

40 years after the coup d'etat against the Ngo Dinh Diem regime

The View from Saigon:

What did the Communists think of Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem? Some first-hand stories

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Translated from Vietnamese

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Editorial - Forty years after the coup d'etat against President Ngo Dinh Diem and his tragic murder, the personage Ngo Dinh Diem is still the subject of debate. To some people, Mr. Diem missed a great opportunity because he was not up to the challenge of the problems he had to confront and solve. To others, he was the victim of a grave mistake by the Kennedy Administration and had he not been overthrown, the Republic of Vietnam's regime would not have had to suffer such a tragic fate. Perhaps both views were partly correct. At least, one can agree on two points: the generals who overthrew and murdered Mr. Diem did not act in the nation's interests but only at Washington's behest and they did not measure up to him; in terms of stature, Mr. Diem towered over and above any of his rivals.

In the previous issue, Thong Luan has posted Mr. Bui Tin's article on the coup d'etat against Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem as the view from Hanoi; at that time, Mr. Bui Tin was the Deputy Editor of the Nhan Dan Daily Newspaper, the official organ of the Vietnam Communist Party in Hanoi. This time, we are posting an article by Mr. Ton That Thien as the view from Saigon; at that moment, Mr. Ton That Thien was Mr. Diem's Press Attaché. It should be added that Mr. Ton That Thien and Mr. Bui Tin are close friends. They were only one year apart in age, and both were sons of two mandarin ministers of the Hue Imperial Court, living next door to each other, studying together at the same school, and both leaving for Hanoi to participate in the August 1945 revolution. Later on, although both were practicing journalism, they followed two opposite paths in the fraternal nationalist vs communist conflict, like the overall tragedy of the Vietnamese people. At present, they are close friends once again and companions in the Movement for Democracy and Pluralism (RDP).

Over the past several years, I have noted down some of the comments from the communist leaders over the coup d'etat and the murder of the President Ngo Dinh Diem. Communist leaders from the South, like Mr. Nguyen Huu Tho, or from the north, like General Vo Nguyen Giap, and including Mr. Ho Chi Minh, have commented on this event. Today, I recall those comments, and in addition to these, I would like to recount some additional stories that I have heard with my own ears, especially a statement from the mouth of one person who had himself heard the comments directly from Mr. Ho Chi Minh.

Only in knowing these stories could we have substantial data and information to answer those who argued that « killing Mr. Diem is a necessary step to eliminate future threat." But today it is clear that it was a monstrous mistake committed by a group of personages, military and civilians, against the Vietnamese people, not only the two million Vietnamese who had to leave their homeland to seek

refuge elsewhere, but also to the tens of millions of southerners who have to live in turpitude, under oppression, in hunger and poverty, a regime that the communists have imposed on them.

I recalled herewith reports from the press and scholars, which I had the opportunity to mention in the review of the book, "The Year of the Hare" by Professor Francis Xavier Winters in 1999 for the Indian periodical, World Affairs: "A New Perspectives on the Coup d'Etat of November 1963: Ngo Dinh Diem was not a monstrous tyrant but a victim of colonialism " (This article was translated into Vietnamese language, printed and distributed to participants at the Commemorative Ceremony of the President in 1999). I would like to quote a few following paragraphs:

"Upon hearing that Mr. Diem was overthrown, Mr. Ho Chi Minh told Mr. Wilfrid Burchett, a well known communist journalist: "I could not believe that the Americans were that stupid".

When General Vo Nguyen Giap and his surviving comrades met with Mr. McNamara in Hanoi in November 1995, they said that: "The Kennedy policy in Vietnam was completely erroneous. Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem is a nationalist and would never allow the Americans to take control of the war, and the fact that the Americans took control have brought them to a costly failure. Hence, the result of the 1963 coup d'etat to overthrow Mr. Diem was an early end [to the presence] of the United States in Vietnam, a really surprising thing to people".

And the Hanoi radio noted: "Due to the overthrow of Mr. Diem and his brother, Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu, the American Imperialists had themselves destroyed the very political and administrative base that they have spent so many years to build up".

On their side, the leaders of the Southern Liberation Front did not expect such great luck. Mr. Nguyen Huu Tho told Nhan Dan newspaper: "The overthrow of Diem was a gift from heaven to us."

And the Vice Chairman Tran Nam Trung said: "The Americans decided to change horses in midstream. They would never find a person more effective than Diem".

The above stories were recalled by the press and foreign scholars. Now I would like to relay three stories that I personally heard from the insiders. These stories have a first hand witness value on the one hand, and a great historical significance on the other, and for us who respect and love the President, they make us proud to be a "Diemiste". (In 1955, at the Trocadéro Square in Paris, a French scolded me as "espèce de Diemiste (species of Diemist)", when overtaking my car because he thought that I was blocking his car, and I was very proud to be scolded in such a way ...).

1. In the years before 1963, among the American journalists in Saigon, there was Mr. Keyes Beech, a special envoy of the Chicago Tribune, a very respected journalist. In 1963, he did not join in the pool of journalists who were against the president. After 1963, he was allowed to remain in Saigon, and he was still friendly with me. He occasionally invited me to his house near the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a meal. One day, among the stories he told me, there was the following one.

He said: "You know, on the afternoon of the day President Diem was overthrown, I was in a bar in Phnom-Penh. Sitting next to me was Wilfrid Burchett. We were not friends. But on hearing about the news about President Diem's death, he turned to me and said: "It's unbelievable! They had killed the

only man with the ideas and the organisation that could stop us. " Burchett did not say who "they" and "us" were, but we can clearly see that "they" were the anti-communists, and "we" were the communists.

2. When I were young, before 1945, in Hue, I knew Mrs. Ho Thi Mong Chi. She was the daughter of the mandarin minister Ho Dac Khai, niece of Dr. Ton That Tung, and wife of Dr. Dang Van Ho. Dr. Tung was my relative and neighbor. He lived two houses away from my house, and Mrs. Chi lived next door to Dr. Tung's. She was a close friend of Mr. Ta Quang Buu, my teacher. So we visited each other very often, and I considered her as older sister, and she also treated me like her own younger brother.

After 1945, Mrs. Chi took her children to France and lived in Paris for them to go to school. I was studying in London. Every summer, I visited Paris and stayed at her house, sometimes for month. But after 1954, she showed her friendliness to North Vietnam side, perhaps because Dr. Tung and Mr. Buu were on that side, and also perhaps because of Dr. Ho, a military doctor and major in the Vietnamese Army who had a concubine. I myself worked for President Diem. Therefore, I no longer visited Mrs. Chi's family. After 1960, and especially after 1968, the "frontline" was even more obvious, because Mrs. Chi was the secretary to Mrs. Nguyen Thi Binh. Her two children were also very aggressively "anti-Saigon", and when "our side" won the 1975 battle, mother and children all flew immediately to Vietnam for a visit.

I knew the above information through friends, especially through Mr. Buu Kinh (now deceased), a close friend of Mrs. Chi's family, and also of myself. So after 1975, I still kept "a respectful distance" from her. But one day, around 1978, on the occasion of my visit to Paris, I met Mr. Buu Kinh who said: "Why don't you go visit Mrs. Chi?". I replied: "No way! For sure, Mrs. Chi would not see me if I came!". Mr. Kinh said: "Please go! She asked after you". I was surprised. Mr. Kinh added: "Now, everything is changed!". I thought: "Oh, really!". And one or two days later, I called Mrs. Chi. She answered the phone very happily, as if there had been no change in our relationship since 1954, and asked me to come visit. She further added that she would make "mashed potato" for me. This was a dish that she had often made for me before 1954. Her mashed potato was always really good, and I loved it.

During the reunion, we chatted for several hours. I listened more than talked, and listened to the her and her two children continually criticize the Vietnamese Communist vehemently! I was stunned. I did not dare to ask why, but just guessed the reason based on what she said "they were really bad", and also thanks to Mr. Buu Kinh who had informed me earlier that she had not been welcomed by the Vietnamese communists during her previous trip to Vietnam, because now that they had won the battle they no longer needed her. And she had thought that the revolution owed her, especially for her help in the communist's propaganda work (being the child of a mandarin of the Nguyen dynasty, but having taken the revolution side, acting as secretary to Mrs. Nguyen Thi Binh in Paris during critical negotiations). Her child then revealed that "they were too ignorant" (they said that Malaysia is not an independent country, and when he accompanied Le Duc Tho during his visit to Paris to see France's industrial economic achievements, the latter said that there was "nothing noteworthy" !!). But the most remarkable thing was the last moment of reunion. At that moment, it was almost 12am. Ms. Chi saw me to the door, and walked with me a few steps out into the quiet street. I never mentioned anything about Mr. Diem during the reunion, but before saying good bye, she said: "Thinking it carefully over again, only Mr. Diem was the best!".

3. The third story is about a matter of patience, or one can say stubbornness. Since 1963, I had consistently believed that Mr. Ho Chi Minh must have shared with members of his party some comments or an assessment of the coup d'état. But in spite of searching through and studying countless documents, years after years, I have never seen anything from Mr. Ho. Of course, the best thing to do was to ask people close to Mr. Ho. But they were on the "other side", and they were in Hanoi. Achieving this task was almost hopeless. But, fortunately, I did it.

Recently, I fortunately met a man from Hanoi, whom I knew quite well before 1954. And fortunately, he was the rare individual who had heard the comments directly from Mr. Ho about the 1963 coup d'état. He absolutely forbade me to disclose his name while he is still alive, because this was an "innermost palace secret", I thus called him, "Officer X".

Officer X told me the following story: He was at the President's Office in Hanoi the day of the coup d'état in Saigon. He belonged to a group scheduled to meet Mr. Ho in the evening of November 2d 1963. When he arrived at the President's Office, Mr. Ho was busy with another delegation. He had to wait in the hallway. While waiting, he saw a man bringing an envelope to Mr. Ho. Mr. Ho opened the envelope and read the letter, said nothing, put the letter in his pocket, and then continued the meeting.

A moment later, after the delegation had left, he asked the group of Officer X to enter, and said: "Earlier, it was reported to me that Mr. Diem has just been overthrown. Mr. Diem was my most formidable enemy. Now that he has been eliminated, the victory will definitely be ours. "

The history of South Vietnam from 1963 to 1975 can be summarised in that brief statement, and those who believe that they belonged to the First Republic should remind individuals, or organizations, involved in the overthrow and murder of President Ngo Dinh Diem to reflect on that statement and their own responsibilities for what has happened since 1963 to the present.

Ton That Thien (Ottawa, May 11, 2003)