

= Ngo Dinh Diem presidential visit to Australia =

The Ngo Dinh Diem presidential visit to Australia from 2 to 9 September 1957 was an official visit by the first president of the Republic of Vietnam . It was part of a year of travelling for Diem , who made official visits to the United States and other anti @-@ communist countries . As with his American trip , Diem was warmly and lavishly received during the height of the Cold War , garnering bipartisan praise from both the Liberal Party of Australia of Prime Minister Robert Menzies and the opposition Australian Labor Party ( ALP ) .

Diem addressed the Parliament of Australia and was made an honorary Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St Michael and St George , one of the highest imperial honours that can be bestowed on a non @-@ British subject ? at the time , Australians were also British subjects . Diem did not engage in substantive political discussions with the Australian leaders and he spent most of his time at public functions . He was universally extolled by the media , which praised him for what they perceived to be a successful , charismatic , democratic and righteous rule in South Vietnam , overlooking his authoritarianism , election fraud and other corrupt practices . The Australian Catholic leadership and media were particularly glowing towards the South Vietnamese head of state . A member of Vietnam 's Catholic minority and the brother of Vietnam 's leading archbishop , Diem had pursued policies in Vietnam favoring his co @-@ religionists . He exempted the Catholic Church from land redistribution , gave them more aid and job promotions , and allowed Catholic paramilitaries to attack Buddhists , who formed the religious majority .

Diem 's visit was a highmark in relations between Australia and South Vietnam . Over time , Diem became unpopular with his foreign allies , who began to criticise his autocratic style and religious bias . By the time of his assassination , he had little support . Australia later sent troops to support South Vietnam in the anti @-@ communist fight , but the bipartisanship evaporated during the mid @-@ 1960s as the ALP began to sympathise with North Vietnam and opposition to the war grew . The ALP later withdrew support for and refused to accept refugees from South Vietnam after winning office , but on the return of the centre right Liberal @-@ National coalition to power in 1975 , Vietnamese refugees were allowed to resettle in Australia in large numbers .

= = Background = =

In 1933 , the devoutly Catholic Diem was appointed Interior Minister of Vietnam , serving under Emperor B?o ??i . However , a few months thereafter he resigned and became a private citizen because the French colonialists would not give Vietnam any meaningful autonomy . During World War II , Imperial Japan attacked Indochina and wrested control from France , but when they were defeated by the Allies in 1945 , a power vacuum was created . The communist @-@ dominated Viet Minh of Ho Chi Minh fought for Vietnamese independence , while the French attempted to regain control of their colony by creating the French Union @-@ allied State of Vietnam under B?o ??i . A staunch anti @-@ communist nationalist , Diem opposed both and attempted to create his own movement , with little success . With both the French and the communists hostile to him , Diem felt unsafe and went into self @-@ imposed exile in 1950 . He spent the next four years in the United States and Europe enlisting support , particularly among Vatican officials and fellow Catholic politicians in America . The success of the effort was helped by the fact that his elder brother Ngo Dinh Thuc was the leading Catholic cleric in Vietnam and had studied with high @-@ ranking Vatican officials in Rome a few decades earlier .

In 1954 , the French lost the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Conference was held to determine the future of French Indochina . The Viet Minh were given control of North Vietnam , while the State of Vietnam controlled the territory south of the 17th parallel . The Geneva agreements , which the State of Vietnam did not sign , called for reunification elections to be held in 1956 . B?o ??i appointed Diem as his prime minister , hoping that he would be able to attract American aid as the French withdrew from Southeast Asia . Diem then deposed B?o ??i in a fraudulent referendum and declared himself president of the newly proclaimed Republic of Vietnam . Diem received support from the U.S. and other anti @-@ communist countries in the midst of the Cold War . He

refused to hold the national elections and asserted that Ho Chi Minh would rig the ballots in the north , although he had done so himself in deposing Bao Dai .

= = Meetings and ceremonies = =

Diem arrived in the capital Canberra on 2 September 1957 ; his visit was the first by a foreign incumbent head of state to Australia . He had visited the US in May , and the visit to Australia was the second of three legs in a tour of anti-communist countries in the Asia Pacific region ; Diem had visited Thailand in August and went on to South Korea after leaving Australia . The magnitude of the ceremonial welcome accorded to Diem was unseen since the visit in 1954 by Queen Elizabeth II . According to Peter Edwards , a military historian at the Australian War Memorial specialising in the Vietnam War , " Everywhere he was feted as a man of courage , faith and vision " , and he noted that Diem was received with " more ceremony and pageantry " than the visit of Queen Elizabeth II in 1954 .

Upon disembarking from his plane , Diem was photographed for The Age and described as a " small but striking figure in a royal blue silk frock coat , long white trousers and black mandarin hat " . He was greeted by the Governor-General of Australia Sir William Slim and the Prime Minister of Australia Robert Menzies . He was given a 21-gun salute and a guard of honour by the Royal Australian Air Force , whose fighter jets flew overhead . Diem visited the Royal Military College Duntroon in Canberra , where he watched and addressed a parade of Australian cadets , who were training to become officers . Diem told the students that they were " comrades of the Free World " and that they would help to defend like-minded countries .

The centrepiece of Diem 's visit was a speech to a joint sitting of the Parliament of Australia , with both the House of Representatives and the Senate in attendance . After the speech , Menzies called for three cheers for Diem at an official parliamentary luncheon . Doc Evatt , the leader of the opposition Australian Labor Party joined in , proclaiming that peace , stability and democracy had been achieved in South Vietnam .

The guard of honour and a 21-gun salute was repeated in Sydney and Melbourne , where large crowds cheered Diem 's arrival at the airport and the passing of his motorcade . The South Vietnamese leader was taken outside the capital cities for two days so that he could see the Snowy Mountains Scheme , a large hydroelectricity project in highland Victoria .

Diem spent little time on detailed defence and policy discussions with Australian officials during the trip , because of his extensive meetings with Catholic leaders . Although Diem had signalled his intentions to discuss defence relations during the visit , these did not materialise . At the end of the visit , Diem and Menzies released a bilateral statement , announcing that they would increase the magnitude of the Colombo Plan , a program under which Asian students could study abroad in Western nations . However , there was little detail in the announcements relating to anti-communism , with only general expressions of Australian support . Diem had previously stated that if North Vietnam attacked the south , he would send the Army of the Republic of Vietnam to land in the Red River Delta in the north and retaliate . This was contrary to the air attack plans of the South East Asian Treaty Organization ( SEATO ) , which had vowed to defend the south under the provisions of the Manila Treaty . Despite the public statements of support , the Australian government never shared the details of the SEATO plans with Diem .

At the end of the visit , Menzies bestowed on Diem an honorary Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St Michael and St George , one of the highest imperial honours that had been bestowed on someone who was not a British subject . Edwards said of the trip : " Australia had now associated Diem 's survival with its national interest , publicly and without restraint " , something that eventually extended to military support against the Vietnamese communists .

= = Media reception and support = =

The Australian media wrote uniformly glowing reports that heaped praise on Diem , and generally presented him as a courageous , selfless and wise leader . The Sydney Morning Herald described

Diem as " One of the most remarkable men in the new Asia ... authoritarian in approach but liberal in principle " . The Age compared Diem favourably to Chiang Kai @-@ shek and Syngman Rhee , the Presidents of the Republic of China and South Korea respectively . The trio were the respective leaders of the anti @-@ communist halves of the three countries in Asia that had been divided along communist and anti @-@ communist lines . The Age opined that Diem was not " morally equivocal " but " incorruptible and intensely patriotic " compared to his anti @-@ communist counterparts , and " the type of Asian leader whose straight talk and courageous manner should be valued " . The Canberra Times noted that Diem 's visit coincided with that of Foreign Minister Richard Casey to Malaya for that country 's independence celebrations . Australia had supported Malaya 's successful fight against communism and the newspaper compared the two countries , predicting that they would succeed because " the leaders owe their authority to popular support " . Like the politicians , the press overlooked the negative aspects and reality of Diem 's rule , such as his authoritarianism . Although Diem was depicted as being extremely popular and democratic , he had made himself president when his brother rigged a 1955 referendum that allowed him to depose B?o ??i ; Diem was subsequently credited with 133 % of the votes in Saigon . Diem 's family regime routinely engaged in corruption , ballot stuffing and arbitrary arrests of all opposition . The newspapers also failed to mention that the South Vietnamese economy was largely being propped up by the Commercial Import Program run by the United States and that land reform had failed .

The mainstream media depicted Diem as a friendly and charismatic leader who related well to the populace . The Herald showed photographs of the president eating cheese , and inspecting the foliage at the Botanic Gardens . Diem was depicted making friends with a young boy from a Collingwood public housing estate and having tea with South Vietnamese students studying abroad at the University of Melbourne , with the females wearing the traditional ao dai . In contrast , Diem was generally regarded as aloof and distant from the population , rarely heading outside the presidential palace to mingle with his people , and holding military processions in honour of his ascension to power in front of empty grandstands .

The strongest support for Diem came from the Australian Catholic media . Diem was a Catholic in a majority Buddhist country , and he had close religious links with the Vatican , who had helped him rise to power . He had stayed in a seminary run by Cardinal Francis Spellman in the United States in the early 1950s before his elevation to power . Diem 's elder brother Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc was the leading Catholic figure in Vietnam and a classmate of Spellman when the pair studied in Rome . Spellman was widely regarded as the most powerful Catholic figure in the United States and he helped to organise support for Diem among American politicians , particularly Catholics . In 1957 , Diem dedicated his country to the Virgin Mary and ruled on the basis of a Catholic doctrine known as personalism . His younger brother Ngo Dinh Nhu ran the secret and autocratic Catholic Can Lao Party ( Personalist Labor Party ) , which provided a clandestine network of support and police @-@ state mechanisms to protect Diem 's rule . It counted many leading public servants and military officers among its members . Diem also maintained land policies that were preferential to the Roman Catholic Church , the largest property owner in the country . Their holdings were exempt from redistribution under land reform schemes , while the construction of Buddhist temples was restricted ; military and civil service promotions were given preferentially to Catholics . Some Catholic priests ran their own private armies and in some areas , forced conversions , looting , shelling and demolition of pagodas occurred .

The Catholic Weekly described Diem as " his nation 's saviour from Red onslaught ... an ardent patriot of great courage and moral integrity and an able intellectual " . The paper also praised Diem 's Catholic links , pointing out that Thuc was a former classmate of the current Archbishop of Sydney Norman Thomas Gilroy when they studied at the Vatican .

Diem 's achievements and support for Catholics were particularly praised by Bob Santamaria , the unofficial leader and guiding influence of the Democratic Labor Party ( DLP ) . The DLP had broken away from the Australian Labor Party ( ALP ) , the nation 's main centre @-@ left social democratic party . The split occurred in the 1950s during the McCarthyism scares , as the Catholic factions broke away to form the DLP on the basis that the ALP was too lenient towards communists . One of the reasons that Menzies strongly backed Diem was to gain further favour with the DLP and

accentuate the divisions among his left wing opponents .

Diem 's visit prompted increased interest in Vietnam by Australian Catholics , particularly supporters of the DLP . Australian Catholics came to see South Vietnam as an anti @-@ communist and Vatican stronghold in Asia and as a result , became strong supporters of the Vietnam War . Harold Lalor , a Jesuit priest and leading confidant of Santamaria , had studied with Thuc in Rome . During the trip , Diem met with Gilroy , the first Australian cardinal , as well as Santamaria and Archbishop of Melbourne Daniel Mannix , both of whom praised him strongly . Mannix was one of the most powerful men in Australia during the era , and had great political influence .

= = Aftermath = =

The positive reception accorded to Diem in 1957 contrasted with increasingly negative Australian attitudes towards Vietnam . Over time , the media in both Australia and the United States began to pay more attention to Diem 's autocratic style and religious bias , especially after the eruption of the Buddhist crisis in 1963 , and the iconic self @-@ immolation of Thích Qu?ng ??c . After six months of civil unrest , Diem was deposed and assassinated in November 1963 , and by that time , little goodwill remained . With new leadership in Saigon , and an escalation in the war against the communists , Australia sent in ground troops ? including conscripts ? to support South Vietnam , but over time , the bipartisanship of the 1950s evaporated . The centre @-@ left ALP became more sympathetic to the communists and Labor leader Arthur Calwell stridently denounced South Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky as a " fascist dictator " and a " butcher " ahead of his 1967 visit ? at the time Ky was the chief of the Vietnam Air Force and headed a military junta . Despite the controversy leading up to the visit , Ky 's trip was a success . He dealt with the media effectively , despite hostile sentiment from some sections of the press and public . However , with the war becoming increasingly destructive , and the death toll rising , opposition to the Vietnam War grew . Edwards and his deputy Jim Cairns led large anti @-@ war protests . Labor won the 1972 federal election on an anti @-@ war platform , and Whitlam withdrew Australian troops and recognised North Vietnam , which welcomed his electoral success . Whitlam later refused to accept South Vietnamese refugees following the fall of Saigon to the communists in April 1975 . The Liberals ? led by Malcolm Fraser ? condemned Whitlam , and after defeating Labor , allowed South Vietnamese refugees to settle in Australia in large numbers .