

Forty years after the fall of Saigon, a reflective Vietnam

While some Vietnamese celebrate, others question growing corruption and inequality



On April 30, 1975, North Vietnamese tanks smashed through the gates of the presidential palace in Saigon, toppling the southern regime backed by the United States. The victory brought an end to a war that had left millions of Vietnamese dead, in addition to some 58,000 US troops sent to halt the communist advance.

Forty years later, a hand-picked crowd witnessed military marches and re-enactments of the communist victory at the former presidential palace. Soldiers waved hammer-and-sickle flags and women danced to a techno version of the Star Wars theme under a sign reading, “Long Live the Glorious Communist Party of Vietnam.” In a speech broadcast nationwide, Nguyen Quoc Khanh, a lieutenant-general in the army, described the April 30 victory as “a golden turning-point for the Vietnamese people”.

A few blocks away, similar sentiments were on the lips of Vo Xuan Son, a 60-year-old woman selling Vietnamese-style baguettes from a street cart. “This was the day our country was reunited,” she said,

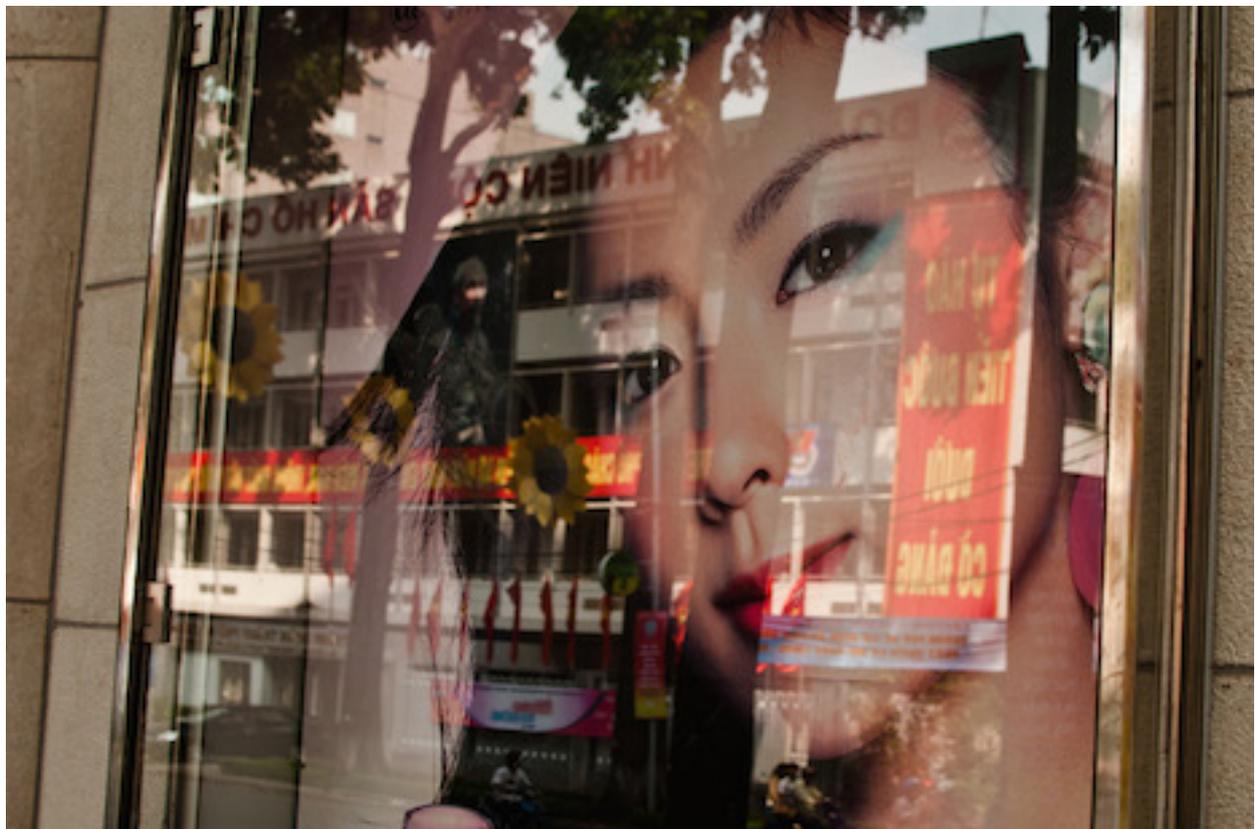
spreading pâté on a freshly-baked bread roll. “This day is very significant for all the people, because there is no war, there are no dead people. Our children don’t need to go into the army.”

Saigon — nearly no one calls it by its official name — has come a long way in forty years. In 1986, after years of socialist deprivation, the Communist Party announced doi moi, a series of reforms that loosened the state’s grip on the economy and created a system of “market-oriented socialism.” As Vietnam reopened to the world, foreign investment arrived. The economy boomed and many people were lifted out of poverty.

Today this city of eight million hums with a capitalistic energy that has transformed it over the past decade. “There are more high buildings, the streets are enlarged, and many things are changing in a positive way,” said Nguyen Thi Thu Thuy, 29, who works at a Japanese construction company.

Thuy is part of a new Vietnamese generation that has grown up since doi moi, too young to have experienced war and revolution. Still, she and her friends felt that this week’s anniversary was worth marking. “This day is very meaningful for the southern people,” she said, sitting in a park close to the former presidential palace.

Tran Thi Kim Huong, 23, who works at the nearby Diamond Plaza, one of Saigon’s most exclusive shopping centers, expressed similar views. Her grandparents fought for the communist insurgents — the Viet Cong — in the 1960s. “I’m Vietnamese, so I must feel proud on Liberation Day,” she said.



But while some celebrated the victory, others complained of the crony capitalism, corruption and inequality that have flourished under communist rule. A particular focus of ire in recent years is the growing gap between the party's foundation of "equality" and the high-flying lifestyles of a new elite class that is given preferential access to the fruits of economic growth.

In April 2012, the Vietnamese blogosphere erupted when To Linh Huong, the 24-year-old daughter of a member of the Communist Party's Politburo, was appointed the head of a state-owned construction company. Three months later, amid widespread criticism, Huong resigned her post. Allegations of nepotism and cronyism have also dogged Vietnam's prime minister, Nguyen Tan Dung, whose daughter heads a prominent investment fund and brokerage firm.

"The government doesn't care about the lives of the people," said Mrs Bay, a coffee seller in the center of town. "If you are relatives of the people working in the government you have big advantages in life. For ordinary people it is difficult."

As Liberation Day dawned, Mrs Bay set out her coffee tables on the pavement, much as she has done each day for the past 47 years. From her street corner, the 81-year-old has seen Vietnam move from a war-wrecked society to a rising middle-income country fully integrated into the global economy. She

marveled at the high buildings that have sprung up around town, with basements so cars don't have to park on the street. But Mrs Bay, who asked that her real name not be used, said she had no interest in the tightly-scripted ceremonies taking place a few blocks away. "I don't care.... If someone asked me to go to the parade I wouldn't go," she said.

Government supporters argue that economic reforms have led to a sharp drop in poverty, but other observers are more skeptical. In practice, "reform" has very often involved the funneling of business opportunities to those with the right connections, said Erik Harms, a Yale University ethnologist who has studied urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City. "Yes, the economy has been opening up in all kinds of ways," he said, "but those experiments in terms of opening up to market mechanisms can't be conflated with experiments in political openness."

Pham Chi Dung, a Communist Party member who resigned his membership in protest in 2013, said the party had long parted ways with the socialist ideals of Ho Chi Minh. "The origin of heavy corruption in Vietnam is one party. If we want to change this we must have multi-parties, democracy, and human rights," he said in a recent interview.



These are sensitive subjects in one-party Vietnam, where the media remains under tight state control. Anthony Le Ngoc Thanh, a Catholic priest who runs the Redemptorist News website, one of the only independent media outlets in Vietnam, has been detained three times for publishing news about human

rights and religious persecution by the state.

“We tell the people what the government doesn’t want them to know,” the 46-year-old said. Given the state of the official press, Le said he has little choice: “The rights of citizens are mentioned only when it does not violate the rights or challenge the Communist Party and government.”

But despite all the complaints about crony capitalism, it’s the cronies most Vietnamese oppose, not the capitalism. Harms said that after years of socialist deprivation, even the poor applauded the government’s efforts to “bring a little bit of Singapore into Saigon”. “Even if you’re impoverished, you look around the city, you still have this sense of ‘bright lights, big city,’ and this sense of Vietnam emerging,” Harms said.

This finding was backed by a recent survey which found that 95 percent of Vietnamese supported capitalist policies, the highest of the 45 nations surveyed. Instead, Harms said, it is the socialist establishment, with its cronies and its rusted-on officials, which is seen as the problem.

This contradiction seemed particularly acute in the case of Le Tuan, a 50-year-old I met at a busy intersection in central Saigon. Le was ten when Saigon fell to the communists. As the northern troops entered his town outside Saigon, he remembered, “all the houses opened their doors and raised the national flag, half-red and half-blue”.

Le cheered the communist victory along with the rest of them, but ran into difficulties after finishing high school. As the son of a South Vietnamese officer, he was barred from going to university throughout the 1980s. Instead he joined the army and served for four years in Cambodia. Returning to Saigon, where he tried and failed to start a few business ventures, he found himself without a job. Eventually Le was forced to survive by collecting scrap metal on the streets.

Some might describe Le as a victim. But that’s not how he sees himself. Much like his nation as a whole, Le is a survivor, and he remains philosophical about his prospects in a new era of free-wheeling capitalism. “I don’t care much about my difficulties,” he said, as Ho Chi Minh stared down from a communist billboard across the road. “Life is just a chess game — someone loses and someone wins.”

Additional reporting by AFP

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