tập đại hội kỳ III," *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 10, 1964): 2.

money or have a high profile.<sup>446</sup> The next day, Võ Công expressed hope that the country's new sports officials took advantage of the "joyful atmosphere" following the "historic revolution of 11-1-63" to create a better national sports culture. He lobbied the government to implement a sports policy "based on a general, positive, guided, and regulated sport education." The journalist identified several ways to potentially improve South Vietnamese sports, including emphasizing nutrition, better financial management, and allowing youths to pursue sports regardless of their body type.<sup>447</sup> On January 16, 1964, Võ Công touted sports as "the most exciting, spectacular, and effective means of improving our race, both mentally and physically." He recognized the difficulty of the endeavor because "the legacy of the old regime is poor" concerning sports development.<sup>448</sup> The next day, Võ Công commented that former Minister of Youth and Sports Cao Xuân Vỹ had cared more about politics and developing Ngô Đình Nhu's Republic Youth movement than improving sports culture.<sup>449</sup> The journalist's final article, part nine, appeared on January 28, 1964. He mentioned the need for and importance of increased female participation in sports, maintaining that "a nation can only be strong when men and women are strong."<sup>450</sup>

In late-January 1964, the evolution of South Vietnamese sports entered a new stage of development when a group of younger military officers overthrew Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ's administration. A provisional military government led by General Nguyễn Khánh took power but remained committed to improving the national sports culture. Since much of the responsibility for sports development resided at the private federation level, the change of government did not prove too disruptive. If anything, the change of government helped sports progress. Nguyễn Khánh loved sports. Formerly an elite athlete, according to *Vietnam Press*, he once played for the men's national soccer team internationally and the Saigon's Gia Dinh Stars domestically, one of the country's best club teams.<sup>451</sup> To make up for the absence of a Ministry of Youth and Sports, which temporarily ceased to exist with the January 1964 coup, Nguyễn Khanh's government created a provisional sports authority known as the Special Commission for Youth and Sports (Đặc Ủy Trưởng Thanh Niên và Thể Thao). On March 6, 1964, *Vietnam Press* reported that the Special Commission for Youth and Sports Nguyễn Văn Kiêu held a reception with leaders of the sports community and various sports reporters. Speaking before the group, Special Commissioner Nguyễn Văn Kiêu stated his desire to set up more sports facilities across the country and develop "many neglected sports." He promised to "democratize" physical culture by "putting one or two physical culture sessions a week into the school curriculum" in addition to emphasizing sports.<sup>452</sup>

Two weeks later, on March 15, 1964, the Special Commission for Youth and Sports hosted an informal dinner with some twenty sportswriters representing the Vietnamese Journalists' Association. According to *Vietnam Press*, at the dinner, Special Commissioner Nguyễn Văn Kiêu stated his hope for making such gatherings between sports officials and the press common practice. He encouraged the journalists attending this and future functions to provide "serious, fair, and constructive criticism" to the special commission to help build the best national sports culture possible. Nguyễn Văn Kiêu made multiple comments about the special commission's intentions. The special commission perceived badminton as a neglected sport and sought to renovate it. To improve sports in rural areas, the commissioner promised to send soccer balls and volleyballs to hamlets all over the country. At the

446 Võ Công, "'Tự Do' đặt lại vấn đề phục vụ thể thao tại nước nhà (I)," *Tự Do* (Saigon: Jan. 14, 1964): 2, 3.

447 Võ Công, "'Tự Do' đặt lại vấn đề phục vụ thể thao tại nước nhà (II)," *Tự Do* (Saigon: Jan. 15, 1964): 2.

448 Võ Công, "'Tự Do' đặt lại vấn đề phục vụ thể thao tại nước nhà (III)," *Tự Do* (Saigon: Jan. 16, 1964): 3.

449 Võ Công, "'Tự Do' đặt lại vấn đề phục vụ thể thao tại nước nhà (IV)," *Tự Do* (Saigon: Jan. 17, 1964): 2.

450 Võ Công, "'Tự Do' đặt lại vấn đề phục vụ thể thao tại nước nhà (IX)," *Tự Do* (Saigon: Jan. 28, 1964): 2.

451 PM congratulates VN soccer team on Tel Aviv win," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Mar. 19, 1964): 1.

452 "Special commissioner meets Saigon sports circles," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Mar. 3, 1964, morning edition): 4.

international level, the government intended to send a delegation to the Tokyo Olympics in October, continuing a tradition going back to the 1952 Olympic Games. Nguyễn Văn Kiêu did not discuss the delegation's potential size. He maintained that the size of the delegation depended on how well the country's athletes performed over the coming months. As it turned out, the country sent its largest delegation in history, by a significant margin. A final comment by Nguyễn Văn Kiêu concerned the potential administrative decentralization of soccer. The sports commissioner expressed a willingness to "gladly" hand over management of Công Hòa Stadium to the Soccer Federation if the federation's board wanted to take on the responsibility.<sup>453</sup>

A few days later, sports commissioner Nguyễn Văn Kiêu followed through on his stated intention to set up more sports facilities across the country. Whether by coincidence or design, for the special commission's first major project, the organization selected a region greatly neglected by Ngô Đình Diệm's government, the Central Highlands. Most of country's upland minorities lived in the Central Highlands, over 750,000 people. On March 17, 1964, *Vietnam Press* wrote that the Special Commission for Youth and Sports approved the establishment of a sports complex and management office in Bao Loc, the provincial capital of Lam Dong Province. Government funds allowed for the construction of a basketball court, volleyball court, badminton court, and track field.<sup>454</sup>

In late-March 1964, South Vietnam's men's soccer program made progress on the international stage. As part of the country's efforts to qualify for the Tokyo Olympic Games, the national soccer team and its head coach Lê Hữu Đức traveled to Tel Aviv, Israel to compete in the concluding match of the Asian zone's semi-final elimination round, wrote the *Saigon Post*. Qualifying rules required South Vietnam and Israel to play the other abroad once, with goal differential determining the winner. The first match, held back in December 1963, ended in South Vietnamese defeat. Israel netted one goal and South Vietnam failed to score. This home-turf loss suggested to some, if not many South Vietnamese, that the team had little chance to beat the Israelis in front of their own supporters. "Objectively we must admit that the Western soccer standard is . . . higher than Eastern football," the publication asserted. Stamina constituted the South Vietnamese national squad's "main handicap." At past international competitions, the men's national squad usually fluttered out the last fifteen minutes of the match, including a home match against Denmark in mid-February 1964.<sup>455</sup> Arriving in Tel Aviv for the March rematch with the Israeli national team, the underdog South Vietnamese squad looked to pull off an upset. Surprisingly, the team netted two goals in the first half. The Israelis failed to score. Neither team scored in the second half. The victory and total goal differential over two games advanced South Vietnam to the second and final Olympic qualifying round against South Korea.

When the men's national squad's return to Saigon, a giddy Prime Minister Nguyễn Khánh personally congratulated the team for its achievement. He admitted to closely following the match and believed that the victory "added prestige to the national colors abroad." The publication reminded readers that Nguyễn Khánh played for the men's national team at the 1944 Phnom Penh Championship. Current national squad manager Nguyễn Phúc Vọng, who landed on his feet after falling out of favor with the Soccer Federation board in late-1963, attributed the victory to "very high morale." The public responded to South Vietnam's performance with jubilation. Nguyễn Phúc Vọng told Nguyễn Khánh that soccer fans mobbed the players several times as they walked on the street to meet Nguyễn Khánh at his office. A number of shop keepers, cinema ushers, and dance hall hostesses offered their congratulations and asked for autographs.<sup>456</sup> The squad hoped to qualify for the Olympic Games for the first time since 1956, but minor Asian soccer power South Korea stood in the way. When the teams

453 "Sports and youth official meets the press," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Mar. 16, 1964, evening edition): 2.

454 "Lam Dong building new youth and sports facilities," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Mar. 17, 1964, morning edition): 3.

455 'Thao Trường,' "Soccer: Will Vietnam upset the odds at Tel Aviv," *Saigon Post* (Saigon: Mar. 3, 1964): 8.

456 "General welcoms soccer winners," *Saigon Post* (Saigon: Mar. 26, 1964): 8.



faced off a few months later, South Vietnam failed to advance, losing by goal differential (0-3, 2-2). While an anticlimactic finish, advancing to the final qualifying round of the Olympic tournament demonstrated that the national squad had talent and chemistry but room for improvement remained.

The months following the November 1963 overthrow of President Ngô Đình Diệm's government brought many changes to South Vietnam's national sports culture. New national political leaders showed greater enthusiasm for sports development. In December 1963, Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ's government officially lifted the ban on organizing combat sport and body building contests for profit. By mid-January 1964, most of the country's sports federation had voted in new leadership. A number of individuals blackballed or alienated during the First Republic years became board members of different sports federations. The Soccer Federation expressed greater openness to Western coaching assistance, laying the foundation for Karl-Heinz Weingang's hiring in 1965. The martial arts community sought greater inclusiveness by inviting two prominent Judo practitioners formerly imprisoned by Ngô Đình Diệm's government to participate in sports development. When General Nguyễn Khánh ousted Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ from power in January 1964, sports saw further developmental progress. The general's provisional government established a Special Commission for Youth and Sports. Chairman Nguyễn Văn Kiêu exhibited great enthusiasm for sports and their role in society. In March 1964, the men's national soccer team advanced past favored Israel to reach the final round of the Olympic Games Asian zone qualifying tournament. This remarkable period of sports development set South Vietnam on a path to future success and progress domestically and internationally.

### **Maintaining momentum: Sports development during the first half of 1965**

The state of South Vietnamese sports continued to improve domestically and internationally throughout the first half of 1965. Generated by divergent sources within society, this period of progress predominantly coincided with the civilian-oriented government of Phan Huy Quát, from mid-February to mid-June 1965. Phan Huy Quát's administration did much for sports development. Minister of Youth and Sports Colonel Nguyễn Tấn Hồng exhibited great passion for his job and gave the private sports federation system wide autonomy to operate after several years of highly-centralized control under former President Ngô Đình Diệm's government. Beyond the Ministry of Youth and Sports, various examples of successful sports development at the individual, community, and federation level manifested domestically and abroad. From basketball to soccer, table tennis to track and field, boxing to martial arts, sports experienced a string of organizational, athletic, and symbolic achievements, further advancing the national sports culture.

On January 4, 1965, the Soccer Federation took another major step toward improving the state of South Vietnamese soccer at the international level by hiring the West German Karl-Heinz Weingang to construct and train the junior national team. According to the *Saigon Post*, federation chairman Võ Văn Ứng personally reached out to the twenty-nine-year-old former national youth all-star, who happened to work at Saigon's Cao Thang Vocational School as part of a cultural-professional exchange program between West German and South Vietnam. Chairman Võ Văn Ứng tasked Weingang with hand-picking the country's junior national squad and implementing his own perceived superior Western training program in preparation for the April 1965 Asian Junior Soccer Championship in Tokyo, Japan. Never before had a Westerner coached one of the country's national soccer teams. The squad's former head coach, 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Nguyễn Huỳnh Phước, who played for the Thu Duc Infantry School soccer team, agreed to remain with the team and work with Weingang as assistant coach. Weingang had already observed some of the junior nation squad's training sessions. He told reporters that the squad "lack conditioning, skill, and team spirit," but assured the public that he intended to turn every young player

into a “good technician.” He stressed a direct relationship between athletic improvement and tireless training, which players under his guidance must embrace. His proposed four-month-long training program started with fifty elite youth players. The first two months focused on physical conditioning and basic soccer techniques. The final two months emphasized soccer tactics. At the end of the training program, only the best, most consistent players made the junior national squad and traveled to Tokyo.<sup>457</sup>

Two weeks later, the Basketball Federation took unprecedented steps to set the sport of basketball on a path to gradual improvement domestically and internationally. On January 15, 1965, following in the footsteps of the Soccer Federation, the Basketball Federation announced plans to establish permanent men’s all-star and junior all-star teams. According to the *Saigon Daily News*, Secretary-General Nguyễn Đức Hạnh stated that the federation hoped to have these two teams organized and practicing by the end of the month, right after the men’s basketball season-opening tournament. Members of these two all-star teams had to commit to laborious training sessions twice a week.<sup>458</sup> One of the more neglected sports during the First Republic years, basketball had much progress to make. Between late-November and early-December 1963, when the men’s national team played in the second Asian Basketball Championship, it finished dead last out of eight teams.<sup>459</sup> The timing behind the formation of the men’s all-star squad by the Basketball Federation had much to do with upcoming international tournaments and a desire to increase the country’s international profile. The federation planned to send the men’s all-star team to the August 1965 Asian Basketball Championships in Malaysia and the December 1965 Southeast Asian Peninsular Games, also in Malaysia. It wanted the squad as ready as possible for these competitions. Secretary-General Nguyễn Đức Hạnh added that the federation planned to discuss the possibility of forming a women’s all-star squad in the near future. The federation hoped to send the women’s all-star team to the first Women’s Asian Basketball Championship in South Korea held between late-April and early-May 1965.<sup>460</sup>

In late-January 1965, the government of Prime Minister Trần Văn Hương, in power since November 1964, dissolved at the behest of General Nguyễn Khánh, his third coup in less than two years. After a short transition period, military leaders allowed civilian leader Phan Huy Quát to set up a government in mid-February 1965. A fortuitous turn of events for sports development, this new but short-lived administration made serious strides to improve the national sports culture. This process commenced with the appointment of Air Force Colonel and medical doctor Nguyễn Tấn Hồng to the position of Minister of Youth and Sports. On the job for less than two weeks, Nguyễn Tấn Hồng quickly caught the national sports community’s attention. According to *Vietnam Press*, the sports minister promised to eliminate a long-implemented tax on sports events and, possibly, decrease the cost of imported sports equipment. Nguyễn Tấn Hồng made this declaration during a formal dinner between the ministry and the heads of fourteen sports associations and federations. Promoting administrative decentralization of sports, the charismatic sports minister pledged to the country’s sports community that he “would work to make sports completely free from government control.” Nguyễn Tấn Hồng planned to start gradually turning over all the sports facilities under government control to the sports federations. He promised to treat all the sports federations equally.<sup>461</sup> Taking further measures to improve sports, Nguyễn Tấn Hồng approved the establishment of a 20-person National Sports Commission with wide representation from the federations and an analogous advisory council of

457 “Former German soccer player to coach Vietnam’s junior team,” *Saigon Post* (Saigon: Jan. 5, 1965): 8.

458 “Two basketball teams to be set up for international meets,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Jan. 16, 1963): 6.

459 “Asia basketball tournament: P.I. leads in 1<sup>st</sup> round,” *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Nov. 29, 1963, morning edition): 6; “P.I. wins Asian Basketball Championship; Vietnam places eight,” *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Dec. 4, 1963, morning edition): 8.

460 “Two basketball teams to be set up for international meets,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Jan. 16, 1963): 6.

461 “Youth minister announces sports policy,” *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Feb. 25, 1965, evening edition): 1.

undetermined size. These bodies functioned to work together with the National Olympic Committee to help improve the state of South Vietnamese sports locally and internationally.<sup>462</sup>

On March 17, 1965, the veteran sports journalist Thanh Đạm of *Civil Rights* newspaper, who regularly contributed to *Sacred Torch* (Đuốc Thiêng) sports magazine during the First Republic, discussed the devastating impact of government taxes on sports and their repeal by Phan Huy Quát's government. Starting in 1959, Ngô Đình Diệm's government had required sports organizers and the federations to hand over 35 percent of all proceeds from domestic and international matches and tournaments. The government's justification for this tax stemmed from a perceived perpetual debt owed by the sporting community to the government for renovating and modernizing Saigon's Republic Stadium for international competition. In 1959, Former Minister of Youth and Sports Cao Xuân Vỹ's had touted the renovated stadium as comparable to grand stadiums in neighboring Southeast Asian countries. He claimed to want to use the stadium as a national center from which to launch a health and sports movement. Thanh Đạm wrote that he did not understand the logic behind the 35 percent tax, which kept the sports community underdeveloped and in constant debt to the government. Many people purportedly questioned Cao Xuân Vỹ's sincerity for improving athletics and health in the country, believing that the minister simply wanted to use sports as a tool to make the government money. Various sports federations purportedly lodged their complaints through the press but Cao Xuân Vỹ refused to repeal the tax. Another problematic tax on the sports community concerned foreign sports equipment. Anyone who wanted to import foreign sports equipment had to pay a 180 percent duty fee. The impact of the importation tax deterred "those who loved to enjoy sports" and stunted the health and development of an entire generation. Thanh Đạm opined that the taxes instituted on the sports community by Ngô Đình Diệm's government had "strangled" ("bóp nghẹt") sports development, discouraged sincere efforts within the community to improve sports, and made the sports federations' jobs more difficult. He commended Phan Huy Quát's government for promising to repeal the importation tax on sports equipment, which, the sports journalists believed, clearly reflected its enthusiasm for sports development. "The sports world has been happy, [but is] now even happier because the two above-mentioned burdens have been lifted from the shoulders of the Federations. . . ." The previous month, Minister of Youth and Sports Nguyễn Tấn Hồng had stated his desire to see the import tax on sports equipment reduced. His change-of-heart decision to cancel the tax altogether only made him more popular with the sports community.<sup>463</sup>

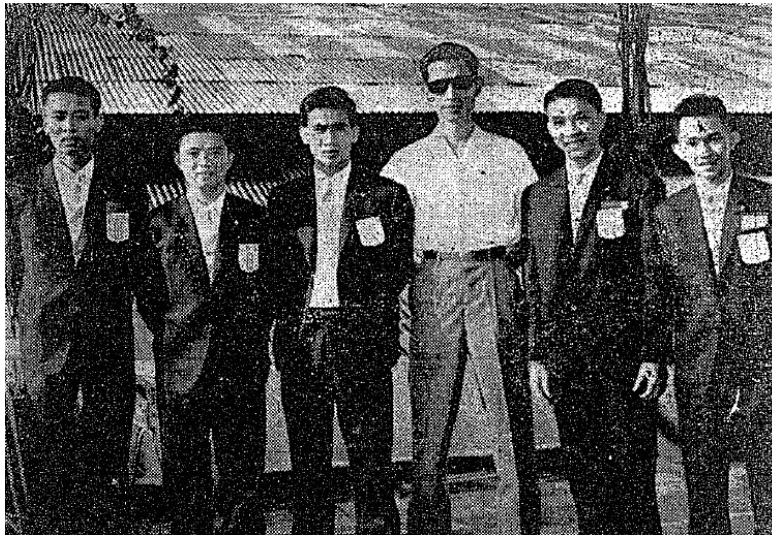
The first week of April 1965, *Civil Rights* newspaper reported on the emergence of a generational talent at Dalat's National Student Sports Championships held between March 16 and 20. At the Championship's track and field meet, student Lê Tuấn Nghĩa won four gold and three silver medals across six individual and one team event: 100 meter dash, 200 meter dash, javelin, high jump, long jump, discus, and 4 x 100 meter relay. No other athlete came close to matching his overall performance. After the meet, he expressed appreciation for the star cyclist Trần Văn Nền, who recognized his diverse athletic talents as a teenager and encouraged him to train at the decathlon. The 22-year-old decathlete and third-year student of architecture already had a reputation within the soccer community as a formidable player for Saigon's Gia Dinh Stars. His physical strength and kicking power earned him the nickname the "Water Buffalo" from teammates and coaching staff. In Dalat, Lê Tuấn Nghĩa's seven-medal achievement earned him another nickname: "The Jungle Man," a reference to the fictional strongman Tarzan. No other athlete in the country trained in the decathlon, making Lê Tuấn Nghĩa's athletic skill set all the more impressive. *Civil Rights* did not specify how many years

462 "National Sports commission to be set up," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Feb. 25, 1965, evening edition): 4.

463 Thanh Đạm, "Những gì cần thiết và cần kíp mà: Giới thể thao ở đây đang chờ đợi mong mỏi nơi ông Tổng Trưởng Thanh Niên và Thể Thao," *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Mả. 17, 1965): 2, 4.

had passed since the track and field community last had a decathlete, but did describe Lê Tuấn Nghĩa as “rare.”<sup>464</sup>

The same week, *Civil Rights* newspaper discussed South Vietnam’s planned participation in the Table Tennis World Championships held in Yugoslavia from April 15 to 25, 1965. Held every two years since 1957, the championships featured a who’s who of male and female talent from across the communist, non-communist, and non-aligned worlds.<sup>465</sup> Reflective of South Vietnam’s gradual retreat from the international sports scene under Ngô Đình Diệm, which coincided with the National Liberation Front’s formation in 1960, the country’s table tennis players had not participated in the world championships since 1959. Since that time, the overall state of table tennis had declined markedly. Sports journalist Hoài Việt considered South Vietnam’s attendance a sign of developmental progress. “Allowing the Table Tennis Delegation to attend a tournament is an encouragement, and a commendable act of the government for the country’s sports [community]. . . .” Purportedly aware of the “heavy responsibility” that came with representing the country abroad, the Table Tennis Federation picked the country’s five best players, started training them twice a day, and fully funded their meals. The all-male team included reigning national champion Huỳnh Văn Ngọc. Sports reporter Hoài Việt, who personally witnessed at least one team training session, saw room for improvement but hoped that the delegation played well. He reminded the delegation that a poor performance in Yugoslavia “will bring humiliation to the whole country, not just the [Table Tennis] Federation.”<sup>466</sup>



The South Vietnamese men’s national table tennis team with Table Tennis Federation Chairman Đinh Văn Ngọc (center right).<sup>467</sup>

On April 9, 1965, *Civil Rights* addressed the improving state of South Vietnamese combat sports. Reporter Thanh Đạm opened by referencing recent efforts by the combat sports community to raise money for victims of late-1964 monsoon floods. As previously reported by *Southern* newspaper, the Boxing and Martial Arts Federations had organized multiple charity events to alleviate the suffering of those impacted by the floods. On December 19, 1964, at Cholon’s Tinh Vo gymnasium, the mecca

464 “Một ngôi sao sáng chói trong kỳ đại hội thể thao sinh viên toàn quốc tại Đà Lạt,” *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Apr. 2, 1965): 2.

465 Before 1957, the Table Tennis Championships occurred annually.

466 Hoài Việt, “Trước ngày xuất ngoại dự giải vô địch hoàn cầu tại Nam Tư,” *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Apr. 7, 1965): 2.

467 “[Men’s national table tennis team photo],” *Saigon Post* (Saigon: Apr. 11, 1965): 14.

of South Vietnamese combat sports, four martial arts and three boxing matches entertained a record audience. All seven matches featured male fighters, but Ms. Lý Lệ Hoa put on a solo martial arts demonstration and publicly challenged two other female fighters to future bouts.<sup>468</sup> A few weeks later, the Boxing and Martial Arts Federations organized two nights of fighting competitions with proceeds once again going to flood victims. At least seven matches took place, including two between female martial artists.<sup>469</sup> *Civil Rights* called these charitable acts by the Boxing and Martial Arts Federations a “blessing” for the country. Based on the impressive fighting tempo observed by reporter Thanh Đạm in different matches, he believed that, without a doubt, “combat sports have made a lot of progress” since Ngô Đình Diệm’s overthrow. Combat sports had room to grow but the future looked potentially bright, for multiple reasons. Of all the sports federations, with exception to soccer, combat sports purportedly had the most freedom and autonomy to operate. In terms of depth, combat sports had a number of promising new fighters like Hồ Ly Ngọc, ‘Kid’ Đoàn, and Dương Văn Me, whose presence “added a lot of richness.” Concerning consumers and sustainability, combat sports had a fairly large, lively, and devoted fan base, at least in the capital. Confident in the future of combat sports, Thanh Đạm believed that the founding generation of Vietnamese fighters like ‘Kid Dempsey,’ Minh Cảnh, and Huỳnh Tiền “smiled with confidence” at the current state of boxing and martial arts.<sup>470</sup>

Two weeks later, on April 21, 1965, the growth and popularization of combat sports continued with back-to-back nights of for-profit fighting at Tinh Vo gymnasium. *Civil Rights* reported on the “best and most skillful match” of the two-night event between bantam-weight boxers Nguyễn Sang and Hoàng Liên. Each fighter fought for one of Saigon’s two most prestigious boxing gyms, informally known as “furnaces” (“lò”). Nguyễn Sang fought for the team coached by Master Nguyễn Sơn, known for his traditional attitudes toward boxing. Hoàng Liên, considered “an outstanding talent,” fought for the perceived superior gym run by Master ‘Kid Dempsey’ (real name Nguyễn Văn Phát), a southern Vietnamese regional bantamweight champion during the 1930s known for his Jack Dempsey-like punching power. Neither fighter wanted to lose the match, bring disrespect to his coach, and give the other gym bragging rights. Both sides had “a large number of enthusiastic supporters” present at the fight. When the opening bell rang, marking the beginning of the five-round “cold war” (“chiến tranh lạnh”), the two combatants “were eager to fight endlessly.” Between rounds, the atmosphere in the corners and stands surged with electricity. By the end of the fourth round, Nguyễn Sang suspected that he trailed Hoàng Liên and sought to make up points. He unleashed all his abilities on his opponent. This strategy won Nguyễn Sang the final round but the judges awarded Hoàng Liên the victory on total points. Some of Nguyễn Sang’s supporters protested but Nguyễn Sang respected the judges’ decision. The sportsmanship and “filial piety” he showed in defeat impressed everyone. According to Thanh Đạm, the match between Nguyễn Sang and Hoàng Liên brought both fighters and their coaches much prestige, entertained the audience “from the beginning to the end,” and “put a lot of confidence in the sport.”<sup>471</sup>

In mid-May 1965, another exciting, well-attended combat sports events took place at Tinh Vo gymnasium, this time in preparation for the Southeast Asian Peninsular Games held in Malaysia at the end of the year. On May 15 and 16, more than a dozen boxers and martial artists squared off to start the process of determining South Vietnamese representation at the peninsular games. Organized by

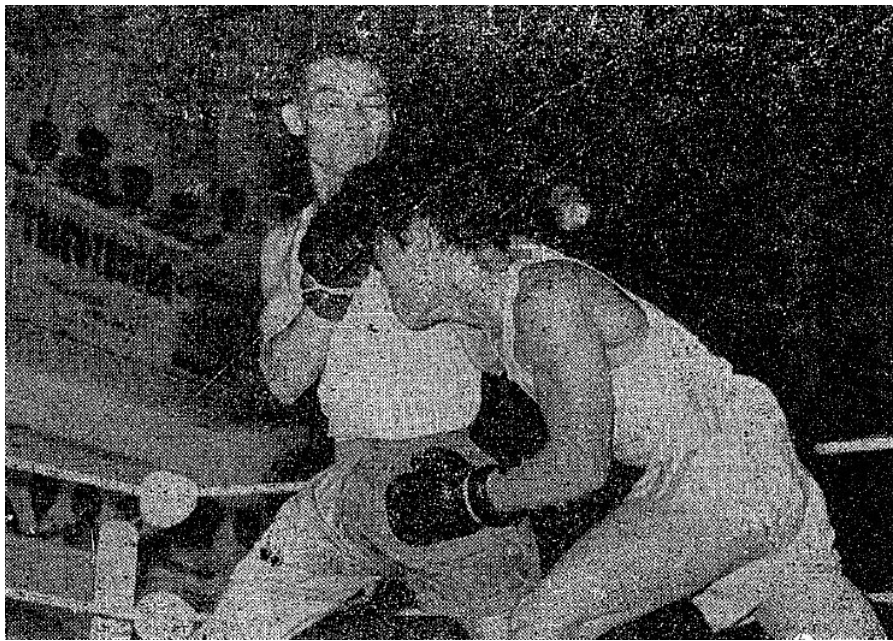
468 Thanh Đạm, “Nữ võ sĩ Lý Lệ Hoa biểu diễn trong đêm quyền thuật giúp nạn lụt,” *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Dec. 23, 1964): 2.

469 “Đêm quyền thuật tại sân Tinh Võ (2-1) được khán giả xem thật đông,” *Phương Nam* (Sài Gòn: Jan. 4, 1965): 1, 4.

470 Thanh Đạm, “Nhân 2 đêm võ đài vừa, cũng nên biết: Những ưu, khuyết điểm của giới quyền thuật nước nhà,” *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Apr. 9, 1965): 2.

471 Thanh Đạm, “Một vài nhận xét của chúng tôi về trận quyền Anh then chốt: Hoàng Liên–Nguyễn Sang,” *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Apr. 21, 1965): 2.

pioneering fighters Nguyễn Sơn, ‘Kid’ Dempsey, Minh Cảnh, and Huỳnh Tiền, both nights featured five martial arts and two boxing matches. According to *Civil Rights*, both cards drew large crowds. On Saturday night, four top boxing contenders, two from the bantamweight division and two from the flyweight division, battled it out. Fans most anticipated the match between flyweights Hoàng Liên and Nguyễn Sĩ Nguyên. Hoàng Liên, one of ‘Kid’ Dempsey’s proteges, emerged victorious over Nguyễn Sĩ Nguyên, a member of Huỳnh Tiền’s gym, after four three-minute rounds. Earlier on the card, the female martial artist Cẩm Huê defeated Kim Thảo. Four more top boxing contenders, two from the bantamweight division and two from the flyweight division, fought Sunday night. Flyweight Nguyễn Sang beat ‘Kid’ Đoàn, setting up a championship fight with Hoàng Liên at a later date. Bantamweight Hồ Ly Ngọc defeated Nguyễn Hữu Trọng, setting up a championship fight with Thân Phong at a later date. Previously, Thân Phong fought for Huỳnh Tiền’s gym under the name Hiệp Huỳnh but suddenly left and joined ‘Kid’ Dempsey’s gym, causing some friction between friendly rivals Huỳnh Tiền and ‘Kid’ Dempsey. On the martial arts card, female fighters Lý Lệ Hoa and ‘Lya’ fought to a draw but “competed pretty well.” Two male martial artists from Tay Ninh province, Lâm Cang and Lâm Phong, easily lost their matches to local competitors.<sup>472</sup> These series of bouts brought an end to the two-night combat sports event. Its success demonstrated the growing popularity of combat sports and the ability of leaders to organize successful multi-bout fighting cards independent of the boxing and martial arts federations.



Flyweight boxers Nguyễn Sang (left) and Kid Doan (right) fighting at Tinh Vo Stadium.<sup>473</sup>

The next month, South Vietnam’s sports community committed to improving the state of women’s athletics by founding the country’s first women’s soccer league. On June 11, 1965, *Civil Rights* wrote that “many sponsors” had stepped up to set up a four-team national Women’s League based out of Saigon. The process of founding the league had much momentum “because not only are the [organizers] enthusiastic in their activities, but they also love this sport, so they are willing to sign

472 “Kết quả các trận quyền thuật hai đêm 15 và 16-5-65,” *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: May 19, 1965): 2.

473 “[Men’s boxing photo],” *Saigon Post* (Saigon: May 18, 1965): 7.

up” to help realize this historic venture. Each of the four teams comprising the league had its own sponsor. The Saigon Stars franchise sponsored one of the teams in collaboration with a number of female artists and female athletes. Nguyễn Chí Nhiều, the wealthy owner of a company that produced a popular children’s medicine, backed the second team. Numerous women tried out for this squad but only twenty roster spots existed. Servicewomen sponsored and made-up the third team. Members of the ethnic Chinese community sponsored the fourth team, an all-ethnic Chinese squad. Each team planned to start practicing soon. Once given a few months to develop, the league’s existence made it possible for South Vietnamese women to participate in international friendlies and tournaments with other Asian women’s teams. Organizers hoped to host friendlies against the Hong Kong women’s team in August.<sup>474</sup> A milestone event, the foundation of the Women’s League in June 1965 reflected the growing popularity of women’s sports in South Vietnam and the passion and cooperation of the private sports community.

On June 14, 1965, sports development experienced another minor disruption when a group of younger military officers led by Generals Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu displaced Phan Huy Quát’s provisional government over a constitutional crisis.<sup>475</sup> Nguyễn Cao Kỳ became prime minister and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu chief of state. The former had a known interest in sports and their development nationally. Previously, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ served as Minister of Youth and Sport for Trần Văn Hương’s short-lived government starting in January 1965.<sup>476</sup> Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Chief of State Nguyễn Văn Thiệu spent a few days vetting cabinet members for their provisional administration. The two servicemen made a wise choice when choosing the Minister of Youth and Sports. They retained the Air Force doctor Nguyễn Tấn Hồng, whom Air Force commander Nguyễn Cao Kỳ already knew.<sup>477</sup> Throughout the political turnover following Ngô Đình Diệm’s overthrow, no provisional government had decided to keep the previous Minister of Youth of Sports.

Building on the momentum of late-1963 and 1964, South Vietnam’s national sports culture continued to mature domestically and internationally throughout the first half of 1965. Various examples across the sports world support this argument. For the first time, the Soccer Federation committed to hiring a Western coach, the West German Karl-Heinz Weigang. The Basketball Federation sought to increase the competitive nature of South Vietnamese basketball abroad by founding the country’s first permanent men’s and junior all-star teams. Minister of Youth and Sports Nguyễn Tấn Hồng pushed for greater administrative decentralization of sports, including repealing government taxes on sports. A generational track and field athlete emerged at the National Student Sports Championships in Dalat, the decathlete Lê Tuấn Nghĩa. South Vietnam participated in the World Table Tennis Championships for the first time since 1959. The boxing and martial arts communities significantly improved the state of combat sports, organizing well-attended competitions with male and female competitors. These various advancements across the South Vietnamese sports world during the first half of 1965 engendered an important and lively six-month period of national athletic development.

### **Realizing greatness: The 1966 Merdeka Soccer Tournament**

Having charted the general renovation of sports in South Vietnam from late-1963 through the first part of 1965, this final section focuses on the men’s national soccer team preparation for and

474 “Saigon đã lập gần xong 4 đội cầu phụ nữ,” *Dân Quyền* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 11, 1965): 2.

475 “Political crisis takes dramatic turn,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Jun. 10, 1965): 1.

476 “‘New look’ cabinet formed key posts for four army men,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Jan. 19, 1965): 1.

477 “New ‘War Cabinet’ for Vietnam,” *Saigon Daily News* (Saigon: Jun. 20, 1965): 1.

historic performance at the August 1966 Merdeka soccer tournament, Asia's preeminent annual soccer championship. Held exclusively in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia starting in 1957, this tournament had broad participation from non-communist and non-aligned nation's across the region. Under the guidance of West German coach Karl-Heinz Weigang, since promoted from the junior national team to the men's national team, South Vietnam bested the tournament's 10-team field to take home the champion's cup for the first time in the country's decade-long history of participation. Only once before had South Vietnam won any major Asian soccer tournament. In 1959, before the general decline of sports in the early-1960s, the men's national squad emerged victorious over a small, lackluster 4-team field at the Southeast Asian Peninsular Games. The quantity and quality of the field at Merdeka in 1966, including budding Southeast Asian power Burma and East and South Asian soccer powers South Korea and India, made South Vietnam's first-place finish a major accomplishment. Widely covered in the press, the event had much influence and significance. It imbued much of the nation with national pride, furthered sports development in the post-November 1963 era, and ranked as one of, if not, the greatest sports accomplishments in the country's history.

Based on South Vietnam's underwhelming nine-year collective performance at the Merdeka soccer tournament from 1957 to 1965, relatively few people believed that the men's national team had a strong chance to win. South Vietnam had never advanced past the semi-final stage of the tournament before. Previous South Vietnamese men's national teams finished, on average, in the middle of the field; not terrible, not great. In 1965, South Vietnam finished well out of contention, sixth place out of nine teams. Never before in the tournament's history had a participating nation followed up a sixth place finish or worse with a successful championship run the next year. The prospect of South Vietnam winning the tournament in 1966, at least on paper, did not look particularly promising.

In the South Vietnamese press, discourse about the August 1966 Merdeka tournament appeared as early as late-June. On June 25, 1966, Thiệu Võ of *Training Grounds (Thao Trường)* sports magazine expressed doubt about the chances of South Vietnam competing well at the Merdeka tournament after observing one of the first team tryouts. In an editorial, the sports reporter questioned the overall quality of the 36 athletes invited to try out for the men's national squad and the competency of the coaching staff. National team manager, Soccer Federation board member, and head of player recruitment Major Cao Văn Phước, heavily involved with sports development since the November 1963 coup, played a leading role vetting this list of players. At the tryout witnessed by Thiệu Võ, the Soccer Federation broke up these 36 invited players into two teams, a military and a civilian team. The military team downed the civilian team 3-1. Thiệu Võ did not seem impressed with the game or the observable data it produced. Since many of the match's elite players had never played on the same team before, disharmony and clumsiness reigned. The sports journalist believe that the undisciplined, segregated match between servicemen and civilians raised many questions and failed to help the federation identify the best players. "That test did not yield any results. . . . No one stood out." he maintained. Other expressed concerns centered around the absence of Hồ Thanh Chinh and the physical health of multiple players. Hồ Thanh Chinh, one of the country's promising young goalkeepers, did not participate in the match. Apparently, he did not receive an invitation from the Soccer Federation, which leadership corrected by early-July. The availability of multiple talented players due to injury made the final composition of the squad and its potential strength more difficult to determine. Midfielder Phạm Huỳnh Tam Lang, one of the country's best and most experienced players, remained out of practice with a torn hamstring. Rising star Quang Kim Phụng had knee pain. These various factors made it "really difficult to choose 18 worthy players to represent South Vietnam at the Merdeka tournament in August."<sup>478</sup>

478 Thiệu Võ, "Cuộc thao diễn tuyển thủ vừa vụng về vừa tồi tăm không một yếng sáng," *Thao Trường* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 25, 1966): 3-4.



Two days later, the sports journalist Thát Hiền of *Democracy (Dân Chủ)* newspaper, run by the longtime journalists Vũ Ngọc Các, reported that ten teams across South, Southeast, and East Asia, the largest field in the tournament's history, had submitted applications to participate in the competition on its tenth anniversary. These teams included Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, India, Hong Kong, Burma, Singapore, Thailand, South Vietnam, and Malaysia. Potential existed for Australia and Indonesia to submit applications but their attendance never materialized. Malaysia's sports community scheduled the tournament from August 13 to 27, 1966 in the nation's capital of Kuala Lumpur. Federation leaders in South Vietnam sought to ensure that the men's national team performed as well as possible at the tournament. Undeterred by the team's disappointing sixth-place finish the previous year, to help the national squad better prepare for the international tournament, South Vietnam's Soccer Federation organized special weekly matches against a different top-tier team from the country's 'premiere' league. At the same time, leadership within the Soccer Federation committed to improving their sports managerial knowledge and effectiveness. The Chairman of the Soccer Federation Võ Văn Mỹ planned to attend the July 1966 World Soccer Championships in London as an observer.<sup>479</sup>

The next month, on July 4, 1966, *Democracy* newspaper discussed the final composition of the men's national team and the Soccer Federation's high hopes at the tournament. The coaching staff and Soccer Federation selected the 20-man national team from a pool of 39 elite players representing several local clubs and associations, wrote sports reporter Nguyễn Đức Hiền. Most of the players who made the cut, including Phạm Huỳnh Tam Lang and Quang Kim Phụng, served in the military or worked for the police. The selection committee favored those with discipline, fighting spirit, and conditioning. The sports reporter drew attention to the squad's two young goalkeepers Hồ Thanh Chinh (Military Supply) and Nguyễn Văn Châu (National Police). He insinuated that the success of the team largely resided on the goalkeeping abilities of these two inexperienced but "dedicated" men, who had a reputation for either playing well or poorly ("Khi trời khi sứt"). When they played well, their opponents on the pitch purportedly "feared" their defensive talents. This youth movement at goalkeeper, part of the federation's plan to partially rejuvenate the men's national squad, proved somewhat "concerning" because it meant leaving Trần Văn Đực, an internationally experienced but older and slower goalie, at home. Team manager Major Cao Văn Phước liked the team and its chances. He stated, "We want to win the 'Merdeka' award!" His confidence derived from the perceived fact that the "Soccer Federation has just selected a team of young, passionate players enthusiastic to fight to the last minute for the national colors on their shirt."<sup>480</sup>

In early-August 1966, one week before the Merdeka championship, team manager Major Cao Văn Phước invited several sports journalists to observe an evening training session at camp Nhut Tao (northern District 5). Ngọc Hiền of *Political Discussion (Chính Luận)* newspaper and Thanh Đạm of *Dawn (Bình Minh)* newspaper wrote about this experience. When Ngọc Hiền, Thanh Đạm, and other reporters arrived at the facility, they found head and assistant coaches Karl-Heinz Weigang and Trần Văn Thông working to instill better teamwork, offensive ball handling skills, and defensive tenacity. The two coaches closely observed a keep away drill between two 3-player teams. One team attempted to keep the ball away from the other team for ten minutes. If it failed to keep control of the ball, the victorious defensive team took over on offense and a new 3-person team rotated in and had the opportunity to steal the ball away. When the drill ended, Major Cao Văn Phước gave assurances about the meticulous nature of the team's training program, after which the journalists visited the facility's modest dining hall. There, Ngọc Hiền and Thanh Đạm noticed great joy and high spirits among the

479 Thát Hiền, "Từ 13 đến 27-8-1966 tại Kuala Lumpur 10 quốc gia dự giải 'Merdeka' 66," *Dân Chủ* (Sài Gòn: Jun. 27, 1966):

480 Nguyễn Đình Hiền, "Nếu 2 thủ môn trẻ Châu và Chinh hết hẳn tật 'khi trời khi sứt' Hội tuyển VN sẽ đoạt giải 'Merdeka' 66," *Dân Chủ* (Sài Gòn: Jul. 4, 1966): 2.

players. Multiple veteran players sought out the journalists to discuss their intense training and the federation's strong support over the past few months. Nguyễn Ngọc Thanh, vice-captain and the player with the most game appearances for the national team, believed that this national squad trained harder than any previous squad for which he had played. "The training this time was extremely hard for us to endure," which helped to create high levels of camaraderie. Off the field, the federation emphasized nutrition to make sure the squad's hard work did not go to waste. The dining hall always had plenty of milk, fruit, and meat. Star defender Phạm Huỳnh Tam Lang, elected head captain, praised coach Karl-Heinz Weigang. Weigang had implemented a formation never before utilized by a South Vietnamese men's national team, the 4-2-4 (four defenders, two midfield runners, and four forwards), which attempted to marry a strong attack with a strong defense. Phạm Huỳnh Tam Lang stated that the team had adapted well to this formation, bringing the players excitement and confidence. The team captain appreciated coach Weigang's level of commitment to the squad. Although "a foreigner," he "lives very close to us." Weigang further endeared himself to the squad by outfitting each player with Adidas soccer cleats shipped in from West Germany.<sup>481</sup>

The South Vietnamese men's national squad left for Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on August 8, 1966. According to *Dawn* newspaper, an allocation round to determine the composition of two 5-team groups of play took place on August 13, 1966. South Vietnam drew the Malaysian host team, a tough opening placement match. The squad fell to Malaysia 5-2, but the loss did not count toward South Vietnam's standing in the tournament.<sup>482</sup> *Liberty* newspaper later revealed that the team did not immediately employ the 4-2-4 formation against Malaysia. Since the game did not really count, Coach Karl-Heinz Weigang wanted to keep the formation a secret until the second half the game.<sup>483</sup> According to *Training Ground* magazine, following the loss, tournament organizers placed South Vietnam in the first group of play with the 1965 defending co-champions Taiwan, 1963 runner-up Japan, the 1964 runner-up India, and Singapore. The second group of play featured the 1960 co-champions Malaysia, the 1965 defending co-champions South Korea, the 1964 champions Burma, Hong Kong, and Thailand. Each group of play commenced its own round-robin tournament. At the end of these two round-robin tournaments, played over the course of multiple days, the second-place team in group 1 faced off against the second-place team in group 2 for third place honors. The first-place team in group 1 played the first-place team in group 2 for the tournament championship.<sup>484</sup>

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481 Ngọc Hiền, "Thăm đoàn tuyển thủ túc cầu VN trước ngày tham dự giải Merdeka," *Chính Luận* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 6, 1966): 5; Thanh Đạm, "Mười hôm trước ngày lên đường viễn trai nhập ngũ của tuyển thủ túc cầu dự giải Merdeka," *Bình Minh* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 6, 1966): 7.

482 "7 ngày trôi qua," *Bình Minh* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 20, 1966): 7.

483 "Kỷ sự thể thao," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 22, 1966): 3, 6.

484 Thuận Mỹ Trang, "Kết quả các trận chia toán của Giải Merdeka," *Thao Trường* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 20, 1966): 23.



The 1966 South Vietnamese men's national soccer team.<sup>485</sup>

*Dawn* newspaper and *Training Ground* magazine summarized the results of South Vietnam's four round-robin games. The men's national team started out the group of play stage strong. On August 18, 1966, in front of 15,000 spectators, the squad blanked Japan 4-0, putting the entire field on notice. South Vietnam battled Singapore two days later. The match ended in victory, 2-1. South Vietnam's high level of play continued against Hong Kong. South Vietnam won 3-0, their second multiple-score clean sheet of the tournament. In South Vietnam's final group play match against India, the squad suffered its only defeat, 0-1. The close loss did not have an adverse impact on South Vietnam's final standing. South Vietnam still ranked first by goal differential over Taiwan, Japan, India, and Singapore. The team advanced to the Merdeka final for the first time in history, legitimizing the 4-2-4 formation and the federation's controversial youth movement at goalkeeper. South Vietnam awaited the conclusion of the second group of play round-robin tournament with Malaysia, South Korea, Burma, Hong Kong, and Thailand. Burma emerged as the top-ranked team with three wins and one loss, beating South Korea 2-0 to advance to the championship.<sup>486</sup>

The all-Southeast Asian championship final between Burma and South Vietnam took place on August 28, 1966. 35,000 people attended the match, wrote *Liberty* newspaper and *Training Ground* magazine. No one knew what to expect out of South Vietnam's national team. It had unexpectedly lost to India after playing so well the previous three games, and Burma had the best soccer program in Southeast Asia. Burma started out by pressing the ball on South Vietnam's side of the field but defender Phạm Huỳnh Tam Lang and company pushed them back. At the 5-minute mark, South Vietnam counter-attacked. Phạm Huỳnh Tam Lang forwarded the ball to left-winger Nguyễn Văn Ngôn. Nguyễn Văn Ngôn had a shot on goal but the ball traveled just wide. South Vietnam had four corner kicks in first 15 minutes but failed to capitalize. Burma barely posed a threat to South Vietnam's penalty area but did take a shot on goal which hit the post. Neither team managed to score by the end of the half. A higher pace of action and stalwart defensive efforts by both teams defined most of the second half. When no one scored by minute 70, it appeared that the match might end in an anticlimactic tie, similar to the 1965 final between South Korea and Taiwan. Then, with less than ten minutes left in the game, right midfielder Nguyễn Văn Chiêu summoned all his strength and agility to

485 "[Men's national soccer team photo]," *Thao Trường* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 13, 1966): front cover.

486 "7 ngày trôi qua," *Bình Minh* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 27, 1966): 7; "Các trận giải Merdeka 66," *Thao Trường* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 27, 1966): 4-8.

mount an attack against Burma. Inside the opponent's penalty box, he quickly dribbled the ball forward with his defender running parallel to him. Needing to create space, he suddenly stopped dribbling but maintained control of the ball, taking his defender by surprise. When the defender's momentum carried him past Nguyễn Văn Chiêu, another defender tried to intervene but arrived too late. Nguyễn Văn Chiêu had a small window of opportunity and struck the ball. The shot cleared the goalkeeper and pierced the back of the net. The capacity crowd went wild as Nguyễn Văn Chiêu's teammates embraced the left-fielder. Burma failed to score the remainder of the match.<sup>487</sup> After ten straight years of trying, South Vietnam's men's national squad, led by coach Karl-Heinz Weigang and captain Phạm Huỳnh Tam Lang, had finally won the Merdeka soccer championship. In storybook fashion, Phạm Huỳnh Tam Lang hoisted the tournament's championship trophy as his teammates carried him off the pitch on their shoulders. This image remains one of the most iconic sports image in the country's history.



Phạm Huỳnh Tam Lang with teammates.<sup>488</sup>

The men's national squad returned to Saigon on August 31, 1966. Not long after its return, team manager Major Cao Văn Phức sat down with the South Vietnamese press and discussed the tournament. He revealed some interesting details about the team's strategy and play. As reported by *Liberty* newspaper, the team manager openly admitted to throwing the first game against Malaysia in the allocation round. An earlier report stated that South Vietnam played poorly because coaches wanted to keep the 4-2-4 formation a secret for as long as possible. As it turned out, the team also sought a more favorable round-robin schedule in the group of play stage. Based on the presumed results of the tournament's other allocation games, the coaches believed that the team had a better chance of winning the tournament if the squad lost to Malaysia. Major Cao Văn Phức attributed the

487 "VN hạ Miến Điện 1-0 đoạt giải Merdeka 66," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Aug. 30, 1966): 1; "Tại Kuala Lumpur trước 35000 khán giả Việt Nam thắng Miến Điện 1-0," *Thao Trường* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 3, 1966): 5.

488 "[Phạm Huỳnh Tam Lang photo]," *Thao Trường* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 3, 1966): front cover.

team's loss versus India a few days later to playing on a mucky field and bad luck. An earlier match that day in the rain compromised the quality of the grass pitch. Apparently, India only managed to score on South Vietnam because the muddy field stymied one of Phạm Huỳnh Tam Lang's passes. When South Vietnam advanced to the final against Burma, the team devised a strategy to counter their opponent's presumed strategy. Major Cao Văn Phước and team captain Phạm Huỳnh Tam Lang agreed that Burma "was convinced that the [South] Vietnamese delegation lacked endurance. . . ." Burma likely wanted to play with less effort in the first half, let South Vietnam wear itself out, and then increase the tempo and pressure against a tired opponent in the second half. South Vietnam went into the game preparing "to fight at the end of the match." With hindsight, Major Cao Văn Phước asserted that he and Phạm Huỳnh Tam Lang had implemented the correct strategy. Burma did not play at full speed in the first half. In the second half, a rested South Vietnam had the energy to match Burma's increased tempo. With less than 10 minutes in the match, midfielder Nguyễn Văn Chiêu still had the energy to press the defense and win the game.<sup>489</sup>

The triumph of the South Vietnamese men's national team winning the 1966 Merdeka soccer championship for the first time in ten years inspired a significant domestic reaction. Political leaders and the public took great national pride in the accomplishment. According to *Vietnam Press*, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu called the squad's success in Kuala Lumpur a "glorious" achievement that "brought honor to the country."<sup>490</sup> Another report stated that thousands of people and many welcome banners awaited the national team when its plane landed at Saigon's Tan Son Nhat airport on August 31, 1966.<sup>491</sup> This outpouring of public support spoke to the significance of the team's achievement in Kuala Lumpur and, arguably, an additional but secondary need for a pleasant distraction from the country's escalating war. To celebrate and recognize the accomplishment of the men's national squad and leadership within the Soccer Federation, the government organized an award ceremony at Gia Long Palace later that evening. Before attending this ceremony, the team stopped off at the Caravelle hotel, wrote *Training Ground* magazine. Outside the hotel, thousands of people gathered awaiting their arrival. A few members of the team, including manager Major Cao Văn Phước and Phạm Huỳnh Tam Lang, spoke to the large crowd from an elevated position.<sup>492</sup> When the rally finished, the team departed for Gia Long Palace to meet with leading politico-military leaders. There, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu awarded the team and Soccer Federation Chairman Colonel Trần Văn Xôi with Merit Order medals, reported *Vietnam Press*.<sup>493</sup> *Liberty* newspaper divulged that Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, Chief of State Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, and other top officers personally congratulated coach Karl-Heinz Weigang. Many people wanted to talk to him about the strategy he implemented and team's path to victory. The coach opined that his team won the tournament not because of superior play but because of its "serious discipline" and "very solid spirit."<sup>494</sup> A final recognition event at City Hall later that night concluded this milestone week of sports development and the Merdeka experience, but the memory of the achievement lived on in the hearts of many South Vietnamese.

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489 "Phát giác mới về giải Merdeka," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 3, 1966): 3, 6.

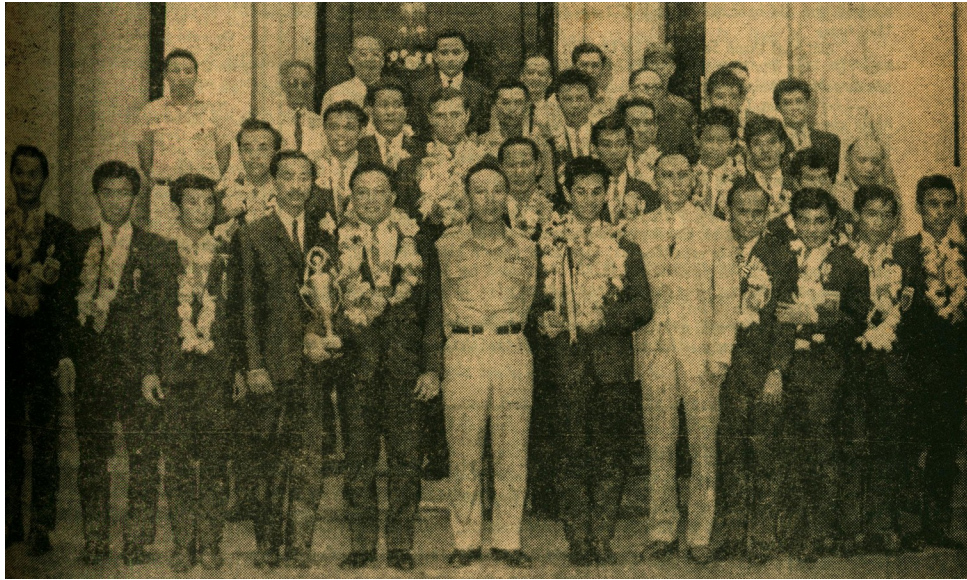
490 "Prime Minister congratulates Vietnamese soccer team," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Aug. 30, 1966, morning edition): 1.

491 "Soccer team honored," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Sep. 1, 1966, morning edition): 3.

492 Thiệu Võ, "Điểm son lịch sử," *Thao Trường* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 10, 1966): 2.

493 "Soccer team honored," *Vietnam Press* (Saigon: Sep. 1, 1966, morning edition): 3.

494 "Phát giác mới về giải Merdeka," *Tự Do* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 3, 1966): 3, 6.



The men's national team posing with dignitaries at Gia Long Palace.<sup>495</sup>

### Conclusion

The state of South Vietnamese sports improved markedly following the overthrow of Ngô Đình Diệm's government in November 1963. First Republic political elites had closely controlled the sports community. From implementing a near-ban on multiple sports for perceived moral reasons to administering steep taxes on the sports community, the First Republic years did not allow for sports to thrive. The downfall of Ngô Đình Diệm's government allowed for a more dynamic era of sports development to commence. Almost immediately, Prime Minister Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ's government repealed the 1962 Moral Protection Laws, which had all but banned combat sports events and body building contests. Most of the country's sports federations sought a change of direction and began electing new leaders to their management boards. By 1964, the Soccer Federation broke with tradition and sought to hire a Western soccer coach to improve the quality of South Vietnamese soccer on the international stage. This paradigm shift in soccer development made Karl-Heinz Weigang's eventual hiring to the men's national team possible. More advancements in sports development took place during the first half of 1965. Phan Huy Quát's government revoked the taxes on organized for-profit sports events and imported sports equipment. Large, well-attended combat sports events featuring male and female fighters became regular occurrences at Cholon's Tinh Vo gymnasium. The sports community established the country's first women's soccer league. The decathlete Lê Tuấn Nghĩa put on a historic performance at the National Student Sports Championships in Dalat. Internationally, the country returned to the World Table Tennis Championship for the first time in several years. The next year, the men's national team won the 1966 Merdeka soccer tournament for the first and last time. A major source of national pride, the team's victory at Asia's preeminent annual soccer tournament represented a high water mark of sports achievement in South Vietnamese history. These different sections discussing South Vietnamese sports between 1963 and 1966 cement the important, unique legacy of sports development during the interregnum years.

<sup>495</sup> “[Gia Long Palace team photo],” *Thao Trường* (Sài Gòn: Sep. 3, 1966): front cover.

## Conclusion

South Vietnam's interregnum period represented one of the most important and dynamic periods of social, cultural, and political development in South Vietnamese history. President Ngô Đình Diệm's 1963 overthrow engendered this national transformation. During South Vietnam's First Republic, the increasingly authoritarian rule, strict Catholic morality, and nativist predilections of Ngô Đình Diệm and his family significantly impacted, if not stunted, the country's development. The President's demise allowed for many worthwhile changes to take place. Contrary to Orthodox and Revisionist depictions of the 1963 coup against Ngô Đình Diệm as throwing the country into complete chaos and engendering widespread failure for multiple years, the President's removal from power had an inspiring impact on South Vietnam. A point of departure for a new and creative phase of national innovation, the coup against Ngô Đình Diệm reinvented the mid-1960s as a creative and generative phase of South Vietnamese history. The country experienced deteriorating security conditions, but citizens enjoyed more individual freedoms and had greater civic independence.

Following the November 1963 coup against Ngô Đình Diệm, public criticism of the First Republic flooded the country's more independent press, challenging Revisionist depictions of the period as illustrious and Ngô Đình Diệm as a popular, adept leader. Continuing to appear throughout the period in various publications, this critical discourse revealed much about the perceived autocratic, domineering Catholic legacy of Ngô Đình Diệm and his family. Starting in the second half of the 1950s, to bolster public support for the war against Vietnamese communism, Ngô Đình Diệm's administration sought to control the performing arts industry. Authorities first pressured modern musicians and, later, the cải lương community to perform works of a politicized or battlefield nature. Modern musicians nearly stopped producing love songs because romantic content did not qualify as beneficial to the war effort. In the cải lương industry, the narrow spectrum of appropriate content approved for public consumption by the government led to predictable, boring theatrical dramas. The industry struggled to survive financially and psychologically. Discriminatory and assimilationist government policies in the Central Highlands created unsatisfactory living conditions for many ethnic minorities. In 1958, when a civil rights protest movement broke out throughout the highlands in response to poor living conditions, the government reacted with arrests, legal prosecutions, and forced relocation. The Catholic zealotry of the Ngô family appeared through the 1959 Family Laws written by First Lady Trần Lệ Xuân. While designed to improve the lives of women, this comprehensive legislative decree included a Catholic-influenced article that all but banned divorce, forcing many women to remain in unhappy or abusive marriages. Three years later, Trần Lệ Xuân successfully backed the Catholic-influenced Moral Protection Laws in the national legislature, which banned, among other things, birth control pills and abortion. From Hue, shadow administrator Ngô Đình Cẩn and spy chief Phan Quang Đông of the Secret Police (Mặt Vụ) ruled over central Vietnam with near-complete autonomy from at least the second half of the 1950s until November 1963. Abusing their authority, these men oversaw acts of extortion and murder against Hue's non-communist community for personal gain. In Saigon, officials loyal to Ngô Đình Diệm's government covered up the 1963 fatal police shooting of the teenage Buddhist student radical Quách Thị Trang. After disposing of her body in an unmarked grave, authorities lied to her family about her death, insisting police arrested and incarcerated her. The public and Quách Thị Trang's family only learned about her demise following the 1963 coup.

Comprehensive research through South Vietnamese press materials refutes long-held Orthodox and Revisionist claims about Ngô Đình Diệm's 1963 overthrow having an unremarkable, detrimental impact on South Vietnam. Instead of descending the country into mediocrity, the coup allowed for many worthwhile changes to take place. Engendered by elite and non-elite forces, these changes impacted South Vietnam's social, cultural, and political development dramatically. Society created a less centralized, more democratic political system supported by constitutionally-backed institutions. A



public long desirous for democracy continuously called for elections following Ngô Đình Diệm's overthrow. In May 1965, the town, city, and provincial council elections, the first major elections of the interregnum period, took place. 72 percent of registered voters, 3,411,482 people, participated in the election of over 550 public servants. These elections represented a small but important step in building democracy and decentralizing governmental control. The next year, the Constituent Assembly election legislated by the National Leadership Committee represented another milestone in South Vietnam's political development. 80 percent of registered voters cast a ballot in the election. Over the course of six months, the 117-person Constituent Assembly drafted a constitution determining the country's political structure and character indefinitely. This constitution promoted administrative decentralization and checks and balances through a unique, multifaceted presidential-style system with a bicameral legislature. The simultaneous presidential and senatorial elections, held in September 1967, signaled an end to the interregnum period. These highly-anticipated elections afforded the country political stability and greater democratic legitimacy through the creation of constitutionally-backed institutions. Reflective of the election's national importance, 83 percent of registered voters participated in these elections, the highest national turnout for any election during the period.

Female fashion and gender norms changed drastically following the termination of the Ngô family's reign. With the strict Catholic morality promoted and legislated by Trần Lệ Xuân no longer holding sway over female society, women had much more socio-cultural freedom. Women of the interregnum period adopted Western standards of living, particularly aesthetically and behaviorally, to a much greater degree than women of the First Republic. "New Wave" fashion trends like sleeveless dresses, high-heeled shoes, and cosmetics proliferated almost immediately after the coup, challenging the predominance of the demure áo dài in the hierarchy of women's fashion. In 1965, South Vietnam's first national beauty contest took place. Criminalized and banned during the late First Republic by Trần Lệ Xuân and the National Assembly for perceived moral reasons, the Ms. South Vietnam Beauty Contest, particularly the swim suit competition, shattered cultural taboos about acceptable female public behavior. Localized to include a formal competition in áo dài, the competition captivated much of the country. Sixty-six women, including forty-four high school students, four graduate students, and fifteen civil servants, participated in the pageant. Thái Kim Hương, an eighteen-year-old high school student from Bình Dương Province, walked away with the crown by a close margin. In mid-1966, the Westernization of South Vietnamese women's fashion and gender norms continued with the advent and popularity of the miniskirt. Many women embraced the miniskirt, refuting Western notions that only prostitutes and bar girls wore the garment. Leading up to the 1967 September presidential election, the miniskirt became a national political and cultural talking point when the field's eldest candidate Trần Văn Lý, a culturally conservative former mandarin, promised to ban the garment if elected president. The only candidate in the election to call for a ban on the miniskirt, Trần Văn Lý finished dead last in the 11-person race.

The state of sports improved markedly during the interregnum period. Following years of government interference, perceived neglect, and poor leadership under former President Ngô Đình Diệm, Youth and Sports Minister Cao Xuân Vỹ, and the country's nominally private federation system, the sports community saw significant changes post-November 1963. In this new era, a more administratively decentralized, economically-viable, and internationalized sports culture existed. The resurrection of multiple neglected sports all but banned by the 1962 Moral Protection Laws and the election of new, more passionate leaders on various national sports federation boards defined the first six months after the coup. This early stage of development laid the foundation for this renaissance era of sports. Sports development during the first half of 1965, largely associated with the leadership of Prime Minister Phan Huy Quát and his Minister of Youth and Sports Colonel Nguyễn Tấn Hồng, saw much private organizational growth and the administrative decentralization of sports. For-profit

combat sports events drew large audiences regularly, citizens founded the country's first women's soccer league, and Minister of Youth and Sports Colonel Nguyễn Tấn Hồng repealed government taxes on sports events and imported sports equipment. In 1966, the South Vietnamese men's national team won the Merdeka soccer championship, Asia's preeminent annual soccer tournament. The national team's championship run at the 1966 Merdeka tournament, in which ten teams across South, Southeast, and East Asia participated, arguably ranks as South Vietnam's greatest sports accomplishment.

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