

Fact Sheet 5: The Second Indochina War 1960-1975

After the partition of Vietnam in 1954 South Vietnam was led by Bao Dai with Ngo Dinh Diem as his Premier.

- Diem was a nationalist who hated the communists
- he was also a Catholic, a religion strongly associated with the French
- he had strong links with the United States:
 - the US gave Diem military and economic aid
 - they saw him as a strong anti-communist leader who would resist the spread of communism in the region.
- he was not interested in playing second fiddle to Bao Dai
 - in 1955 he used a referendum to remove Bao Dai from power
 - Diem now declared himself President of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN or South Vietnam)

The 1954 Geneva Accord had promised elections to determine the government for a unified Vietnam. France and the Viet Minh signed this agreement but Diem and the US did not. Fearing that Ho Chi Minh would win the election due to his war and nationalist popularity Diem refused to allow the election in South Vietnam.

Diem set about attacking all possible threats to his government. These actions alienated many South Vietnamese, both communist and non-communist. Many of his measures challenged traditional Vietnamese beliefs. He promoted family members to high positions and his most trusted official was his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. Many of his officials abused their power and tried to promote Catholicism over other religions. This led to protests from the Buddhist community. His critics believed the only thing keeping him in power was the support he received from the US.

The regime in the north was also repressive. Thousands of people opposed to the communist government were executed.

A second war broke out in Vietnam. This began as a civil war. Viet Minh still living in South Vietnam began a low-level insurgency in late 1956. The scale of the fighting increased from 1960 when the Viet Minh organised and controlled a rural uprising in the South. Most of Diem's support came from the cities whereas the majority of the population was poor farmers. Many of these people had struggled under Diem's government and were willing to fight against it.

This insurgency was led by the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF), which was formed at the end of 1960 and provided an alternative government to Diem's regime. The NLF was made up of two distinct groups – nationalists and communists – although the latter dominated the movement. The NLF wanted to seize political power through a popular revolution and unify Vietnam. It also sought an end American influence.

The NLF's military forces became known as the Viet Cong (which meant 'Vietnamese Communists') and received weapons, supplies and troops from North Vietnam. This support came via a system of jungle trails named the Ho Chi Minh Trail. These trails ran into neighbouring Laos and Cambodia before entering South Vietnam. North Vietnam initially received most of its aid from China. The Soviet Union later provided North Vietnam with tanks, artillery, MIG fighter planes and surface-to-air missiles.

In the early 1960s the US increased its assistance to South Vietnam. New Zealand resisted American pressure to make a contribution as well. The New Zealand government doubted whether any outside help would be effective and was worried about a wider war developing that might include China.

The fall of Diem

There had been attempts to overthrow Diem in 1960 and 1962. Both times he had remained in power but his position became more difficult in 1963. An incident on 11 June dealt his government a serious blow. A Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, burned himself to death at a busy intersection in Saigon. He was protesting about the persecution of Buddhists by Diem. His death was captured on film and flashed around the world. Diem's communist rivals claimed Thich Quang Duc's death was a protest over the war. They used this as further evidence that Diem had no support from the Vietnamese people. The US was now worried that Diem's regime was undermining their anti-communist effort in Southeast Asia. In November 1963 an army coup overthrew Diem. On 2 November Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu were captured and executed in the back of an armoured personnel carrier. Those leading the coup believed they had the support of the US government.

Diem's murder did not bring about greater stability in Vietnam. For the next few years the generals fought with each other and promoted their own men to positions of authority. No government could keep power for long. Eventually in 1965 General Nguyen Van Thieu established some stability in South Vietnam.

Instability in the south helped the Viet Cong. In 1965 US President Johnson decided to act. He did not see the conflict as a civil war, and feared that without US intervention other Southeast Asian countries would fall to communism. America decided to send troops to South Vietnam and its air force began bombing the North.