Opinion
Guest Voices



Thousands of people participated in a parade down Lê Duẩn Boulevard to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the ending of the Vietnam War on April 30 in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. (Thomas C. Fox)



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Red-and-gold banners snapped in the sticky morning breeze above a quarter-mile-long grandstand holding some 5,600 Vietnamese dignitaries and foreign guests. I occupied one of the cushioned seats, invited, along with a handful of other former war correspondents, to witness the 50th anniversary celebration of peace and national reunification.

From my perch midway down Lê Duẩn Boulevard, I could see, half a mile away, the old Independence (Presidential) Palace. It was there, at mid-morning on April 30, 1975, that Tank 843 of the North Vietnamese Army crashed through the gates; 45 minutes later, soldiers hoisted the blue-and-red flag of the National Liberation Front, signaling the war's end. Today, that scene felt both distant and unnervingly close.

Under a brutal, bright sun, the formalities stretched for three hours before giving way to an exuberant parade. Thirteen thousand participants — older veterans radiant beneath rows of medals, rifle squads, armored carriers and fighter jets carving silver arcs overhead — moved off in precise formation. Drones hovered to beam the pageant to televisions across the country.

Yet the martial display was only one note in a fuller symphony. Waves of schoolchildren, women gliding by in shimmering áo dài, and dancers brandishing white plastic doves followed close behind. A float draped in lotus blossoms cradled a large portrait of Hồ Chí Minh, the nation's unparalleled hero-patriot. Goose-stepping soldiers kept time, but pop anthems of unity soon melted their cadence into something lighter — an unbridled outpouring of Vietnamese pride that spilled into side streets crowded five deep with cheering families.

The day's official address was delivered by To Lam, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam. He lauded economic gains and national unity, but his speech also drew on 50-year-old pejoratives for southern supporters of the former Saigon government and their American allies. The words stung. "I felt insulted," one older Vietnamese woman, now living abroad, told me after the ceremony. "I tried

listening again later, but the language was still the same — and it hurt."

Two mid-level officials — both products of post-war classrooms rather than battlefields — admitted to feeling a sense of disappointment. They belong to the generation that knows the conflict only through history books. The younger, second-generation generation since the war seems not to know that history books exist.

Their reactions underscore a basic demographic fact: more than 60% of Vietnam's citizens are under 40, with no memory of what people here call the American war. For them, April 30 was a grand holiday, a day off from the office, not a haunting memory.

Interview after interview delivered the same refrain: today's young Vietnamese are pragmatic, entrepreneurial and impatient with ideology; a reliable iPhone, good internet connection and a decent job rank higher on their life scale than any political persuasion, let alone one based on dusty, foreign Marxist-Leninist slogans.

An educated Catholic couple, professionals in their 30s, said religious practices are not restricted. Both have lived abroad, with relatives scattered across the globe, including in the United States. Asked if they would ever emigrate, without hesitation they said no: "Vietnam is where we want to build our future." They reasoned that the country's economy is expanding rapidly, jobs are abundant despite a recent slowdown, the cost of living is more manageable than in Europe or the United States, and a rich web of extended family support makes everyday life richer and more meaningful.

Yes, political freedoms are limited, she acknowledged, but if they don't overtly criticize the government, they are left alone to craft their lives. They feel connected to the world, and unlike in China, foreign news is available on the Internet. The young, she added, freely use WhatsApp, TikTok and Facebook for personal communication.



People watch a fireworks display during celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War on April 30 in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. (Thomas C. Fox)

Vietnam is on the move. Its people have benefited from one of the world's fastest-growing economies. This follows the first decade after the Communist takeover of the South. From 1975 to the mid-1980s, hard socialism was never a viable option, and the nation barely managed to survive years of widespread poverty. In 1986, Hanoi changed course by announcing a new economic policy, "Đổi Mới" (New Life), which opened the door to foreign investments. At first, the government required equal ownership; eventually, fully privately owned businesses flourished everywhere.

As the economy took off, so too did the construction of modern high-rise office and residential buildings. Seemingly overnight, the skyline along the river changed radically. Vietnam's economy has been experiencing an astonishing recent

annual 6% growth rate.

So, is Vietnam a socialist nation? In name, yes. However, when a reporter this week asked a spokeswoman for the Bureau of Foreign Affairs, she danced around providing a clear answer. Independence, freedom and happiness, she said, are our goals.

What is the basic rallying cry of the Hanoi government? It seems the answer can be found in history and mythology. Together, they weave purpose, sacrifice and honor into a firmly held sense of national identity. Take a walk in any town or city from Hanoi to the Mekong Delta. You will find streets named after Vietnam's greatest war heroes — men and women who led rebellions against outside forces: Hai Bà Trưng, Trần Hưng Đạo, Lê Lợi, Nguyễn Trãi, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and, most importantly, Hồ Chí Minh, or simply, "Uncle Ho." Vietnam's single-party has wrapped its legitimacy and authority in a patriotism that rings deeply within the Vietnamese soul. It's hard to imagine another party taking root or the Communist Party allowing it to happen.

If Vietnam's ship at sea is nationalism, its fuel is capital investment and a record of successful capital-driven development.

Hanoi, it needs to be said, if not the center of the development surge, keeps whatever grip it can to shape its direction. The bounties of victory 50 years ago remain in place, at least structurally. While it envisions itself as two embracing sisters, as depicted in neon signs throughout Saigon, they are hobbled by inequality, lingering suspicions and sometimes animosity.

Hanoi is very much the center of the nation's decision-making. Participation in a party is often required to advance to higher ranks in most public and private management. While party membership can offer perks, there seem to be plenty of other ways to get ahead, including simple perseverance, hard work and ingenuity.

"Most people I know don't want to join," a 40-year-old Saigon businesswoman told me. "Some who do give it only lip service." Politics is now a sideshow to the main event: building lives in an economy that increasingly rewards talent and hustle.

Two impressions linger after just one week, following some 15 trips to my wife's birthplace. First is the vitality of the young. Their patriotism runs deep but is rooted in possibility, not old slogans.

Second is the sober truth that reconciliation — on both domestic and international fronts — remains incomplete. The words seem to be right, but the intent seems lacking. Beneath this, youthful patriotism and energy are gaining by the year.

Prosperity has more room for bridges. With bridges come new movements and change.

Pope Francis, in *Fratelli tutti*, warned against the "false sense of security" that sidesteps painful memory for superficial harmony. "Authentic reconciliation does not flee from conflict, but is achieved *in* conflict," he reminded us.

Young Vietnamese, raised amid breathless growth, expanded schooling and global networks, appear ready to choose that future. Whether their leaders will match their energy and openness remains an unanswered question for now. The moral weight of true reconciliation — North with South — seems both unimaginable, and at once, inevitable. After all, Vietnam is all about mystery.

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Thomas C. Fox is part of a delegation of former war correspondents attending the 50th anniversary events hosted by the Vietnamese government. NCR funded Fox's trip to maintain editorial independence.