

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF INDOCHINA JULES BRÉVIÉ (1936–1939)

RACHID TOUAOULA

PhD in Law, Aix-Marseille University

E-mail: rachid.touaoula@univ-amu.fr

ABSTRACT

By exploring French archives during the occupation of Indochina and analysing Brévié's mandate. The author focuses on his policies in Indochina (1936–1939). The actions of Jules Brévié led to the implementation of an economic policy aspiring toward improvement of the living conditions of the peasantry through land reform. Moreover, Brévié had to find a solution concerning security issues provoked by the nationalists joined by communists in resistance to French oppression. Meanwhile, Brévié had to focus on the main threat – that of the Japanese Empire. However, his propositions were rejected French central government, which dismissed him in 1939.

Keywords: Jules Brévié, colonial policy, Indochina, French colonization, French colonial law.

INTRODUCTION

Jules Brévié, a prominent figure in French colonial administration, played a significant role in shaping colonial policies in the 1930s (Delavignette 1999). He was also known for “his often-enlightened action embodies both the voluntarism and ambiguities of a corps that sought to simultaneously modernize, humanize, and maintain colonial domination” (Ramognino 2010, 93–94). Born on 12 March 1880, in Bagnères-de-Luchon, Jules Brévié entered the Colonial School in 1901. As a commander, he would discover the megaliths of Tondidarou near Niafunké in 1904 (Raimbault *et al.* 1991, 39). In 1907, while administering the circles of Bougoni and Niafouré, he was called to the directorate of political affairs of the colony, where he would serve for a decade (Ramognino 2010, 93–94). Furthermore, he

held many positions in French Administration in African colonies until being appointed to Indochina in June 1936 by the Popular Front to prepare the autonomy of Indochina (Franchini 2011, 205).

The French Conquest of Indochina officially started in 1858, and the construction of the Federation of Indochina was achieved within 45 years, between 1862 and 1907. This territory consisted of five regions that gave birth to three countries in 1954 after the French defeat in the first Indochina War¹.

In Indochina, Jules Brévié faced economic issues and significant security problems in the context of Japanese Empire expansionism. Accused of failing to ensure military preparation for Japanese aggression, he was dismissed in 1939 (Franchini 2011, 217).

By exploring French archives during the occupation of Indochina and analysing Brévié's mandate, the author of this paper focuses on his policies in Indochina between 1936 and 1939 for two reasons. Firstly, even in France, historians mostly focused on the period after Brévié's dismissal to analyse the Japanese invasion. Secondly, Brévié's legacy shows the rise of neo-colonialism. Jules Brévié seemed to attempt to resolve, albeit with limited success, the economic and social problems in Indochina (I), he also had to contend with security issues (II) that would shake the general government until the Japanese invasion of 1945.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POLICY UNDER JULES BRÉVIÉ'S GOVERNANCE IN FRENCH INDOCHINA

In June 1936, Jules Brévié arrived in a country gripped by a prolonged crisis in production structures, demographics, and resources. "The depression created the material conditions for a moral secession between the ruling elites and the popular masses, especially as it coincided and combined with the structural crisis of the peasant economy". Brévié's colonial administration would have no choice but to attempt to address the issue of underdevelopment through a policy of "conservative reform" of existing structures (Brocheux 2001, 267). Thus, it is pertinent to analyse the economic policy of Jules Brévié's administration considering a social context that demanded reforms.

ANALYSIS OF ECONOMIC POLICY IN INDOCHINA UNDER JULES BRÉVIÉ'S ADMINISTRATION

Aware of the extreme poverty prevailing in the Indochinese provinces, the French government feared the emergence of a new general protest

movement. Faced with the Great Depression and its consequences, Jules Brévié was then tasked with implementing a new policy which, according to Léon Blum's terms, should aim "to extract from the colonial fact the maximum of social justice and human possibilities" (Bouvier 2010, 241). Brévié, due to his previous career in French West Africa and his political connections, was considered a true "reformer", but he would soon encounter the consequences of the economic crisis that had greatly intensified the misery of rural populations, leading to overpopulation and famines in many regions of French Indochina. From April 1937, Brévié undertook the implementation of a major hydraulic program aimed at enabling the irrigation of approximately 130 000 hectares of land. He also worked to establish a policy of agricultural equipment assistance to no longer export but rather promote the development of crops intended to meet the needs of local populations (Ramognino 2010, 100). However, the experience would be marked by many ambiguities and uncertainties. Indeed, the colonial choices of the central government nevertheless opposed the dynamics of renovating colonial relations that were then in vogue, and simply sought to shift debates through the modernization of socio-economic structures and the restoration of agrarian relations through the implementation of an emergency economic policy, particularly in hydraulics for land irrigation (Bernard 1937). Already in 1930, a hydraulic program was developed and would be reviewed and revised between 1936 and 1937 under Jules Brévié's administration. A total of approximately 42 million piastres were invested in major hydraulic works that enabled the development of more than 380 000 hectares of land (Roquebain 1939).

The figures may seem surprising, but it should be noted that this strategy was a relative failure, since "The absence of a true consistent agrarian and agronomic policy and concrete new industrialization of the country only allowed maintaining peasant consumption at its existing precarious level, avoiding famine, but not lifting the rural masses out of the undernourishment and general underdevelopment into which they were slowly sinking" (Brocheux 2001, 270). Faced with this ambitious "peasant strategy", (Brocheux 1976, 232–233) Jules Brévié would explain in 1938: "I have tried to outline the main principles of the land policy that I proposed to promote in this country. It is inspired by the idea of improving, above all, the fate of the peasant masses who are the most numerous and the most destitute. In both moral and material orders, all other concerns, all other needs must give way to these, and I would appreciate it if the imperious demands, the excessive ultimatums of those who are much better provided for than our peasants, would subside in Indochina" (Marseille 2005, 638).

Another idea required significant resources to mobilize rural populations and even organize their migrations by creating "colonization villages"

(Brévié 1938). These villages aimed to alleviate congestion in the country's delta areas, where overpopulation was one of the main factors of crisis and thus an obstacle to the economic development of the Indochinese Union. Political reforms, while improving the fate and living standards of the populations, were meant to "consolidate the attachment of the colonized and relegate political issues to the background" (Ramognino 2010, 102). However, dialoguing with social and political movements was another task of paramount importance that Brévié had to face.

SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE LATE 1930S IN FRENCH INDOCHINA: REFORMIST ENTERPRISE OF GOVERNOR-GENERAL BRÉVIÉ

Genuine political and social protest movements coexisted with the economic crisis that the territories of French Indochina had been experiencing since the early 1930s. Although the Popular Front's accession to power, initially carrying the idea of gradual decolonization, was a source of hope for Indochinese national movements, it appears that despite attempts and some notable developments, it was ultimately a "neo-colonialist" policy that would be implemented. From a political and social standpoint, the action carried out by Jules Brévié in Indochina proves to be quite symbolic of the limitations due to the contradictions in the reformist desires of the colonial administration as supported and directed by the Popular Front. Reform had to intervene, with the aim of precisely relegating true political questions to the background, and it should be observed here that although a certain number of measures were taken in the late 1930s, the debate regarding the prospect of "gradual decolonization" (Brocheux 2001, 270), would remain closed and political refusal steadfast.

Nevertheless, some social developments remain synonymous with certain progress. For instance, the promulgation of a Labour Code in Indochina (Boucheret 2001, 29–55), limiting the duration of effective work to 10 hours per day, then reduced to 9 hours per day from 1 January 1938, also regulating the condition of underground workers and prohibiting night work for minors under 18 years of age. These were indeed real developments; however, this information must be perceived as nuanced, since it appears that employers and trade organizations managed to obtain certain "flexibility" regarding these regulations, and it should also be considered that labour regulations were, by essence, only to apply to declared workers, yet very few workers were declared at the time. It is curious to observe that while Jules Brévié promulgated the Indochinese Labour Code, he firmly opposed

the idea of creating trade union freedom in Indochina, even though such freedom was already in place in French West Africa under his governance (Ramognino 2010, 102). Besides, Brévié, in his quest to contain the population's misery, developed and enabled the evolution of existing social works that had been underutilized until then. Meanwhile, Jules Brévié's intervention in French Indochina during a three-year stay has a mixed record that calls for a detailed enquiry. It must also be considered in the face of the imminence of the Second World War and the threat posed by Japan's conquering ambitions.

JULES BRÉVIÉ'S MILITARY CABINET FACING THE SECURITY CHALLENGE

Along with the economic and social crisis troubling the colony, Jules Brévié had to confront numerous security problems. Indeed, while World War II had not yet broken out on the old continent, the expansionist ambitions of Emperor Hirohito's Empire were already being felt in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the social protest, which Brévié had hoped to silence through major economic reforms, far from weakening, gradually transformed into a political movement supported by various communist and nationalist movements existing in Indochina, notably – the Viet Minh founded in 1930. While this latter issue should presumably be a subject of internal security, it fell, like the former, under the Governor-General's military cabinet, as evidenced by certain archives (ANOM-INDO-CGI, 209). Thus, it was Jules Brévié's military cabinet that would have to work to face, on the one hand, the coalition of nationalist and communist movements hostile to French imperialism, and on the other hand, to consider solutions to best defend the colony from a Japanese invasion that already seemed inevitable.

BRÉVIÉ'S ACTION TESTED BY INTERNAL THREATS

From the early 1930s, the general government encountered the rise of nationalism in Indochina, a resistance that partly stemmed from French spirit itself. Indeed, the colonizer having "brought education to the natives", now had to deal with its consequences. An evidence is the case of nationalist Nguyen Trong Bang who armed himself with this French spirit by declaring: "It is you who taught us about Revolution. You killed your King Louis XVI who had committed betrayal, I am doing the same" (CM, 1206).

Thus, upon taking office, Brévié already came up against a situation he could not really contain. Indeed, he had hoped to strengthen the colonized people's attachment to the Empire through his social and economic reforms, "but the political and social agitation from summer 1936 to summer 1937, by forcing him to position himself as the leader and defender of the colonial system, would show the limits of this voluntarism" (Ramognino 2010, 102). Then a movement, initially social in nature, was driven by an Indochinese Congress, itself born from the *La Lutte* group. This group would very quickly, through newspapers, pamphlets, and other means provoke a wave of protest that led to the establishment of 600 action committees. In parallel, the Indochinese Communist Party proposed a "selective alliance with the democratic bourgeoisie," offering "to other political formations the constitution of a democratic front." Thus, the scale of the Congress movement and the agitation caused by various Stalinist and Trotskyist groups allied with nationalists worried the colony, the authorities, and even the Popular Front government, as this apparent social movement seemed to gradually mutate into a nationalist movement (Franchini 2011, 205).

Therefore, Brévié had to engage in "a resolute policy of repression of the social and nationalist movement: arrest of leaders, multiplication of trials" (Ramognino 2010, 102). Following this logic, "The Congress was banned, action committees dissolved, and personalities like Ta Thu Thau, Nguyen An Ninh, Nguyen Van Tao, arrested". This marked the end of illusions in the revolutionary and nationalist camp. Thus, the communists began to divide, and the rupture appeared when the "orthodox communists [...] launched a newspaper, *L'Avant-Garde*, and dissolved clandestine organizations, peasant associations, red unions, or Youth Corps." Evidently, the Viet Minh seemed to want to dissociate itself from the "Trotskyists, advocates of agitation and enemies of any compromise." At the time, the Viet Minh was characterised by a "nationalism with deep patriotic roots still veiled by the revolutionary internationalist mask of the hour, but which Nguyen the Patriot, absent from the thirties, would know how to bring to light when the opportunity came" (Franchini 2011, 206). Indeed, while Brévié may have managed to stifle nationalist agitation, the national sentiment had not withered, as evidenced by the strong return of anti-French propaganda during the entry into war against Japan, which itself gradually deconstructed the myth of white man's invincibility. Thus, additional credits would be allocated to the general government to more effectively monitor elements deemed suspicious (ANOM-INDO-CGI, 209).

However, although substantial, the internal threat was not the predominant worry of Governor-General Brévié. Indeed, in Southeast Asia, it was the Japanese Empire – invading all territories bordering it – that seriously concerned Jules Brévié, who increasingly expected a French defeat.

BRÉVIÉ'S ACTION TESTED BY EXTERNAL THREATS

Beyond the internal threat, Brévié inherited the general government in an extremely difficult context, namely, that of an imminent Japanese invasion of Indochina. Faced with the threat, Jules Brévié did not limit himself to an executive role; he would consider different hypotheses to envision in case of conflict with Japan, submit these various measures to the metropole, while justifying those he would prefer to adopt. Thus, he would note the necessity of extending the Governor-General's powers to effectively respond to the challenges ahead.

The necessity of extending the Governor-General's powers

Faced with Japan's expansionist threat, Jules Brévié became aware of the need for the general government to prepare for possible armed conflict. However, he encountered a legal void regarding the powers devolved to the Governor-General in matters of defence. This emerges from his note to the Minister of Colonies: "No text currently stipulates that the head of the Colony will have, in wartime, general powers different from those he holds in peacetime." Thus, to fill this gap, Jules Brévié would request an "extension of the Governor-General's powers," allowing him to take all necessary measures to prepare the defence of Indochinese territory. In this context, he would ask the Minister of Colonies for a draft decree legally validating his proposal, while admitting that "this text would of course only be submitted for the Head of State's signature if circumstances required it and by virtue of the full powers that would likely be granted to the government in wartime." Moreover, anticipating a possible disruption of communication between Indochina and the metropole, Jules Brévié proposed that the Governor-General be allowed to "take measures that, in the normal exercise of his functions, fall under the authority of the Government or Parliament," to best respond to the necessities of defence and administration (ANOM-INDO-CGI, 778).

However, despite the apparent utility of his proposals, Jules Brévié's appeals were not favourably treated by the metropole, as evidenced by the negative response addressed to him by Georges Mandel on 15 June 1939 (ANOM-INDO-CGI, 778, 639).

The "scorched earth" method, applied to the administrative framework

As the Japanese threat became more pronounced, Jules Brévié seemed to anticipate a French defeat and the invasion of Indochina by the Imperial Japanese Army – like Lieutenant-Colonel Bertaux three months later. Thus, he would consider two possible reactions (ANOM-INDO-CGI, 938).

Indeed, the first idea would be to leave the French administration in place under Japanese occupation, with the aim of maintaining a link with the indigenous populations. Meanwhile, such a procedure would expose French officials to the arbitrary moves of the Japanese army. Thus, Brévié rather favoured the second idea and therefore the withdrawal of French officials to prevent their possible imprisonment, thereby depriving France of potential soldiers in the case of a probable reconquest of its colony. Moreover, the advantage of removing an already established administration was to “create difficulties for the enemy by leaving behind a country as disorganized as possible,” following the Chinese method. Yet here again Brévié would see his proposal rejected (ANOM-INDO-CGI, 778, 2769).

On 23 August 1939, Brévié was dismissed from his functions, and Minister of Colonies Georges Mandel appointed General Catroux in his place, Brévié being “judged too formalistic and soft” (Franchini 2011, 217). However, it would be unfair to attribute the French failure in Indochina to him, considering the report: *Defence of Indochina, Increase in Military Power of French Indochina During the Years 1937, 1938, 1939*. Indeed, in this report, Lieutenant-Colonel Bertaux notes in 1937 a military weakness at all levels in the domain of defence in Indochina, both materially due to the obsolescence of armament and vehicles, as well as in terms of infrastructure. However, in 1939, the year of Brévié’s departure from the general government, Bertaux notes a very clear improvement in the situation, a development which, according to Bertaux, is essentially due to Brévié’s action during this period: “All this has been possible thanks to the effort provided by Indochina itself, under the impetus of Governor-General Brévié”. Finally, it would not be acceptable to blame Jules Brévié for the upcoming Japanese invasion of Indochina, since Bertaux himself recognizes that Japanese victory was predictable, inevitable, as the metropole was not fully committed to the defence of Indochinese territory (ANOM-INDO-CGI, 938).

CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, Jules Brévié took office as Governor-General of Indochina as a man of conviction, faithful to his socialist tradition. It was evidenced by his highly voluntarist policy in the economic domain, which aimed to improve the living conditions of the peasantry through land reform. Regarding the reform, Jules Brévié extended it to the social field through labour regulations, which nevertheless were not fully implemented, thus demonstrating the limits of Brévié’s governance. Moreover, despite his voluntarism, Brévié was not a stubborn idealist; he showed pragmatism when it came to resolving the internal security issue caused by nationalists.

Furthermore, he also knew how to envision the best solutions to face the programmed invasion of Indochina by the Japanese. Hence, even if his governance was not perfect, at least on the military level he knew how to brilliantly remobilize Indochinese forces. Nevertheless, his action bears witness to the birth and gradual development of neo-colonialism, which is still denounced today in former French colonies and even in French overseas territories, as evidenced by the recent events in New Caledonia².

BIBLIOGRAPHY

SOURCES

Archives (Archives Nationales d'Outer-Mer)

- Note 639, ministre des colonies à m. Le gouverneur général de l'Indochine, 15 juin 1939. ANOM, INDO, GGI, cabinet militaire, 778.
- Note 2769/apa, du gouverneur général au ministre des colonies, 20.05.1939. ANOM, INDO, GGI, cabinet militaire, 778.
- Note de service n°1158 2/srm, du commandant supérieur des troupes, du 25 août 1939. ANOM, INDO, GGI, cabinet militaire, 209.
- Note du gouverneur général au directeur des Affaires politiques, note du 23 mai 1939. ANOM, INDO, GGI, cabinet militaire, 778.
- Rapport du lieutenant-colonel Bertaux sur la défense de l'Indochine, 08 août 1939. ANOM, INDO, GGI, cabinet militaire, 938.

Report

- CM 1206, rapport de la commission criminelle 1930–1931: complots contre la sûreté de l'état.

LITERATURE

- Bernard, P., 1937. *Nouveaux aspects du problème économique indochinois*. Paris: Sorlot.
- Boucheret, M., 2001. Le pouvoir colonial et la question de la main d'œuvre en Indochine dans les années vingt. *Revue d'histoire critique*, 85, 29–55.
- Bouvier, J., 2010. *L'impérialisme à la française: 1914–1960*. Paris: La découverte.
- Brocheux, P., 2001. *Indochine la colonisation ambiguë: 1858–1954*. Paris: La découverte.
- Brévié, J., 1938. Le déblocement des régions surpeuplées d'Indochine. *Société Belge d'études et d'expansion*, Dec.
- Brévié, J., 1936. *Trois études de M. le gouverneur général Brévié*. Dakar: Imprimerie du gouvernement général de l'AOF.
- Brocheux, P., 1976. Crise économique et société en Indochine française. *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, 63 (232–233), 655–667.
- Delavignette, R., 1999. *Les vrais chefs de l'Empire*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Franchini, P., 2011. *Les guerres d'Indochine: de la conquête française à 1949*. Paris: Tallandier.
- Raimbault, M., Sanogo, K., 1991. *Recherches archéologiques au Mali*. Paris: Karthala.
- Roquebain, C., 1939. *L'évolution économique de l'Indochine française*. Paris: Hartman.
- Marseille, J., 2005. *Empire colonial et capitalisme français*. Paris: Albin Michel.

REFERENCES

¹ Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam.

² A crisis in the New Caledonia started in May 2024 after a proposed electoral reform that would expand voting rights to include more non-indigenous residents. According to Kanak independence leaders, this change would have made any decolonization in the future almost impossible.

INDOĶĪNAS ĢENERĀLGUBERNATORA ŽILA BREVJĒ (*JULES BRÉVIÉ*) IZAICINĀJUMI (1936–1939)

RAŠIDS TUAULA

PhD tiesību zinātnē, Eksas-Marseļas Universitātē

E-pasts: rachid.touaoula@univ-amu.fr

ANOTĀCIJA

Pētot Francijas arhīvu materiālus par Indoķīnas okupācijas laiku un analizējot Brevjē pilnvaras, raksta mērķis ir koncentrēties uz viņa politiku Indoķīnā (1936–1939). Viņa rīcība noveda pie ekonomiskās politikas īstenošanas, kuras mērķis bija ar zemes reformas palīdzību uzlabot zemnieku dzīves apstākļus. Turklāt Brevjē bija jārod risinājums drošības jautājumiem, ko izraisīja nacionālisti, kuriem pievienojās komunisti, pretojoties Francijas īstenošanai apspiešanai. Tomēr Brevjē bija jākoncentrējas uz galveno draudu – Japānas impēriju. Viņa priekšlikumi tika noraidīti, un Francijas centrālā valdība viņu atlaida 1939. gadā.

Atslēgvārdi: Žils Brevjē, koloniālā politika, Indoķīna, franču kolonizācija, Francijas koloniālās tiesības.

KOPSAVILKUMS

Žils Brevjē bija tehniķis, kuru pazina, pateicoties viņa efektivitātei un zināšanām par Francijas pārvaldi koloniālajā laikmetā. Izpētot Francijas arhīva dokumentus par Indoķīnas okupāciju un analizējot viņa pilnvaras, šī raksta mērķis ir pievērsties Žila Brevjē politikai Franču Indoķīnā.

Viņa rīcības rezultātā tika īstenota ekonomiskā politika, kuras mērķis bija uzlabot zemnieku dzīves apstākļus ar zemes reformas palīdzību. Pasaules ekonomiskās krīzes ietekme joprojām bija jūtama – lauku iedzīvotāju vidū pieauga nabadzība un daudzos reģionos bija bads.

Turklāt Brevjē bija jāatrod veids, kā ierobežot Francijas kolonijā valdošās domstarpības. Nebūdams akls ideālists, viņš spēja demonstrēt pragmatismu, kad runa bija par iekšējo drošību, ko apdraudēja nacionālistu kustība un komunisti, kuri pretojās Francijas varai. Brevjē valdības īstenošanās represijas bija ievērojamas un pielika punktu visām revolucionārajām ilūzijām. Turklāt viņam bija jākoncentrējas uz galvenajiem draudiem – Japānas impēriju.

Saskaņā ar Brevjē uzskatiem tikai ģenerālgubernatora pilnvaru nostiprināšana, īpaši militārā līmenī, varēja ļaut reaģēt uz Japānas draudiem.

Saskaroties ar Francijas valdības pretestību un paredzot Japānas uzvaru pār Francijas spēkiem, viņš ierosināja kopā ar visu Francijas administrāciju evakuēties no valsts. Tomēr Francijas centrālā valdība noraidīja arī šo priekšlikumu, atlaižot Brevjē un viņa vietā amatam izvēloties ģenerāli Žoržu Katrū.

Brevjē pilnvaru laiks liecināja par attiecīgā laikmeta kontekstu – ierēdņi centās saglabāt Francijas koloniālās intereses, lai gan centrālās valsts neveiksmes un politiskā nestabilitāte nepārtraukti atspoguļoja valsts nepilnības.