



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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South Vietnamese Buddhists initiate fall of dictator Diem, 1963

8 May

1963

to: 1 November

1963

Country: Vietnam

Location City/State/Province: *Cities including Hue and Saigon in South Vietnam*

Goals:

The Diem regime, must (1) rescind the order against displaying the Buddhist flag; (2) permit Buddhists the same legal rights allowed to Catholics; (3) halt arbitrary arrests and intimidation of the Buddhists; (4) allow religious freedom; and (5) compensate the families of those killed and punish the perpetrators; goal later became the removal of President Diem from power

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 013. Deputations
- 015. Group lobbying
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 032. Taunting officials
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 045. Demonstrative funerals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 032. Taunting officials
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches

- 045. Demonstrative funerals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 4th segment:

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 6th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Notes on Methods:

Self-immolation was also used and seemed to be considered a nonviolent method by the Buddhist campaigners

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Defense

Cluster:

Democracy

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Buddhist majority of South Vietnam

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Thich Tri Quang; Thich Thien Minh (Vice President of the Buddhist Association of the Central Region and a member of the Committee of General Association of Buddhists of Vietnam)

Partners:

Not Known

External allies:

United States forces in Vietnam and the Kennedy Administration (see 'Success' below), Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)

Involvement of social elites:

Not Known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

- U.S. Kennedy Administration

Groups in 3rd Segment:**Groups in 4th Segment:****Groups in 5th Segment:****Groups in 6th Segment:**

- Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)

Segment Length: *Approximately 1 month*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

The Ngo Dinh Diem regime of South Vietnam

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

throwing rocks at police; resistance with stones, sharp sticks, and clubs during a police raid.

Repressive Violence:

forcibly tearing down flags; use of stun weapons, fire hoses, tear gas, chemical weapons, clubs; shootings; grenades; police charging with bayonets; forced arrests; beatings; raids; declaring martial law; kidnapping

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Success is very difficult to assess for two main reasons: (1) the goals of the Buddhist resistance began with religious equality and grew to include the overthrow of President Diem's regime, and (2) reports on the "Third Force Buddhists" became limited after the fall of the Diem regime. Concretely, Buddhists did win an agreement on the most difficult of their five original demands, that relating to the flying of the Buddhist flag, and their efforts did set the stage for the coup that overthrew Diem whose regime was heavily Catholic. However, during Diem's rule, he barely acknowledged the grievances of the Buddhists

and repressed them with brutal force. Additionally, amidst the Buddhist crisis was South Vietnam's struggle against the National Liberation Front, making it difficult to interpret the difference between the two points of conflict. U.S. involvement is difficult to assess for this reason also, because the U.S. often used the Buddhist crisis for other political purposes.

Buddhist resistance survived to confront Prime Minister Ky in the 'Buddhist Crisis of 1966,' where Tri Quang led a campaign of political protest and general strikes

Buddhist resistance in 1963 depended heavily on preexisting religious organization, however sustained action, sometimes involving thousands of participants is testament to campaign growth. Also, the presence of U.S. forces allowed Western media to spread the Buddhist cause with the rest of the world. The self-immolation is noted in particular for galvanizing international support for the monks.

Following the collapse of French colonial administration in Vietnam in 1954, the country was temporarily divided, with Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam in North Vietnam, and Emperor Bao Dai's State of Vietnam in the South. The Geneva Conference peace agreement ending the French Indo-China war included a provision for nationwide elections in 1956. Soon after the country was divided, Ngo Dinh Diem had proclaimed himself president of South Vietnam by means of a fraudulent election.

In July 1955, President Diem rejected the nationwide elections that had been agreed upon. According to then-U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower, the U.S. backed this refusal of nationwide elections because it believed that the Vietnamese people in a free election would vote for Ho Chi Minh to be the new president. Faced with a divided country with a government in the South backed by the U.S. military, Vietnamese people began a new insurgency led by the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam (NLF), concentrated at first in rural areas.

By the early 1960s, Diem ruled South Vietnam with a largely Catholic-dominated government: Catholic positions included members of the ruling Ngo family, more than half of the National Assembly, and most landholders. Even though South Vietnam's three to four million Buddhists made up nearly 80 percent of the population, they were discriminated against by the Catholic ruling elite.

On May 8, 1963, Buddhist followers in the city of Hue celebrated the Buddha's 2,527th birthday. The day before, a deputy province chief invoked a previously ignored law that prohibited the display of religious flags, even though many Buddhist and Catholic flags had been flying for years. Police forcibly tore down flags, inciting waves of protest. On the morning of May 8, over 500 Buddhists marched and held a demonstration at the Tu Dam pagoda in opposition. The participants soon numbered over 3,000 and marched into downtown Hue, waving banners and calling for religious equality. Banners were written in English as well as Vietnamese to attract Western allies. Leading the Buddhists was a chief monk named Thich Tri Quang. The protesters soon found themselves surrounded by eight armored cars, civil guardsmen, and other armed security officials.

Tri Quang directed his people to meet outside the local radio station for a huge rally that evening. Thousands of Buddhists crowded around the radio station, demanding they broadcast a regularly scheduled religious service. In response, armed police and military forces from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) attempted to forcibly disperse the crowd. Stun weapons and fire-hoses were used. Ultimately, police and military fired shots into the crowd. Grenades exploded among the protesters. Eight were killed, including several children, and four were left severely wounded.

The next morning, government officials spoke to a gathering of almost 800 demonstrating youth. The Diem regime did not take responsibility for the violence, blaming the casualties on both NLF and Buddhist protesters themselves. In response, the youth marched around the old citadel section of Hue, chanting 'Down with Catholicism' and 'Down with Diem government.' A student banner welcomed martyrdom: 'Please Kill Us!'

Tri Quang traveled throughout the country, urging fellow Buddhists to join the campaign for religious equality. He called on all Buddhists in central Vietnam to attend a mass funeral for the victims in Hue several days later.

Around 6,000 Buddhists attended a meeting at Tu Dam pagoda. The deputy province chief, ARVN troops and police hovered nearby. Again, banners depicted anti-government sentiments including 'Kill us,' 'Buddhists and Catholics equal,' and 'Request stop of arrests and kidnapping.' Tri Quang spoke to the crowd appealing to nonviolence and the power of martyrdom. The Diem regime did not heed the Buddhist's warning, believing that the NLF was the true source of opposition and ignoring claims of religious discrimination. United States forces, present in Vietnam since 1950 as part of a Cold War containment strategy, also paid little attention to the Buddhist upheaval.

By May 13, Buddhist clergy in Hue had drafted a list of demands to give to government officials titled, 'Manifesto of Vietnamese Buddhist Clergy and Faithful.' It stated that the Diem regime, must (1) rescind the order against displaying their flag; (2) permit them the same legal rights allowed to Catholics; (3) halt arbitrary arrests and intimidation of the Buddhists; (4) allow them religious freedom; and (5) compensate the families of those killed and punish the perpetrators. Two days later the demands were presented to Diem, who paid them little attention.

The Buddhists intensified their pressure. They held a press conference at Xa Loi pagoda in Saigon. Here they distributed pamphlets compiling daily news items that kept followers enraged, and activated allies in both civilian and military groups. They also organized a series of hunger strikes and four weeks of memorial services to highlight their condition. Diem continued to denounce the protest efforts as a Vietcong plot. However, due to increasing worldwide attention and sympathy, it became difficult for the U.S. to support the Diem regime.

In Saigon on May 30, over 500 monks sat in the street in protest. Monks in Hue began a forty-eight hour hunger strike. On June 1, a large gathering of Buddhists gathered in Hue, marching onto the office of the province chief, who had promised a government response to the Buddhists' demands. Others, totaling almost 10,000, gathered at Tu Dam pagoda. Police and paratroopers were close, armed with American army vehicles. Demonstrators dispersed without incident, continuing their hunger strike. The Kennedy administration in the U.S. urged Diem to negotiate with the Buddhists, but he refused.

On June 3, again in Saigon, about 500 Buddhist demonstrators met 300 troops who were standing by. After much shouting, the troops charged into the crowd with fixed bayonets, throwing tear-gas grenades. Later that evening, security forces scattered a crowd of 1,500 by emptying glass vials of brownish red liquid on the heads of praying Buddhists. While some accounts report casualties, at least sixty-seven of those exposed to the chemicals went to the hospital for treatment of blisters and respiratory problems.

On June 5, a negotiation meeting with Diem, Dinh Nhu (Diem's brother), and a leading monk from Hue named Thich Thien Minh (Vice President of the Buddhist Association of the Central Region and a member of the Committee of General Association of Buddhists of Vietnam) showed progress toward satisfying the five Buddhist demands from mid-May.

On June 10, Buddhists at Tu Dam pagoda called off their fast and returned home. Police withdrew as well, creating the appearance of peace. However, that morning in downtown Saigon 500 monks and nuns gathered solemnly to watch Thich Quang Duc, a seventy-three-year-old monk from an outlying province, burn himself to death in protest, a practice called self-immolation. American members of the press were at the scene. Photographs and stories of the martyr awakened the world to the Buddhist crisis in Vietnam, which quickly became international news. The protest extended beyond religious equality and threatened the Diem regime itself. The U.S. administration for the first time was aware of the importance of the Buddhist crisis and questioned the de-escalation program it was initiating in South Vietnam.

A procession of about 400 monks carried Quang Duc's body to Xa Loi pagoda, where almost 1,000 monks came to show respect. A large group of pro-Buddhist students rallied outside, hanging a banner that read 'This Buddhist priest cremated himself for five items demanded of the government.'

The self-immolation of Quang Duc is cited as influencing the regime more than any other protest action. Out of nervousness, on June 11, police arrested thirty nuns and six monks for praying in the street outside the Xa Loi pagoda.

On June 14, a government committee agreed to meet with the monks. By midday they had come to an agreement on the most

difficult of the five demands, that relating to the flags. But hope for further negotiation was crushed. On June 16, 250 Buddhist students among a large crowd charged remaining police forces, hurling rocks and retreating only when hit with tear gas, fire hoses, clubs, and shots fired in the air. The confrontation resulted in one death, with injuries sustained by both Buddhists and police.

After that incident, there were no disturbances leading up to or during the highly publicized funeral for the martyred monk, Quang Duc, on June 19.

All the while, the U.S. came to seriously doubt the ability of the Diem regime to defeat the National Liberation Front. And slowly, the Buddhist protest became a struggle against the regime itself. Tri Quang assumed a greater leadership role and claimed that he would not stop until the government fell. Discussion of a coup became more widespread. Soon, there were several coup groups, strategizing how to take advantage of the Buddhist crisis.

On July 16, over a hundred monks gathered in front of the U.S. embassy to encourage the U.S. to help persuade Diem to comply with the June 16 agreements. They claimed more human sacrifices would be necessitated if their demands were not met, putting pressure on the U.S. The demonstrators dispersed and began a two-day fast.

However, the next morning renewed demonstrations were violently repressed by police force. The police beat and arrested demonstrators and blocked the Giac Minh pagoda with barbed wire. U.S. support for Diem reduced further as American forces let Vietnamese generals know that they would not aid Diem in case of a coup.

Buddhist leaders tried to halt further suicides 'unless necessary.' However on August 15 a nun burned herself to death days after a young girl tried to cut off her hand as a sacrifice to Buddha. The following day another monk immolated himself.

On August 21, heavily armed government forces raided Buddhist pagodas in the night. Diem had moments earlier proclaimed martial law. Special forces arrested over 1,400 monks and charged them with possessing weapons. At the Tu Dam pagoda, monks and nuns resisted with stones, sharp sticks, and clubs.

The U.S. attempted to remain hands-off, assessing whether the raids were signs of an anticipated coup. Diem's repressive tactics not only further aggravated Vietnamese Buddhists, but also annoyed the U.S. government. The pagoda raids and their aftermath destroyed any remaining trust in the Saigon government. U.S. intelligence soon became complicit in several coup plots.

Diem tried to convey that the Buddhist crisis was solved and that remaining problems were attributable to the Vietcong. The regime lifted martial law on September 16, but its repressive Buddhist policies continued. With strengthened doubts, the U.S. focused on a partial withdrawal of troops, but remained open to a coup.

In early October, Buddhist monk Thich Quang Huong immolated himself in front of the Saigon Central Market, dousing himself with gasoline before setting himself afire. In other parts of the city, Buddhist employed propaganda grenades, which harmlessly exploded and released Buddhist flags. Hundreds of Buddhists demonstrated in Saigon, adding momentum for the coup.

On November 1, 1963, the ARVN generals launched their long-anticipated coup, during which Diem was arrested and later executed. Political instability followed in South Vietnam, as the country was ruled by a series of short-lived military regimes. With the insurgency gaining ground, the U.S. became increasingly engaged in ground operations, known as the Vietnam War. Buddhist resistance survived to confront Prime Minister Ky in the 'Buddhist Crisis of 1966,' where Tri Quang led a campaign of political protest and general strikes.

After many years of bloodshed, the U.S. withdrew many of its troops in the early 1970s but continued to support the Saigon government until Saigon was captured by North Vietnam in 1975. The next year, North and South Vietnam re-united to form the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Research Notes

Influences:

This campaign influenced the Buddhist Crisis of 1966 (2).

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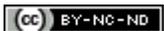
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