**Headline:** Vietnam Celebrates Fifty Years of the End of Its Colonial Period

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**[Article Body:]**

Fifty years ago, on 30 April 1975, the revolutionary forces of the People’s Army of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front entered Saigon, then the capital of South Vietnam. Two days earlier, in a desperate attempt to avert further war, the US brought in a ‘peace candidate’ – former General Duong Văn Minh – to be the president. It was ‘Big Minh’, as he was known, who ordered his forces to surrender to the Communist troops, which then meant the withdrawal of the US forces on that day. Eventually, on 2 July 1976, North and South Vietnam were formally reunified under the presidency of Tôn Duc Thắng, a long-time communist leader, who had taken over as the President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (the north) after the death of Ho Chi Minh in 1969. Uncle Tôn, as he was known, worked closely with General Le Duan to unify the country, and to build an economy out of the devastation left after sixty-seven years of French colonialism (from 1887 to 1954) and then twenty-one years of brutal war (1954 to 1975).

It is difficult to understand the situation after 1975 without a full assessment of the destruction of the twenty-one years of war. The Vietnamese communists organised a mass army of patriotic people who refused to surrender despite the horrific violence meted out against them by the United States, the major industrial power of that time. Between 1954 and 1975, the United States armed forces dropped 7.5 million tons of bombs on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, more than the 2 million tons of bombs dropped during World War II in all theatres of the war. In Vietnam, the US dropped 4.6 million tons of bombs, including during harsh, indiscriminate carpet-bombing campaigns such as Operation Rolling Thunder (1965–1968) and Operation Linebacker (1972). This ordnance included the use of the chemical herbicide Agent Orange, cluster bombs, and the fuel gel fire bomb called Napalm (made of naphthenic and palmitic acids).

The use of [Agent Orange](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/agent-orange-in-vietnam-program/what-is-agent-orange/) had a long-term impact on Vietnamese agriculture. Between 1961 and 1971, the US sprayed over 20 million gallons of herbicides on Vietnamese soil (over half of this was Agent Orange). The herbicides struck at least 5 million acres of land, including forests (which experienced extensive deforestation and reduction by a third of the mangroves) and farmland (half a million acres almost permanently rendered unfarmable). Millions of Vietnamese, particularly in rural areas, faced terrible health problems due to Agent Orange for generations (due to severe birth defects). A colonial history as harsh as that of the French and then the horrendous war depleted the economy of its vitality (millions of people, mostly from the peasantry, died in the war), and then after reunification over two million people left the country (including many intellectuals, medical workers, and scientists and engineers). This produced an enormous challenge for the new country.

The new socialist Vietnam placed enormous emphasis on the reconstruction of life for the peasantry, who had borne the brunt of the war. Two projects of immense importance have been rarely written about: the national food programmes to alleviate hunger through the increase of rice output and emergency food distribution, and the rural development programme to rebuild rural schools, medical clinics, and irrigation systems, as well as to send out health and literacy brigades to build a new Vietnamese person out of the rigid hierarchies of old Vietnam (*con người mới xã hội chủ nghĩa* – to build a new person). Against great odds, the Vietnamese Communist Party was able to start the transformation of rural society from being utterly devastated by the war to attaining some level of normalcy. Stagnation in the agricultural cooperatives due to poor soil quality and out-of-date equipment led to serious reconsideration of the path forward. It was out of the realisation that productive forces needed to be advanced that the Vietnamese Communist Party launched the Doi Moi (or Renovation) policy in 1986 to attract new technologies and finance.

The Doi Moi period has been misunderstood outside Vietnam. The Vietnamese State continued to control the financial and currency system through the State Bank of Vietnam (monetary policy) and the Ministry of Finance (fiscal policy and oversight of the state-owned enterprises). The state, meanwhile, tightly regulates private banks and investors, restricts and monitors foreign currency flows through tight capital controls, and allocates credit to favour strategic sectors or to state-owned enterprises. Linked to the buoyancy of the Chinese economy and due to the importation of new technologies from foreign companies, Vietnam has seen high rates of growth (over 7% in 2024), driven by manufacturing and construction, with modest contributions from agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. As a consequence, life expectancy has improved, and so have general social indicators.

However, the economy is vulnerable to external shocks because 87% of its Gross Domestic Product is from exports. But growing demand within the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement of 2020, which produced the largest trading bloc in the world, has provided Vietnam with a diversified set of customers and so has insulated it from any problem. Within Vietnam, there is a strong political demand to increase the domestic market and eradicate absolute poverty, particularly in rural areas. That has been on the table alongside the Communist Party’s campaign to end corruption amongst officials and in private businesses. One indicator of this approach is that while Vietnam is the world’s largest rice exporter, no rice leaves the country unless domestic needs are first satisfied.

At the commemoration for the reunification of Vietnam, To Lam, the Communist Party general secretary, invoked a saying from Ho Chi Minh: ‘Vietnam is one, the Vietnamese people are one. Rivers may dry up, mountains may erode, but that truth will never change’. In fact, the Vietnamese state and the Vietnamese people are in a struggle to make sure that rivers do not dry up and mountains do not erode, that they remain united, and that their country begins to abolish the old problems (hunger, poverty, illiteracy) that have plagued them for centuries. The Party’s former general secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng said in this context, ‘No Vietnamese should go hungry in the land their revolution liberated’. This is a commitment that the Party has made to ending these rigid inheritances from the past. That many of these problems are within sight of being eradicated gives people faith in their system.