Obituary: Madame Nhu: Immensely powerful political figure in 1960s South Vietnam dubbed 'an oriental Lucrezia Borgia'

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Madame Nhu, who has died aged 87, was the archetypal "dragon lady" of Asian politics, a svelte and sinister woman who wielded immense power in the South Vietnamese regime of president Ngo Dinh Diem, her brother-in-law, until his assassination in 1963. She accumulated vast wealth and power, but was reviled for her puritanical social campaigns and her callous dismissal of Buddhist monks who burned themselves to death to protest against the brutal rule of Diem and her husband Ngo [ETH]inh Nhu. "I would clap hands at seeing another monk barbecue show, for one cannot be responsible for the madness of others," she wrote in a letter to the New York Times. The world was stunned by photographs of monks sitting shrouded in flames; Madame Nhu simply offered to bring along some mustard for the next self-immolation. She later accused monks of lacking patriotism for setting themselves alight with imported petrol.

Madame Nhu, the name by which she was always known, although she was born Tran Le Xuan, preferred to see herself as continuing the tradition of the Trung sisters, two aristocratic women who led a revolt against Chinese rule in the first century. To aid South Vietnam's fight against the communist insurgency, she founded a women's paramilitary, known as the Women's Solidarity Movement. This force, whose members were paid twice the wages of conscripted men, drained money from the army and rarely did more than parade for the cameras while Madame Nhu took the salute.

Raised a Buddhist, Madame Nhu had converted to Catholicism when she married, and took to it with a convert's zeal. She rammed a bill through parliament that outlawed divorce, abortion and contraception. Describing the craze for dancing the twist as an "unhealthy activity", she had it banned as well. Wrestling, cock fighting and boxing soon followed. Some of her actions, which were portrayed as ludicrously puritanical, were aimed at improving the lot of women. She had laws passed that ended concubinage and polygamy. Divorce was only allowed by presidential decree, but that ended the power Vietnamese men had held to shed their wives on a whim. During Diem's rule, women achieved something close to parity with men. Rumours among the Saigonese were that Madame Nhu passed the ban to stop her sister divorcing her philandering husband to marry a Frenchman.

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Those remarks solidified the enmity felt for a woman whom the American press had optimistically described in the mid-1950s as her country's Joan of Arc. Less than a decade later, as the US was drawn into the conflict between North and South Vietnam, she came to be seen as "an oriental Lucrezia Borgia". This tiny woman, who stood less that 5ft tall, at first intoxicated the US with her lacquered glamour; later the US press, shocked by her icy hauteur and political machinations, turned her into the personification of the remoteness and corruption that afflicted Diem's government.

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Her only official position was as a deputy to the National Assembly, voted in by a group of Roman Catholic refugees from North Vietnam who enjoyed her enormous powers of patronage. But her power came from her proximity to Diem, an ascetic bachelor who rarely ventured outside the palace. Her husband, Diem's supposed political theoretician and closest adviser, ran a menacing secret police that dispatched opponents to the awful former French penal colonies on Poulo Condore and Phu Quoc islands. Madame Nhu revelled in her position. Her often repeated motto was: "Power is wonderful. Total power is totally wonderful."

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Her personal style, which had once captivated many Americans, began to repel them. She favoured heavily kohl-rimmed eyes, beehive hairstyles and the figure-hugging ao dai tunic worn by Vietnamese women. She was widely imitated; to this day the type of low-cut, ultra-fitted ao dai she wore is still known as the Tran Le Xuan style. But her elegance had its sinister side. She was described as being "moulded into her dress like a dagger in its sheath".

Born in Hanoi, she grew up in isolated privilege as the daughter of one of Vietnam's wealthiest businessmen, who had married a cousin of the Emperor Bao Dai. She was raised by a multitude of servants, who took her to French and ballet lessons, and was educated in Hanoi and Saigon. In 1943, aged 18, she married Nhu, one of six brothers from the prominent mandarin Ngo clan. Two years later she was captured, along with her eldest child, and was held briefly in a communist-controlled village. When scolding American officials for being insufficiently fervent in their anti-communism, she frequently referred to these months of deprivation, during which she was forced to subsist on just two bowls of rice a day and had only one coat to wear, in her words "a very fashionable wasp-waisted number from Paris".

Diem came to power in 1955, when Vietnam was divided into the communist North and the American-backed South. Almost immediately Madame Nhu began scheming; she was eventually banished to a convent in Hong Kong as her brother-in-law delicately consolidated his power over a country run by pirates, gangsters and armed religious cults. When she was allowed back, she stepped up her efforts to enhance her influence while maintaining the pretence that she was nothing more than the president's demure hostess for official functions.

Despite Diem's efforts, the communist insurgency that stepped up in 1960 took its toll on his rule, which became increasingly vicious. His brother and sister-in-law began to make more decisions and kept close to the isolated president, even sharing his official residence. Madame Nhu was always on hand to cajole or even berate Diem; she was said to have frequently flown into violent rages if he showed any signs of weakness against the regime's many opponents.

In February 1962, Madame Nhu survived the bombing of the presidential palace by two rebellious South Vietnamese pilots. Blinded by the flames and smoke, she raced to her children sleeping next door but fell through a hole left by the explosion and ended up two floors below, in the basement. She believed the attack had been secretly encouraged by the US, which had grown disappointed with Diem and disgusted with both Nhus. As the Buddhist crisis raged in 1963, she toured America's campuses to defend the Ngo clan's rule.

The tour disintegrated into farce; even her father - South Vietnam's ambassador to Washington - refused to meet her. She was photographed with her daughter, both in satin evening gowns, peering into the dark windows of the empty ambassador's residence that her parents had left to avoid meeting her. At Ivy League colleges, where she planned to make the case for a more muscular offensive against communism, students enraged by the growing repression in Saigon pelted her with eggs and abuse.

While in the Beverly Wilshire hotel in Los Angeles on 2 November, Madame Nhu was informed of a coup against Diem by his generals. The president and his brother had fled to a church in Saigon's Chinatown. As they were removed from this sanctuary they were killed; the official version put out was that they had killed themselves, but photographs showed them bound and bloody from beatings. They had been shot in the back of an army truck.

Her children were allowed to leave Saigon and join her in Paris, where she began her exile in an apartment overlooking the Eiffel Tower. She soon moved to Rome, where another brother-in-law, the archbishop of Hue, Ngo Dinh Thuc, had also found asylum. The only other surviving brother of the murdered president was later executed.

Exile was a bitter time. Madame Nhu earned some money initially by charging for interviews and photographs. She soon disappeared from the limelight only to make a brief reappearance in 1975, when South Vietnam finally fell to the communist North. She claimed none of that would have happened if the Ngo clan had remained in power. Her elder daughter was killed in a car crash in Paris in 1967, and in 1986 her brother, Tran Van Khiem was charged with suffocating their elderly parents to death, in a dispute over his inheritance. He was found to be mentally ill, claiming in court that Zionist conspirators had murdered his parents. Madame Nhu is survived by two sons and a daughter.

Madame Nhu (Tran Le Xuan), political consort, born 15 April 1924; died 24 April 2011

Credit: Robert Templer

**Illustration**

Caption: Captions: 'Power is wonderful. Total power is totally wonderful,' was Madame Nhu's often-repeated motto Photograph: John Loengard/Time & Life/Getty Images

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