**1967 Presidential Election: A lost election for South Vietnam’s nation-building project**

*The literature on the nature of the 1967 Presidential Election and its impacts on the nation-building project in the Second Republic of Vietnam has remained an under-researched topics due to the presumption that the election was staged by the military establishment to satisfy the request for setting up liberal democracies in America. However, the 1967 election yielded surprising results, and the historical narratives have provided a mixed message on the “free and fair” nature of the election. This research paper contends that the South Vietnamese citizens’ expectation and experience must be factored in the discourse. If one is familiar with the history of the Vietnam War, the support from the citizens for the ruling regime was as equally important as the support from the foreign governments in the making of the two republics. Thus, understanding the expectations and experience of South Vietnamese is a crucial step to determine the nature of the 1967 Presidential Election and assess its impact on the nation-building project in the Republic of Vietnam.*

In the past decades, there have been countless literatures analyzing the Vietnam War via the geopolitical, ideological, national interest lens but the scholars have yet to ask: what about the Vietnamese people who lived in these warzones? Ironically, the voices of the common Vietnamese citizens, North and South alike, were sidelined and deemed inferior to the ‘overall narrative of global and national conflicts’ despite being the direct beneficiaries of the nation-building project in the Republic of Vietnam. Throughout the war period, the South Vietnamese people had raised their voices in multiple occasions via protesting, joining militia groups, rioting, suiciding but the effectiveness of these efforts remains limited due to the authoritarian control of the ruling regime in the South. Then came the 1967 Presidential election, a symbol of the American nation-building project in the Republic of Vietnam by adhering to the liberal democracy value of free and fair election. The competing narratives on the nature of the election have paved way for two questions of interest in this research paper: To what extent was the 1967 election was perceived as free and fair by the South Vietnamese citizens, and how was the nation-building project in the Republic of Vietnam impacted by this perception? One might ask why this paper is primarily concerned with the citizens’ perspective instead of mainstream historical narratives and the answer is as follow: The people were the direct beneficiaries of the attempted political system and only with the popular support could a nation survive and gain the legitimacy to govern, thus, the end goal of the nation building project. This is also the key innovation within the literature of this research paper.

To determine the nature and the impact of the 1967 Presidential Election, it is essential to conceptualize the meaning behind ‘nation-building’ project in the context of the Republic of Vietnam and the Vietnam War. From the Republic of Vietnam’s viewpoint, the country suffered from a great nation-building struggle that posed a threat to any ruling military establishment in 1966. Following a century of French colonization, there was a political vacuum and not only did the South Vietnam’s government had to defeat revolutionary insurgency (the National Liberation Front), but they were also burdened to craft a new national identity from a mixture of traditional base and superstructure of Western organization[[1]](#footnote-1). In addition, the nation building mission was further disrupted by the ever-changing political landscape and personal ambitions in the country from Ngo Dinh Diem’s presidency and his commitment to developing national consciousness, to the chaotic period of military coups between 1963 and 1965[[2]](#footnote-2). Hence, the problem facing the military establishment led by Thieu-Ky was the urgency to create stability in the country as well as establish legitimacy for the ruling government.

From the American scholars and government’ point of view, nation building was the subtext for the American deep intervention in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, besides the dominating narrative of domino theory[[3]](#footnote-3). At the center of the American nation-building program was the Modernization Theory, an ideology that upheld the following set of values: extending the principle of liberal capitalism and showing muscle against global communism[[4]](#footnote-4). To put liberal capitalism in a practical context, Howard J. Wiarda explained that investment in wealth and literacy would soothe political and social problems, immunize the people against communist propaganda, create a middle-class, and pave the way for liberal democracy.[[5]](#footnote-5) In this case, liberal democracy was characterized by free and fair elections between distinct political parties, a separation of power into three different branches of government, rule of law in an open society, market economy with private property rights, and equal protection of human rights, civil rights, civil liberties, and political rights.[[6]](#footnote-6) Thus, the demand from the American government was to create a sustainable track to liberal democracy via organizing a free and fair election in the Republic of Vietnam.

With such different angles when it came to nation building in South Vietnam and the competing narratives of the 1967 Presidential Election, the citizens’ perception of this political will be the tiebreaker in determining its ‘free and fair’ nature as well as the realistic impacts of the election on the nation building project in the Republic of Vietnam.

**Competing narratives about the 1967 Presidential Election**

Almost all elections in the Republic of Vietnam were rigged and flawed due to the reign of different authoritarian regimes and personal ambitions such as Ngo Dinh Diem (1954-1963), the military juntas (1963-1965) and Nguyen Van Thieu (1965-1975). During the First Republic, the 1955 State of Vietnam referendum to elect a president for the Republic between Ngo Dinh Diem and Bao Dai was widely marred by electoral fraud with 98.9% of the vote for Diem and the result of the 1961 Presidential election was no less fraudulent with 89% for President Diem, which inflamed the oppositions’ frustration and led to the 1961 coup d'etat of Nguyen Chanh Thi. In the Second Republic, the 1971 Presidential election turned into a fiasco with the two opposition candidates boycotting the election and President Nguyen Van Thieu won 100% of the vote as the only legitimate candidate. Despite this pattern, the outcome of the 1967 Presidential election was surprisingly competitive with the only 34.8% of vote for the winning candidates and engaging with the turnout of 83.2%[[7]](#footnote-7). Intuitively, there were clear signs that the election was relatively free and fair, but in-depth analysis by comparing the competing narratives from the ruling government, opposition forces, the American government, and various scholars. Upon analyzing the reports, literatures about the 1967 Presidential Election, it is evident that one must comprehend different motives to organize the election as well as the different narratives on the conduct of this political event in order to truthfully depict the nature of this election.

For the American government, it was established earlier that a liberal democracy system was the end goal of their nation-building program in the Republic of Vietnam and a free and fair election was the primary means to achieve this objective. However, it is equally important to understand the underlying intention in the making of this election. The CIA had noted in their report “Nation in Ferment” explaining that the US Government was neither favoring a civilian government given their incompetency in the past[[8]](#footnote-8) nor believing in a total military dominance in the Government and the National Assembly due to its infeasibility. It was crucial for the military establishment to appease the popular demand of the public while responding to the US guidance and direction[[9]](#footnote-9). This underlying expectations for the election explained the US support for the military joint ticket of Thieu-Ky in 1967. As for the ruling military establishment, their goal was simple and straightforward, using the election as a means to rightfully form a legitimate government.

One important pattern to pinpoint here is the motives of the election organizers were largely self-serving for their own agenda and this would be the justification for actions committed during the conduct of the election. However, there was also a in the memoir of Phan Quang Tue, a family member of former Deputy Prime Minister Phan Quang Dan that the election was a victory for the people’s call for democracy. According to his memoir, the South Vietnamese, who were desperate for stability, started to make their voices heard by demanding for their political rights: the right to participate in a free and fair election that allowed the people to democratically choose their leaders for the nation. “Ironically, the councilors were the only representatives elected in the country, unlike the chief of state, the prime minister, or the cabinet members, none of them being elected by the people.''[[10]](#footnote-10) Tue also recorded numerous calls to organize the election of a Constituent’s Assembly such as the declaration of the provincial and municipal councilors in October 1965 and the student demonstration in March 1966[[11]](#footnote-11). Eventually, the South Vietnamese saw the success in their efforts with the approval from the interim government of Nguyen Van Thieu to hold an election for the Constituents’ Assembly in 1966 and a Presidential election in 1967.

Moving onward to the competing narratives on the conduct of the 1967 Presidential Election in the Republic of Vietnam. From the Government of Vietnam (GVN) viewpoint, the election was a success for legitimacy and democracy in the Republic of Vietnam. According to Report VII by the Embassy of the RVN, not only was there no sign of corruption in the conduct of the election but there was also the enlargement of freedom and meaningful achievements for the Republic’s democracy. Specifically, the report claimed that although all civilian slates had at one time or another leveled general charges of corruption against the Government, none of them substantiated their charges and the military ticket was the only slate to propose a definite program of corruption eradication. Furthermore, the long-imposed censorship law was lifted from July 22nd, 1967, for the press to truthfully report about the election. The report stated that on September 3rd, the voting took place orderly and freely under the scrutinizing eyes of the Americans and observers from 24 countries, and no mass-scale voting irregularity was identified. It also reaffirmed that the competitive election result should satisfy any lingering doubts about the free and fair nature of the election[[12]](#footnote-12). The sources of documents from the American government reinforced these arguments in three ways. First, the American observers sent to Vietnam by President Johnson reported that the election was free and fair even compared to Western standard and the Vietnamese people were enthusiastic about the election[[13]](#footnote-13). Second, the telegram from Ambassador Bunker to President Johnson showed that General Thieu was losing initially, and General Ky was the front runner. At one-point, General Thieu was even considering throwing support to the civilian candidate and a veteran politician Tran Van Huong[[14]](#footnote-14). It was due to the efforts from the military establishment and the American government[[15]](#footnote-15) that had delivered the Thieu-Ky coalition to compete in the highly contested election and thus, this fact demonstrated the free and fair nature of this election via its competitiveness. Third, the US Department of State reaffirmed their “success” characterization of the democratic practice, emphasizing how the election had maintained the American commitment to fourteen points of peace and democracy in Vietnam, how the election strengthened the democracy building progress in every corner of South Vietnam[[16]](#footnote-16).

However, the documents from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States had self-contradicted the American claims on the integrity of the election. According to the report “Nation in Ferment”, the military faction had taken concrete to ensure the victory in the presidential election. Utilizing its total dominance over virtually every aspect of life in South Vietnam namely the financial system, political influence, manpower, the military establishment had amassed grassroot relations and support from all levels of administration in the country[[17]](#footnote-17). Specifically, the provincial and district officials were mobilized to reach out to the people and get the vote for the military establishment similar to the successful conduct during the 1966 Constituent Assembly election[[18]](#footnote-18). The main tactics used by these officials were either to share the benefits or threaten the livelihood of the citizens, which proved to be effective as the docile people in the areas heavily controlled by the military had a strong tendency to comply with their headman[[19]](#footnote-19). The document went further to confirm that General Nguyen Ngoc Loan would most likely be the person in charge for this operation[[20]](#footnote-20). Despite not being officially confirmed by the GVN, the information about these illegal interventions into the election had tentatively refuted the ‘free and fair’ notion regarding the 1967 election. According to the premise establisher earlier in this paper, the American nation building program was supposed to construct liberal democracy in the Republic of Vietnam via a national election, but the US had expressed their support for a military government rather than the civilian faction. Hence, the US had the incentives to overlook the fraudulent actions committed by the GVN and report untruthfully about the election to achieve their desirable outcomes.

Regarding the literatures on the 1967 Presidential election, there was also a division of opinions on the nature of this democratic practice. For example, on the one hand, Wendell Merrick analyzed the surprising result of the election and although there was no further information about the fraud chargers nor the judicial process to resolve this conflict, the writer regarded the political processes of checks and balances in the context of the 1967 Constitution as an attempt for democratization by the ruling government[[21]](#footnote-21). Additionally, Nguyen Minh Hung had the following assessment of the 1967 election. Despite failing in dispelling all of the misunderstanding and hard feelings caused by the crackdown on Buddhist Uprising in 1966, the election had been successful in solidifying the legitimacy for the GVN as well as laying the foundation for orderly political process and basic institutions for an infant democracy[[22]](#footnote-22).

On the other hand, there were literatures questioning the free and fair nature of the 1967 election. According to David Wurfel, the election was “the loss of hope of freedom” because of the following illegal practices: exclusion of popular candidates such as Duong Van Minh and Au Truong Thanh, restriction on the relative freedom of campaign with the closing of three newspapers and censorship, direct fraud on election day with vote manufacturing and pressure exerted by the government via military and civil services[[23]](#footnote-23). Furthermore, Sean Fear had also reaffirmed the illegal interventions into the election conducted by General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, instructed by Nguyen Cao Ky, to ensure the support and the victory for the military slate[[24]](#footnote-24).

All in all, having compared and contrasted the official and the scholarly narratives on the making of the 1967 Presidential Election, the research paper contends that the likelihood that the election was free and fair, is lower than the opposite scenario. The two main arguments leading to this conclusion derive from the lack of credibility from the sources claiming that the election was free and fair. First, the positive assessments from the Government of Vietnam and US Government on the election were highly subjected to propaganda and falsehood in serving of the political agenda, which was to ensure the victory of the military faction. Second, the fraud changes mentioned by Wendell Merrick could be easily diffused by the Government of Vietnam due to the civilian faction’s lack of access to information and the military’s control of the government including the judiciary. However, this section on competing narratives have yet been able to address two research questions as well as the key innovation of the research paper, which is the extent to which the election was not free and fair. By using oral history technique to record the real-life experiences of the South Vietnamese citizens on the Election Day (September 3rd, 1967), the paper attempts to conclude on the nature of the election as well as its impact on the nation-building project in the Republic of Vietnam.

**Perception of the South Vietnamese citizens on the election**

Having interviewed with a pool of diverse respondents in occupation such as professor, college student, government official to laborers and places of origin namely Saigon, Can Tho, Hue, Da Nang, and Phu Yen, the research establishes a certain degree of representativeness and the validity of its conclusion. Upon analyzing the interviews, the paper argues that there were limited but concrete signs of the election being “free and fair” for a certain type of interviewees and the respondents will be divided into three distinct groups (Government sceptics, Government enthusiasts, Bystanders) to further examine the extent of freedom and fairness.

In the government sceptics group, the two respondents namely Mr. Kieu and Mr. The have explicitly expressed their skepticism against the military faction either verbally, via his political affiliation, or via the deep concerns about the economic mishandling and the corruption of the military government from 1965 onwards. Despite so, the perception of the respondents on the conduct of the 1967 Presidential Election was surprisingly opposite to each other, even though they both casted their ballots in Saigon. For Mr. Kieu, he was a student in 1967 and he recalled that there was serious act of repression against citizens who decided not to vote or voted against the military establishment. Personally, Mr. Kieu had to use some tricks to deceive the polling station officers to vote for his desired candidates[[25]](#footnote-25). As for Mr The, he was a staunch supporter, a campaigner for the Tran Van Huong – Le Tho Truyen presidential slate, and a chief officer at a polling station in Saigon. On the Election Day, he personally ensured the integrity of the voting process but besides a minor confrontation with the military staffs due to his refusal to leave the polling station until all votes were counted, he witnessed no major voting irregularities and strongly insisted that the election was free and fair, at least in Saigon. Backing up with his argument, he shared that the Huong – Truyen presidential candidate had won in presidential race Saigon and there could have been voting manipulation in other parts of the country leading to the humiliating defeat of Tran Van Huong with an overall fourth place[[26]](#footnote-26).

In the pro-government column, the respondents are Mr. Thu and Mr. Ngoan, both were based in Saigon metropolitan area at the time of the election. Different from the previous group, the attitudes toward the military government were implied via their responses on the freedom and fairness of the 1967 Presidential Election. According to Mr. Thu, the 1967 Presidential Election was merely a byproduct of the Declaration of Honolulu 1966, and the goal was to legitimately set up a united military government under the leadership of Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky. He contended that almost everyone who were in the educated class knew about the ‘true nature’ of this election. Furthermore, the ARVN soldiers were a large segment of the Republic population and although they were required and allowed to vote directly, there were certain mechanisms such as military team will go to vote together and having added apply social pressure to vote for the ‘right choice’. However, there were a few features of interest in the interview with Mr. Thu. First, despite reaffirming the manipulation behind the curtains, he thought that if the civilian faction united under one ticket, they may even have the chance to win the presidential election. Second, he and his friends willingly voted for the military establishment in the belief that they were the most capable faction to contain and combat the spread of communism. Third, Mr. Thu expressed a sincere sympathy with the ruling military government when it came to organizing this political event. He argued that given the wartime situations as well as a large part of the population was under the direct control of the National Liberation Front, such an attempt at liberal democracy and election had been far more than sufficient[[27]](#footnote-27). Additionally, Mr. Ngoan, who was a student in 1967, was the only interviewee to have a truly positive expectation and experience the election. Specifically, he sincerely hoped that the country would achieve stability, security, prosperity and on the Election Day, he witnessed enthusiastic voting behavior and no sign of voting irregularities in his voting district in Saigon[[28]](#footnote-28).

In the bystander group, the remaining respondents were barely paying sufficient attention to the domestic political affairs or the 1967 Presidential Election itself. Despite so, two intriguing points from the discussion with this group can be applied to my future research projects. One was that most of the citizens still had to suffer from the matter of life and death even in their home area, let alone political engagement with the US political system, which deterred political engagement of the citizens. Moreover, some of the respondents witnessed extensive acts of repression to increase turnout rate and get out of the vote for the military establishment. For example, Mr. Thien from Thua Thien Hue province was claiming that Presidential Candidate Truong Dinh Dzu’s name, who second nationally, did not appear at his polling station in Hue at all[[29]](#footnote-29).

To sum up, the characterization and analysis of the oral research interviews yielded the following results. The perception of the South Vietnamese citizens on the 1967 election was as broad and fitted perfectly in several mainstream narratives such as pro-government, government sceptics, bystander. The most important conclusion, though, was that there were far more pieces of evidence suggesting that there were direct intervention, some were even repressive measures to conduct the 1967 Election. Hence, it can be suggested that South Vietnamese citizens had developed an overall negative perception on the conduct of the political event and the legitimacy earned from the election. However, among the educated and well-informed class, there seemed to be a strong positive perception of this election and they developed a tendency to shed sympathy and support the ruling military government as they knew about the hardship and dilemma from the DRVN, the NLF, the American government.

**Impacts of the perceived nature of the election on the nation-building project**

Elections could matter even if it was strongly controlled by the government. That was the lesson the paper has noted from the interview with Ms. Phuong from the former Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The reason being that for ceremonial election, the ruling government needed not having an open but fair election[[30]](#footnote-30). The paper will reiterate one of the main premises of this research paper, which is the citizens are the direct beneficiaries of any political system and the popular support is required for a nation’s survival and legitimacy to govern. The evidence shown in this research have pointed out that perceived nature of the 1967 Election had been a detrimental factor to the nation-building project in the Republic. But things could also have been different.

On one hand, the results show that the American nation building program and the Government of Vietnam were too ambitious about the level of liberal democracy they could feasibly set up in South Vietnam. Analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of the perceived nature of this election, the paper concludes that the election had helped the ruling military government gain support from neutral educated workforce. The sole reason being that they appreciated the democratization attempts made by the government even in such dire situation (escalating warfare, growing opposition) as well as they saw the military government as the best tool to combat against the National Liberation Front and North Vietnam. However, the GVN had completely lost all of the remaining trust from the civilian or opposition faction while deepened a sense of fear among its citizens. Reflecting on the electoral history of the Republic of Vietnam, 1967 was the first and also the last year that the civilian had participated in the formal democratic process to raise their voices and opinions, but the conduct of the election had shattered every last bit of trust in the ruling military government. Consequently, the military establishment could not work with the civilian faction to utilize their expertise in running an economy and a civil society for example. More evidently, the 1971 Presidential Election saw no committed civilian candidate partly due to the deeply rooted mistrust derived from the authoritarian conduct of the 1967 election. As for the common people who expressed little to none interest in politics, it was not mistrust but fear that had driven them far away from the government. It was noted by Mr Thien in the bystander group that all that the citizens wanted at the time was stability, peace, security but the oppressive and repressive actions had certainly not convinced them about the stable future for the Republic of Vietnam.

On another hand, if the Republic of Vietnam had followed the footstep of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam by understanding the limits of Vietnamese citizens, organizing a restricted but fair election in order to gain the support from the educated workforce and not scare off the civilian faction as well as the common people, would the South Vietnam nation see a much better ending?

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**APPENDIX I: INTERVIEWEE PROFILE**

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| **INTERVIEWEE PROFILE** | | | | | | |
| **No** | **Name** | **Age** | **Occupation (1967)** | **Residence (1967)** | **Religion** | **Political Affiliation** |
| 1 | Mr Ngoan | 80 | Student | Saigon | None | None |
| 2 | Mr Thien | 74 | Laborer | Hue | Buddhism | None |
| 3 | Mr Kieu | 72 | Student | Saigon/Can Tho | None | None |
| 4 | Mr The | 77 | Teacher  (Govt official) | Saigon/Ben Tre | None | Tran Van Huong slate |
| 5 | Mrs Tam | 80 | Self-employed | Da Nang | None | None |
| 6 | Mr Thu |  | Teacher  (Govt official) | Tuy Hoa, Phu Yen | Buddhism | None |
| *\*Ms Phuong, aged 85, resided in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1967 was interviewed to understand the significance of the National Assembly election in North Vietnam.* | | | | | | |

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