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FRANCE'S DECOLONIZATION POLICY AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR: A CASE STUDY OF COCHINCHINA (1945-1949)

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ABSTRACT

After the Second World War, a global wave of decolonization began. This shift was exemplified by the United States recognizing the Philippines' independence in 1946 and Great Britain granting India independence in 1947. At the same time, France faced nationalist movements within its colonies, particularly in Vietnam, where Cochinchina became the first colony to be decolonized after the war. Before adopting the French Constitution on October 27, 1946, France reconquered Cochinchina and attempted to establish an autonomous government to restore the Indochinese Union, which would later be known as the Indochinese Federation. This policy led to failed negotiations with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and ultimately contributed to the outbreak of the Indochina War. In response, France implemented the "Bảo Đại solution," which involved creating the State of Vietnam. Following the Élysée Agreements on March 8, 1949, Decree No. 49-733 issued on June 4, 1949, attached Cochinchina to the Associated State of Vietnam while maintaining French control under the French Union. Drawing upon French archival sources and scholarly works, this study analyses France's Cochinchina policy (1945-1949), its implementation, and its consequences, arguing that this policy was a decisive factor in the collapse of Franco-Vietnamese negotiations and the prolongation of the First Indochina War.

KEYWORDS: Decolonization, First Indochina War, Cochinchina, Bảo Đại solution

INTRODUCTION

In his wartime memoir, Thierry d'Argenlieu wrote, on the day of Japan's capitulation (August 15, 1945): "[...] the Japanese surrender came as a sudden surprise, with all its consequences: nothing had been prepared... Everything was still directed toward operations against Japan." (Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, 1985, p.47).

In fact, the end of the Second World War raised several questions for the Allied powers, among which was the issue of colonies. The post-war period marked a shift in the colonial policies of the United States and Great Britain. Their colonies were moving toward independence - either granted by the colonial powers (as in the American and British cases) or claimed through nationalist movements, particularly in Southeast Asia. Philippe Richer classified the paths to independence of Southeast Asian

countries into four categories: “promised independence” (the case of the Philippines), “negotiated independence” (the cases of Burma and Malaya, in which Singapore took advantage to obtain its autonomy), “withheld independence” (the cases of Laos and Cambodia), and “armed struggles and revolutionary wars” (the cases of Indonesia and Vietnam) (Philippe Richer, 1981). Given this context, why did France face an armed struggle and a revolutionary war for independence in Vietnam - a conflict that lasted nine years and had serious repercussions for French politics, society, and economy, as well as France's position on the international stage? One of the main reasons lies in the decolonization policy implemented by the governments of the French Fourth Republic.

Indochina, Indochina, a valued French colony in the Far East, has long captured the interest of scholars worldwide. Among them, Philippe Devillers (*Histoire du Viêt-Nam de 1940 à 1952*, Seuil, 1952), Jean Lacouture (*Viêt-Nam : de la guerre française à la guerre américaine*, Seuil, 1969), David Marr (*Vietnam: state, war, revolution, 1945-1946*, University of California Press, 2013), Christopher Goscha (*Vietnam: A new history*, Basic Books, 2016), Stein Tønnesson (*1946 : Déclenchement de la guerre d'Indochine. Les vêpres tonkinoises du 19 décembre*, L'Harmattan, 1987), and Pierre Journoud (*De Gaulle et le Viêt-Nam (1945 - 1969). La réconciliation*, Tallandier, Paris, 2011) are notable researchers. However, most of these studies primarily focus on the French War in Indochina or on relations between France and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. What remains largely absent is a study examining how France sought to resolve the question of Cochinchina - considered, in the French conception, a colony and French territory overseas - after 19 December 1946, the date marking the outbreak of the Franco-Vietnamese War.

In fact, within the global French colonial system, Cochinchina was the first colony that France decolonized after the Second World War. Before the adoption of the Constitution of the French Republic on October 27, 1946, France reconquered Cochinchina. It attempted to establish an autonomous government there in order to reconstitute the Indochinese Union (which became the Indochinese Federation after the war). This policy led to the failure of negotiations between France and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam during 1946. After the outbreak of the First Indochina War, France adopted the so-called “Bảo Đại solution” and established the State of Vietnam. Following the signing of the Élysée Agreements on March 8, 1949, and by Decree No. 49-733 dated June 4, 1949, the French government modified Cochinchina's status within the French Union by attaching its territory to the Associated State of Vietnam. This decision had detrimental consequences for Vietnam: the continuation of the Franco-Vietnamese War and, subsequently, the division of the country after the Geneva Agreements of 1954.

To carry out this study, we draw upon the extensive corpus of French archival materials on the subject, including those preserved at the National Archives in Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, the Diplomatic Archives of Paris in La Courneuve, the Historical Service of the Defence Ministry at the Château de Vincennes, and the National Overseas Archives in Aix-en-Provence. This research aims to examine how France addressed the question of Cochinchina after the Việt Minh attack on French forces in Hanoi on December 19, 1946.

1. France's Postwar Policy toward Indochina: "Making Something New out of Something Old"

1.1. The Declaration of the Provisional Government of France on Indochina, 23 March 1945

During the interwar period, French Indochina became known as "*the balcony over the Pacific*" (Patrice Morlat, 2001) or "*the pearl of the Empire*" (Philippe Hédouy, 1998) in the Far East for France. These expressions underscored the crucial role of Indochina within the French colonial system and its significance for France's standing among other colonial powers (Laurent Cesari, 2013, pp.49-72). This explains why France was by no means willing to relinquish its interests in Indochina.

Faced with the changing circumstances during and after the Second World War, the French government struggled to develop a new and effective policy toward Indochina. This was primarily due to domestic political instability and a reliance on foreign aid. As a result, important decisions regarding Indochina were made by the High Commissioner's Office, where Thierry d'Argenlieu and Leclerc were the most influential figures.

Over the course of two years, several events shaped France's policy toward Indochina. These included the establishment of the Indochina Office in August 1943, General Charles de Gaulle's declaration on December 8, 1943, at the Brazzaville Conference, and the formation of the Interministerial Committee for Indochina (Cominindo) on February 21, 1945, which operated directly under de Gaulle's authority. Most notably, the government issued a declaration concerning Indochina on March 23, 1945. In reality, the Provisional Government of the French Republic lacked a coherent policy toward Indochina, even as the situation evolved rapidly. The delay in implementing the new Constitution was one of the key factors behind the failure of Franco-Vietnamese negotiations (1946) prior to the outbreak of the Indochina War.

It is essential to highlight the key points of the French Government's declaration of March 23, 1945, which outlined France's vision for the future of Indochina.

First, the notion of a "*federation*" constituted the central idea of this declaration. The term "*federation*" and its adjectival forms appear fifteen times within a document of no more than two pages, underscoring its conceptual prominence. According to the declaration, the Indochinese Federation was to consist of five entities, each possessing its own government, army, and economic autonomy.

Second, this was the first official text in which the concept of the "*French Union*" appeared. As Alain Ruscio observes, the principles outlined in this document "combine closely new, liberal ideas with the paternalistic or authoritarian legacy of the past." (Alain Ruscio, 1992, p.49). However, what exactly was the *French Union*? The answer would only become clear with the promulgation of the 1946 Constitution.

Finally, the conception held by officials of the Ministry of Colonies had become obsolete in light of the rapidly changing situation in Indochina. In this declaration, France still clung to the idea of the five Indochinese countries, whereas on the ground, Vietnamese nationalists were advancing a different

notion - that of “*Việt Nam*” as the central focus of their struggle. In other words, the declaration made on March 23, 1945, lagged behind Emperor Bảo Đại’s proclamation of independence on March 11, 1945. Indeed, taking advantage of the Japanese coup d’état against the French administration on March 9, 1945, Emperor Bảo Đại, at noon on March 11, 1945, in the presence of his ministers at the Administrative Palace (*Điện Cần Chánh*), solemnly proclaimed to the people the independence of Việt Nam. In this declaration, he announced the abrogation of all Franco-Vietnamese treaties establishing the French protectorates over Annam and Tonkin as well as the colony in Cochinchina, thus affirming the complete independence of the country within the framework of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere:

“In view of the global situation, and that of Asia in particular, the Government of Việt Nam hereby publicly proclaims that, as of this day, the Treaty of Protectorate with France is abolished, and that the country resumes its full rights to independence.

Việt Nam will endeavor, by its own means, to develop itself so as to merit the status of an independent state, and will follow the directives of the Common Manifesto of the Greater East Asia, considering itself as an integral part of the Greater East Asia in order to contribute its resources to common prosperity.

The Government of Việt Nam also places its trust in Japan’s good faith and is determined to cooperate with that country to achieve the aforementioned goal.” (Bảo Đại, 1980, p.104) (Trần Huy Liệu, Phạm Khắc Hòe, 1992, pp.13-14).

1.2. The Implementation of the Declaration of 24 March 1945 in Indochina in 1946

The Forceful Return of French Troops to Cochinchina in 1945

Following the Japanese capitulation on August 15, 1945, Charles de Gaulle entrusted Thierry d’Argenlieu and Philippe Leclerc with a new mission in Indochina. When the Provisional Government appointed d’Argenlieu as High Commissioner for Indochina, de Gaulle initially wished to grant him the title of “Governor-General,” for, in his view, “this very title signifies the continuity of our sovereignty.” (Archives diplomatiques de Paris) 517AP, 32) (Thomas Vaisset, 2017, p.352). Thierry d’Argenlieu and Philippe Leclerc became the two key figures directly responsible for Indochinese affairs from August 1945 to March 1947. They pursued two main objectives: first, to maintain the Indochinese ensemble fragmented into five autonomous states - three inhabited predominantly by Vietnamese and two by other ethnic populations; and second, to preserve centralized French control within the framework of an Indochinese Federation composed of these five states (Jacques Valette, 1994, p.303).

The Potsdam Conference of the Three Great Powers decided that the task of disarming Japanese troops in Vietnam would be assigned to the British forces south of the 16th parallel and to the Chinese Nationalist forces north of it. Consequently, the French were given no mandate to deploy their troops

in this region. In order to realize its ambition of reoccupying Vietnam, France therefore needed assistance from the Allied powers. The French government entered into negotiations with Britain, the United States, and the Chinese Nationalists. With the support of General Douglas D. Gracey, the British commander in Saigon, French prisoners of war captured after March 9, 1945 were released and rearmed. During the nights of September 22-23, 1945, approximately 1,500 French troops seized key positions in Saigon, including the Treasury, the Police Department, the Security Bureau, and the City Hall. French civilians in Saigon assaulted any Vietnamese they encountered on the streets and detained them in police stations. Thus, French forces began their campaign to retake Cochinchina even before D'Argenlieu arrived in Saigon.

On October 5, 1945, General Leclerc arrived in Saigon. He declared that “nothing can be achieved until Vietnam understands the strength of France.” In a letter to De Gaulle dated 13 October, Leclerc wrote: “It would be an absolute mistake to negotiate with representatives of the Viet Minh before showing them our strength.” On October 27, 1945, De Gaulle replied: “We have nothing to sign with the natives until we possess power. Until then, we may, with prudence and at an opportune moment, establish contact with them - but only that.” Leclerc thus concluded that military force was necessary for the reconquest of Indochina. His first objective upon arriving in the region was, in his words, “to destroy completely the system of Viet Minh rule throughout the country.” Leclerc’s operational plan was explicit: “Quickly liberate the densely populated Saigon-Cholon area, seize the wealthy provincial capitals, and secure the communication routes leading to Cambodia, the Muong territories, and southern Central Vietnam” (Philippe Devillers, 1993, p.121).

Upon arriving in Indochina, General Leclerc conducted an overall assessment of the military situation there. He decided to launch attacks to re-establish French authority, starting first in Cambodia and Laos before advancing toward southern Vietnam. On October 9, 1945, Leclerc ordered a contingent of 200 Indian paratroopers to be deployed in Phnom Penh. Then, on October 15, 1945, he arrested members of the pro-Japanese government led by Son Ngọc Thành. On the same day, Leclerc sent a detachment of 75 soldiers by air to Pakse to reclaim French control over southern Laos.

After regaining control of Laos, French forces moved forward to reconquer Cochinchina by force. On October 24, 1945, France continued to send reinforcements to the Indochinese front. By December 31, 1945, 145 transport ships had delivered 27,907 French soldiers and 2,325 military vehicles to southern Vietnam (Nguyễn Thành Văn, 2016, p.51). With these forces, and with the assistance of the British army, Leclerc began directing French troops to expand operations across multiple directions in Saigon. Leclerc launched swift military campaigns based on the “oil spot” strategy. Expanding the war in southern Vietnam, “with Massu’s group, he quickly dismantled the young military apparatus of the Viet Minh in Cochinchina and rapidly seized all cities in the Mekong Delta.” (Philippe Devillers, 1993, p.12). The first phase of operations (October 1945) saw British troops advancing north of Saigon while Leclerc’s troops attacked from the south. In the second phase (November 1945), French troops advanced toward the northwest and north of Saigon. The third phase (January 1946) involved two armored divisions moving from Bien Hoa and Ban Me Thuot toward southern Central Vietnam. The

fourth phase (January 1, 1946) consisted of Leclerc's troops occupying the remaining small towns in the provinces surrounding Saigon. By February 5, 1946, Leclerc declared that "the pacification of Cochinchina and southern Annam has been completed." (Hoàng Cơ Thụy, 1992, p.2045). In essence, d'Argenlieu and Leclerc had carried out the policy of the Provisional Government and the spirit of the Declaration of March 24, re-establishing French control over Cochinchina and "restoring French sovereignty" in Indochina.

The Formation of the Provisional Government of the Autonomous Republic of Cochinchina (June 1946 - October 1947)

The Cochinchina question was a major obstacle during the Franco-Vietnamese negotiations in 1946. Moreover, the establishment of Nguyễn Văn Thỉnh's government in June 1946 and its subsequent activities played a decisive role in the failure of the Fontainebleau Conference. The existence of this government remains controversial in the contemporary history of Vietnam. In reality, it was created and sustained by both the Cochinchina's elites and the French, following a political logic consistent with the principle recognized by the French authorities in both the Metropole and Indochina - that of the Declaration of March 24. The members of this government would later go on to play a key role in the history of the State of Vietnam between 1949 and 1954.

In summary, from the French perspective, Cochinchina had been considered a French colony since the Treaty of 1863; thus, it was viewed as French territory, and its inhabitants were recognized as French nationals. Any changes to its political status required approval from the French Parliament. Following the Second World War, three major viewpoints emerged within French political circles regarding the future of Cochinchina: 1. Restoring a colonial regime similar to that which existed before 1945; 2. Transforming Cochinchina into an overseas department (département d'outre-mer) of France; and 3. Establishing an autonomous government in Cochinchina (Nguyễn Long Thành Nam, 1991, p. 377).

In effect, the creation of the Provisional Government of the Autonomous Republic of Cochinchina (G.P.R.A.C.) appeared to be d'Argenlieu's solution, one that was endorsed by his government in accordance with the implementation of the Declaration of 24 March 1945. Conversely, from another standpoint, the establishment of Nguyễn Văn Thỉnh's government also reflected the aspirations of Cochinchinese politicians. The government led by Nguyễn Văn Thỉnh was founded upon the following bases:

Legally, it accepted both the Declaration of 24 March 1945 and the Agreement of 6 March 1946. Clearly, in the governmental declaration of 24 March, France envisioned an Indochinese Federation composed of five states within the broader framework of the French Union.

Politically, the authorities in Saigon and the Cochinchinese politicians developed theoretical justifications for establishing Cochinchinese autonomy. In early 1946, the Minister of the Colonies, the Minister of Overseas France, and the High Commissioner agreed upon the slogan "*Cochinchina for the Cochinchinese*" as a means to prevent the reunification of Cochinchina with the two other

Vietnamese regions. They sought to apply, without delay, the most liberal principles of the Declaration of 24 March 1945 to the settlement of the Cochinchina question. In fact, as Cochinchina was legally classified as a colony, this status did not allow the French authorities in Indochina to treat it in the same way as the other Indochinese countries.

During the Dalat Conference of 1946, Thierry d'Argenlieu convinced the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the need to grant autonomy to Cochinchina under the new political circumstances. In a report addressed to Georges Bidault, Thierrey d'Argenlieu presented several arguments to justify his proposal:

“Only an ideological and doctrinaire standpoint could lead one to favor the reunification of the three regions and to follow in the footsteps of the government in Hanoi.

Geographically, historically, and economically, the conception of uniting the three *Kỳ* is in no way compelling - quite the contrary.

Geographically, because of the Mekong basin firmly binds together Laos, Cambodia, and Cochinchina, the Annamite Range completes their isolation from Annam.

Historically, the settlement of Annamites coming from the North replaced centuries of Khmer occupation of these lands. That occupation was incidental and short-lived, whereas French presence succeeded it for nearly a century.

Economically, because it is the Mekong and its delta that connect Laos, Cambodia, and Cochinchina. It is France - and France alone - that has made Cochinchina the cornerstone of the Indochinese economy (rice, rubber, etc.).

As for the argument based on linguistic unity, it is either childish or corrupted by a faint trace of racism.” (Documents diplomatiques français, janvier - juin 1945, 1998, p.665).

D'Argenlieu successively prepared the conditions necessary to establish Cochinchina's autonomy.

On June 1, 1946, in front of Saigon's cathedral square - adorned with the French tricolor flag and the new Cochinchinese flag, whose yellow field was crossed by blue stripes symbolizing the Mekong, the nourishing river - and in the presence of D'Argenlieu, Leclerc, and Jean Cédile, President Nguyễn Văn Thinh proclaimed the formation of the Autonomous Republic of Cochinchina and announced the composition of its government, which included eight ministers and two deputy secretaries of state. The creation of this double-provisional government of Cochinchina occurred just one day after Hồ Chí Minh and the Vietnamese delegation departed for Paris, precisely as D'Argenlieu had planned. The Interministerial Committee approved the establishment of the French Indochina government on June 4, 1946.

Five days earlier, on May 27, D'Argenlieu had signed an ordinance creating the Commission for the Mountain Populations of Southern Indochina (P.M.S.I.), known as "*Tây Kỳ quốc*" ("Western Region State"), which paralleled the formation of Nguyễn Văn Thinh's government in Cochinchina (Phippe Devillers, 1952, p.274).

On June 3, 1946, Nguyễn Văn Thinh signed a convention with Jean Cédile, defining the powers of the provisional government and the relationship between the Republic of Cochinchina and the Commissioner of the French Republic.

The establishment of the provisional government of Cochinchina and the proceedings of the Dalat Conference in August 1946 played a decisive role in the failure of the Fontainebleau Conference.

2. The Bảo Đại Solution, the March 8 Agreements, and the Reintegration of Cochinchina into the Associated State of Vietnam

2.1. The Bảo Đại Solution

At the beginning of 1947, D'Argenlieu and Léon Pignon - the main French officials in Saigon - began to consider an alternative approach to resolving the conflict as the Franco-Vietnamese hostilities escalated. They remained committed to the Gaullist concept of an Indochinese Federation, but sought a preferred intermediary other than Hồ Chí Minh (Jacques Valette, 1987, p.48).

On March 5, 1947, Émile Bollaert was appointed High Commissioner for French Indochina (H.C.F.I.) and arrived in Indochina with a clear directive: "*Negotiate, negotiate at all costs.*" (Guy Pedroncini, Philippe Duplay, 1992). Ultimately, the French government chose Bảo Đại, who was then living in exile in Hong Kong, to negotiate toward the formation of a nationalist government in Vietnam.

From March 1947 to February 1949, negotiations between Bảo Đại, his collaborators, and French representatives took place in Hong Kong, Cannes, and Paris. In Cannes, on February 13-14, discussions were held between the two delegations to finalize the clauses of the agreements between Bảo Đại and the French government. The discussions between the representatives of the French government and Bảo Đại ultimately culminated in the signing of the Élysée Agreement on March 8, 1949, which officially codified the terms of their negotiations and marked a new phase in the redefinition of Vietnam's political status within the French Union.

2.2. The Agreements on March 8, 1949

At noon on March 8, 1949, an exchange of letters took place between Bảo Đại and Vincent Auriol regarding the future of Vietnam and the relations between France and Vietnam under Bảo Đại's leadership. It is essential to highlight the main concessions made by the French government to the Vietnamese demands presented by Bảo Đại, particularly regarding issues of independence, national unity, diplomacy, and the armed forces.

Concerning the status of Cochinchina and the question of Vietnamese unity, the French government reaffirmed its intention not to create obstacles to the reintegration of Cochinchina with the rest of Vietnam within the framework of the new State- provided that the concerned populations were consulted. To this end, France committed itself to implementing the procedures outlined in the French Constitution.

Instead of organizing a referendum, as stipulated in the Convention of March 6, 1946, the future status of Cochinchina, regarded as “*French territory*”, was to be debated by French and Cochinchinese representatives within the future Territorial Assembly of Cochinchina. Clearly, the French government pursued these measures because, had such a referendum been held, it would likely have been influenced by the propaganda activities of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), which had already established a resistance network throughout southern Vietnam.

Such a Territorial Assembly offered France a major advantage, as its members were French primarily citizens or naturalized persons, and therefore legally or politically bound to France. The French government thus anticipated a favorable outcome for its position in Cochinchina - or, at the very least, the establishment of a special administrative regime for this territory (Archives nationales d’Outre-mer, HCI, 25, Accords franco-vietnamiens du 8 mars 1949) (Archives nationales du Vietnam 2, Fonds Secrétariat du Président du Conseil des Ministres de l’État du Viêt-Nam, 1297, version vietnamienne des accords du 8 mars).

2.3. The Reintegration of Cochinchina into the Associated State of Vietnam

The “Bảo Đại Solution” was adopted by the French government of the so-called “Third Force”, whose decisions were based on the French Constitution of 1946. The legal status of Cochinchina, a French colony in Indochina, could not be altered except in accordance with Article 75 of that Constitution, which stipulates:

“The respective statuses of the members of the Republic and of the French Union are subject to change.

Any modifications of status, or transfers from one category to another within the framework set forth in Article 60, may result only from a law voted by Parliament, after consultation with the territorial assemblies and the Assembly of the Union.”

Thus, the modification of Cochinchina’s status took place in four steps:

Step 1. Consultation of the Territorial Assembly

In order to respond to the Vietnamese demand regarding the status of Cochinchina, it was first necessary to establish a Territorial Assembly of Cochinchina. Two days after the signing of the March 8 Agreements, the Indochinese question was raised before the French National Assembly. The March 8 Agreements were strongly criticized by opposition parties to the Third Force government. For example, Rivet (from the M.R.P. party) called on the French government to engage with all

Vietnamese political groups, particularly those aligned with Hồ Chí Minh. Similarly, Guillou (also of the M.R.P.) criticized the government's decision to negotiate with Bảo Đại. In response to these criticisms, Paul Ramadier, Minister of Defense in Henri Queuille's government, argued that the sole purpose of the French initiative was to establish peace in Indochina. On March 11, 1949, the French National Assembly devoted a whole day to discussing the draft law for the creation of an elected Territorial Representative Assembly in Cochinchina. With 294 votes in favor and 287 against, the National Assembly approved the decision not to postpone consideration of this bill (Bulletin d'information de la France d'Outre-mer, n° 130, avril 1949, p.8).

On the evening of March 12, 1949, by 348 votes to 202, the French National Assembly passed the government's bill creating a Territorial Assembly in Cochinchina. Two days later, on March 14, 1949, Law No. 49-339 was approved, officially establishing an elected representative assembly for Cochinchina. This assembly was composed of 64 members - 16 French nationals and 48 Vietnamese representatives - who were to express their opinion, in accordance with Article 75 of the French Constitution, on the proposed change in Cochinchina's territorial status within the French Union: either by its integration into the Associated State of Vietnam, or by adopting one of the statuses provided under Article 60 of the same Constitution (ANOM, HCI, 769), (ANOM, Fonds privés, Papiers de Monguillot 56PA, 10), (Journal officiel de la République française, Jeudi 24 mars 1949, p.3099-3010.). Thus, only one week after the signing of the March 8 Agreements, the Cochinchina Territorial Assembly existed *de jure*, paving the way for an official consultation process.

Nearly a month after the promulgation of Law No. 49-339, elections were held in Cochinchina on April 10, 1949. The Saigon elections played a particularly decisive role. The electorate was divided into two colleges - one French and one Vietnamese. The French electorate was itself divided into two categories: representatives of trade and professional associations, and members of other liberal professions.

On the Vietnamese side, there was a desire for universal suffrage, especially in Saigon. In reality, however, voter participation was extremely low - only 12.2% (598 voters out of 4,899 registered). The results fell far short of expectations. On April 19, 1949, the newly elected Representative Assembly, composed of 16 French delegates and 47 Vietnamese delegates, convened for the first time in the grand halls of the Saigon City Hall (*Hôtel de Ville de Saigon*) (ANOM, HCI, 497, *Résumé analytique des séances*, le 15 mai 1949)¹.

Finally, during the session of April 23, 1949, at 12:40 p.m., the Cochinchina Territorial Assembly voted for the integration of Cochinchina into the Associated State of Vietnam, with 55 votes in favor, 6 against, and 2 abstentions out of 63 members present (ANOM, HCI, 497, p.10), (ANOM, HCI, 310, p.2), (Bulletin d'information de la France d'Outre-mer, n° 131, mai 1949, p.27). A formal text of the motion adopted by the Territorial Assembly of Cochinchina was subsequently transmitted in the form

¹ The Territorial Assembly comprised only 63 members instead of the intended 64, as the province of Hà Tiên was represented by a single delegate rather than two.

of two notices: one addressed to the French Parliament, and the other to Bảo Đại. The text submitted to the French Parliament reads as follows:

“1- The current status of Cochinchina, as established by the treaties of June 5, 1862, and March 15, 1874, no longer corresponds to present necessities and must therefore be repealed.

2- Cochinchina (Southern Vietnam) shall be integrated into the Associated State of Vietnam.

3- The effective and legal integration of Cochinchina shall be pronounced immediately, although such integration shall become null and void in the event of a change in the status of Vietnam within the French Union” (Bulletin d’information de la France d’Outre-mer, n° 131, mai 1949, p. 29-30), (ANOM, HCI, 769), (ANOM, HCI, 497).

Step 2: Consultation of the French Union Assembly

Following the motion of the Territorial Assembly of Cochinchina, on 11 May 1949, during a formal meeting, the Council of French Ministers drafted a bill to modify the status of Cochinchina within the French Union:

“Article 1: Within the framework established by Article 60 of the Constitution of the French Republic and following the opinion expressed by the Territorial Assembly of Cochinchina in its session of April 23, 1949, the status of Cochinchina shall be modified under the conditions set forth in the following articles.

Article 2: The territory of Cochinchina is to be integrated into the Associated State of Vietnam. Consequently, Cochinchina shall cease to hold the status of an Overseas Territory.

Article 3: The provisions of this law shall become null and void in the event of a change in the status of Vietnam within the French Union.” (Bulletin d’information de la France d’Outre-mer, n° 132, juin 1949, p.11).

The bill was submitted at the parliamentary session on May 17, 1949. In accordance with the French Constitution, the change in the status of Cochinchina was discussed at the Assembly of the French Union on May 19, 1949, constituting the second step in the legal procedure. Following a twelve-hour debate, the Assembly adopted the bill by a vote of 123 to 25. Consequently, the territory of Cochinchina was formally attached to the Associated State of Vietnam, in accordance with the stipulations of the Joint Declaration of June 1948 and the agreements of March 8, 1949. These provisions were rendered null and void in the event of a subsequent change in Vietnam's status within the French Union.

The only significant modification was the insertion of an additional article, Article 2 bis:

“The implementation of this law shall harm none of the interests of Cambodia. Such interests shall be the subject of agreements between Vietnam and Cambodia, to be arbitrated by France.

The same principle shall apply to all ethnic minorities of Cochinchina.” (Bulletin d’information de la France d’Outre-mer, n° 132, juin 1949, p.11).

Step 3: Consultation by the French National Assembly

On 20 May 1949, the bill passed by the Assembly of the French Union was submitted to the Commission for Overseas Territories of the French National Assembly. However, as the members present did not reach the required quorum, the Commission referred the matter to the full National Assembly for arbitration. On May 21, 1949, the National Assembly convened to deliberate on this issue. The matter was treated urgently, as in his letter of March 8, 1949, the President of the Republic had assured that the Parliament would decide without delay on the vote issued by the Assembly of Cochinchina. Ultimately, at 1:00 a.m. on May 22, 1949, the bill was adopted by a vote of 351 to 209 (Journal officiel de la République française, pp. 1272-1277).

Step 4: The Law Modifying the Status of Cochinchina

Finally, on 4 June 1949, in Toulon, the President of the French Republic signed Law 49-733, which modified the status of Cochinchina within the French Union. The text of this law is as follows:

“Article 1 - Within the framework established by Article 60 of the Constitution of the French Republic, and following the opinion issued during its session on April 23, 1949, by the Territorial Assembly of Cochinchina, the status of Cochinchina is modified under the conditions set out in the following article.

Article 2 - The territory of Cochinchina is attached to the Associated State of Vietnam in accordance with the terms of the joint declaration of June 5, 1948, and the governmental declaration of August 19, 1948. Consequently, Cochinchina ceases to hold the status of an Overseas Territory.

Article 3 - In the event of a change in the status of Vietnam, the status of Cochinchina shall be subject to a new deliberation by the assemblies provided for in Article 75 of the Constitution (Title VII: On the French Union)” (Bulletin d’information de la France d’Outre-mer, n° 132, juin 1949, p.12).

By this law, the legal bond linking Cochinchina to France was formally ended (*Léon Pignon, 1908 - 1976, 1988, p.71*). The French government reaffirmed the terms specified in the June 5, 1948, declaration in Ha Long Bay and the governmental declaration of August 19, 1948, given that the March 8 Agreements remained confidential. As the status of Vietnam had not yet been finalized, the government added a provision to safeguard Cochinchina in the event that Vietnam would no longer be a member of the French Union. Upon its promulgation, this law granted legitimacy to Bảo Đại to establish his government, demonstrating to his supporters the results of his negotiations with the French government over a period of more than two years.

CONCLUSION

The question of Cochinchina during the period 1945-1949 reveals the full complexity and internal contradictions of French colonial policy at a time when the traditional imperial order was collapsing.

For France, Cochinchina was not merely a colony; it represented the symbolic and economic heart of French presence in Indochina—a space regarded as the epitome of the “civilizing mission.” Consequently, the process of returning this territory, according to French reasoning, to an independent Vietnam unfolded slowly and cautiously, shaped by multiple political calculations. Paradoxically, however, Cochinchina became the first colony that France peacefully restored to the Vietnamese. Although belated and constrained by international circumstances, this act nonetheless marked an important step in redefining the relationship between the metropole and its former colonies. However, this transfer of sovereignty held limited meaning for the Vietnamese, as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had already proclaimed its sovereignty over Cochinchina following the August Revolution of 1945. Thus, France’s policy toward Cochinchina became the cornerstone—and the most significant obstacle—to the Franco-Vietnamese negotiations of 1946.

Nevertheless, this restitution did not signify an entire rupture with the foundations of French colonialism. France remained deeply attached to its traditional conception of colonial policy: maintaining, in a new form, its presence and influence within its former territories. Behind the rhetoric of autonomy and the French Union, the principal objective was to safeguard economic and strategic interests in the region while preventing Vietnam from achieving complete independence. The establishment of the Autonomous Cochinchina in 1946, along with the prolonged hesitation surrounding its integration into the State of Vietnam, clearly reflected France’s desire to retain a lever of control within the framework of a future Indochinese Federation.

The incorporation of Cochinchina into the State of Vietnam, achieved only after intense negotiations and under the pressure of military and diplomatic circumstances, had profound political and identity-related consequences. On the one hand, it enabled the Bảo Đại government and French diplomacy to assert some progress toward Vietnamese unity, partially addressing nationalist demands. On the other hand, this reunification remained fragile and contradictory. The long separation of Cochinchina from the rest of the country had created deep administrative, economic, and social disparities, which complicated the consolidation of the State of Vietnam. Moreover, France’s decision to integrate Cochinchina into a pro-French government did not confer legitimacy, as the State of Vietnam lacked widespread recognition. In reality, this situation exemplified France’s conservative approach to decolonization policy after the Second World War, a stance that ultimately prolonged the First Indochina War.

Thus, the Cochinchina experience between 1945 and 1949 reflected both the end of an era and the persistence of a model. In returning Cochinchina, France sought to reconcile its imperial heritage with the growing national aspirations of its people. However, this compromise was only temporary. Rather than resolving the Vietnamese question, the process of integration instead contributed to the emergence of future tensions between France and Vietnam, as well as within Vietnamese society itself. In this sense, Cochinchina was indeed the first colony peacefully restored by France, but it also remained the final symbol of a colonial policy incapable of adapting to the age of independence.

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