

Vietnam: Impressions of a socialist 'pilgrim'

Friday 7 September 2007, by [BOYLE Peter](#) (Date first published: 31 August 2007).

Whenever a socialist from the generation whose political ideas were shaped by involvement in the global movement against the US-led Vietnam War pay their first visit to Vietnam, it is a bit like a pilgrimage. It is an encounter with a symbolic home of our political hopes and convictions.

That's a lot to load on any country, let alone a poor country subjected by the world's richest and most powerful state to 15 years of war and many more of economic isolation. But try as we might, we can't totally escape doing this and the Vietnam of our political dreams clings on stubbornly in our minds.

Before I made my first visit Vietnam, I was privileged to be briefed in some detail by a friend and comrade who has been studying closely current developments in Vietnam. I knew that the country was going through an accelerating opening up to the world market and that the latest round of renovations (Doi Moi) included the "equitisation", or part-privatisation, of all large state-owned enterprises.

Vietnam enthusiastically embraced full membership of the World Trade Organisation and hosted the 2006 APEC summit in Hanoi. So I went prepared to see what some global bankers — including World Bank president Robert Zoellick — predict will be the next "tiger" economy of Asia.

In my mind, images of Indonesia, a decidedly ex-tiger economy, jostled with desperate hopes for something better. But the reality I confronted over two weeks travelling from Vietnam's south to the north was much happier than I anticipated.

Vietnam is undergoing dramatic marketisation, but my impression was that this process has in the main been good for the country and welcomed by its people. Vietnam seemed seized by a constructive and productive dynamic, and the dramatic poverty, social dislocations and repression that characterise Indonesia, for instance, were not evident.

The old socialist realist posters and billboards are now hard to find in Vietnam's cities, apart from the great collection at the bluntly named Old Propaganda Posters Gallery in Hanoi's Old Quarter. Most billboards sport the iconography of the global corporations. Foreign direct investment (FDI) in Vietnam was US\$10 billion in 2006 and is reaching for US\$15 billion this year, so those corporate logos will multiply.

Yet the heritage of the long and heroic national liberation war, won through revolutionary struggle, has not been vanquished. You can see it in the UN-applauded poverty-reduction statistics. The proportion of poor households is down from 63% in 1986 to 16% last year, and the government aims for a further 2% reduction each year. The infant mortality rate, at 15 per 10,000 births, is much better than in China, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. Some 60% of households have some access to free health care; school fees and health-insurance fees are waived for poor households and ethnic minorities.

The revolutionary heritage remains in the proud and fiercely independent spirit of the people. A spirit captured by 20-year-old Dung as she posed next to a US tank demolished by the heroic

partisans of Cu Chi village hear Ho Chi Minh City. And why not after the heroic victory in what is called the “American War in Vietnam”?

This spirit showed itself dramatically when a number of newly built factories in rural areas were recently set on fire by local peasant communities angry at not getting a fair deal from the factories’ corporate owners.

It also shows itself in rounds of technically illegal wildcat strikes that have hit the private industrial sector. The striking workers have generally been given a sympathetic hearing by the government.

Comrade Tran Van Hang, chairperson of Communist Party of Vietnam’s (CPV) Commission for External Relations Central Committee, told me that his party holds on to its commitment to finding a socialist path even while capitalist development is the present reality of Vietnam. “We understand quite well in theory why we have to go through this stage of capitalist development but we are still working on our theoretical understanding of our path to socialism from here.

“We need to be more concrete about that socialist path. Unless we become more concrete other parties will think that all we have now is a path to capitalism.

“We know that as well as freeing up forces for development we also want this development to have quality, to be social as well as economic and to be sustainable.

“We need to continue to reform the state and make it more law-governed, but administrative reform and fighting corruption are major challenges — but corruption is not as bad as the foreign press claim.”

But the party is up against powerful new capitalist forces that are already beginning to find a political voice through independents in the National Assembly and also indirectly through more neoliberal trends in the CPV itself. With 60% of industry under private ownership and “equitisation” promising to further reduce state ownership, the meaning of preserving a “leading state role” in the economy is now contested within the party.

There is also an uphill battle for ideas in the broader population. A recent survey found that 99% of young Vietnamese want to go into business. The city populations are clearly entranced by the glitter of global capitalism. The bitter memories of the severe deprivations and political and cultural restrictions of the “war communism” that prevailed until Doi Moi began in 1986 are still fresh in the minds of many people. A frank and poignant exhibition in Hanoi’s fantastic Museum of Ethnology reveals just how bad those times were for ordinary working Vietnamese.

Multimedia-enhanced presentations document the painful experience of endless queuing to get basic necessities with the ubiquitous ration vouchers. Most workers were forced to sell their food vouchers on the black market because they had to go to work and so did not have the time to wait in the queues. Other exhibits show interviews with artists and workers who bristled under heavy ideological regulation.

I doubt anyone in Vietnam wants to go back to that era, which was born out of war and enforced isolation, as well as the acknowledged mistakes of the party. In such a situation winning support for the abstract idea of a “socialist path” is a challenge.

The socialist “pilgrim” in me left Vietnam reconciled with if worried about this contradiction, and infected with the obvious optimism the Vietnamese people seem to have about their future.

“Hen gap lai” (“See you again”) meant more than that for this departing “pilgrim” to Vietnam. There

was no socialist utopia to go back to and the future holds real uncertainties for Vietnam's heroic revolutionary heritage. But socialists in the wealthiest part of the world don't have the moral right to complain or preach to the Vietnamese people. We live amid material conditions and technical means with which socialist transformation is possible and practical, yet we have a long way to go to win over the political forces to bring it into being. If our movement was more advanced, the Vietnamese, the Cuban and the Venezuelan people would not face as acute contradictions as they do today.

P.S.

* From: International News, Green Left Weekly issue #723 5 September 2007.