

Early Political Movement in Vietnamese American Communities

Slidedeck (Suggested text):

Slide 1:

Early Political Movement in Vietnamese American Communities

Slide 2:

Homeland Restoration (1975-1980s)

1976: Anti-communist organizations in their new communities overseas mobilize support for insurgency against the new communist government.

Insurgency led by former South Vietnamese military officers.

Emergence of HR (Homeland Restoration) movement in exile communities.

1977: National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam emerges, led by former vice-admiral Hoàng Cơ Minh.

Front's goal: Anti-communist revolution tied to South Vietnamese military past.

Major anti-communist organizations in several countries use Vietnamese American communities to fundraise for their political-military coalition.

Insurgency forces camp out in Thailand, using the Cambodia-Vietnam war as an advantage to make attacks on communist soldiers.

Image examples of homeland restoration:

- Việt Tân. (2023). Danh dấu 35 năm đứng cơ chính nghĩa. Việt Tân.
<https://viettan.org/danh-dau-35-nam-dung-co-chinh-nghia/>
- Trên Đường Đông Tiến. (2007, August 26). Bối cảnh thành lập Mặt Trận Quốc Gia Thống Nhất Giải Phóng Việt Nam.
<http://trenduongdongtien.blogspot.com/2007/08/boi-canhh-thanh-lap-mat-tran-quoc-gia.html>

Slide 3:

Failure of Homeland Restoration

Late 1980s: Disillusionment with HR due to Front's secrecy and lack of progress.

Many in Vietnamese American community also alarmed at the deaths of journalists who speak out against the HR movement or talk about normalizing U.S.-Vietnam relations

Shift away from violent overthrow; younger generation disapproves of Front's methods.

1987: Hoàng Cơ Minh and forces killed

1991: Collapse of the Soviet Union; new shift towards normalizing U.S.-Vietnam relations as Vietnam seeks new allies

With normalized relations, focus shifts to demanding free elections and toppling communism through public pressure.

Slide 4:

Homeland Restoration Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttfXnfezobk>

Slide 5:

22 September 1990

Triet Le

Van Nghe Tien Phong

Bailey's Crossroads, Virginia

A columnist of controversial content for the same Vietnamese magazine that employed Nhan Trong Do. Assassinated.

22 November 1989

Nhan Trong Do

Van Nghe Tien Phong

Fairfax County, Virginia

A layout designer who worked with Triet Le, he was the first employer of the Vietnamese-language magazine to be assassinated.

9 August 1987

Tap Van Pham (a.k.a. Hoai Diep Tu)

Mai

Garden Grove, California

He was assassinated by arson while sleeping in his office by an anti-communist group that took responsibility.

24 August 1982

Nguyen Dam Phong

Tu Do (Freedom)

Houston, Texas

Was assassinated at his home by an anti-communist group.

21 July 1981

Duong Trong Lam

Cai Dinh Lang (The Village Temple)

San Francisco, California

Killed by gunfire from a member of one of two anti-communist groups taking credit for his assassination.

Journalists killed, although the actual perpetrators are unknown, these deaths instilled both a lack of dissent against the HR movement but a growing attitude of younger generations to advocate for human rights/democracy peacefully rather than through military force

Slide 6:

“Our men need our support,” Mrs. Hoa said. “And we need good citizens like yourself to contribute.”

From the backseat, I said, “How much are you giving Mrs. Hoa?”

“Nothing,” she replied. “It’s extortion.”

“But they’re fighting the Communists,” I said. Also known as Chinese and North Koreans, with Cubans and Sandinistas threatening infiltration and invasion from south of our border, as President Reagan explained on World News Tonight. “Shouldn’t we help them?”

“The war’s over.” My mother sounded tired. “There’s no fighting it again.”

I was outraged, for Mrs. Hoa’s appearance proved the war was not over, in that she had somehow followed us from the old Saigon to the new one. What was more, I had read Newsweek in the dentist’s office and knew we were in the midst of an epic battle against the evil empire of the Soviet Union. But if I was unhappy with my mother’s response, I was even more upset with my father’s.

“The war may be over,” he said, wiggling his little finger in his ear, “but paying a little hush money would make our lives a lot easier.” My mother said nothing, merely drumming her fingers on the armrest.

Excerpt from *The Refugees*, Viet Thanh Nguyen

Slide 7:

Refugee Rights Advocacy

During this time, many overseas communities used their political power to help aid refugees stuck in refugee camps and boat people

1986: Vietnam among world's poorest due to economic policies.

Diasporic Concern: Refugees abroad worried about family in Vietnam and in refugee camps

Remittance Flow: > \$17 billion annually, despite U.S. embargo against Vietnam.

Vietnamese Americans used family/friend refugee networks in Canada, UK, and France to bypass embargo and send goods back to Vietnam to sell on the black market

A number of Vietnamese American organizations sprang up to fundraise and pressure political leaders to receive more refugees

Protest led by Project Ngoc at UC Irvine against Western governments announcing that they would stop accepting refugees

Slide 8:

Shift: Homeland Restoration to Human Rights

Shift from “violent” retaking of Vietnam to “peaceful” advocacy of reform in communist Vietnam

Vietnamese refugees lobby in their respective countries for democracy in Vietnam.

Main focus: Influencing national political leaders.

Vietnamese Americans began to become linked with the Republican Party due to anti-communist stance and active support in the movement to pressure the Vietnamese government to expand human rights.

Vietnamese refugee community in Japan protest for human rights and democracy for Vietnam

Slide 9:

Human Rights Watch:

“Despite having one of Asia’s highest growth rates, Vietnam’s respect for fundamental human rights continues to lag behind many other countries, and the one-party state remains intolerant of criticism. Hundreds of political and religious prisoners remain behind bars in harsh conditions. During 2006, the government released a handful of prisoners of conscience but arrested dozens more, including democracy activists, cyber-dissidents, and ethnic minority Christians. Authorities continue to persecute members of independent churches, impose controls over the internet and the press, restrict public gatherings, and imprison people for their religious and political views. Media, political parties, religious organizations, and labor unions are not allowed to exist without official oversight, or to take actions considered contrary to Party policies. The year saw unprecedented labor unrest, official efforts to muzzle an emerging democracy movement, and ongoing repression of Buddhists and ethnic minority Christians.”

Slide 10:

Protests → Government Action

For Vietnamese American community, protests are a way for getting their voice heard using symbols that are important to them

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_AK0yTICdI

Slide 11:

Advocacy Today?

Support for Ukraine, 2022: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p0O-dOW_VAs

Using the South Vietnamese flag to support Trump?:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViIn6donBi0>

What are a minority of Vietnamese Americans trying to represent when they use the South Vietnamese flag to represent all Vietnamese Americans in U.S. politics?

Is this minority’s effort to have a “voice” successful in reaching the media and how the media views them?

Protest for human rights and democracy in Vietnam:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euRJYFZ7pgk>

Homeland Restoration [Word Count: 376]

In 1976, anticommunist organizations began mobilizing support for a supposed anticommunist insurgency against the SRV. News of the existence of the insurgency reached the exile community during the summer of 1975, and the insurgency was depicted as being led by former South Vietnamese military officers who valiantly refused to flee the country during the communist takeover. **Phục Quốc**, or **Homeland Restoration** (henceforth HR), came to be defined as a legitimate and patriotic effort on the part of former military elites to “liberate” Vietnam from communist rule, “restore the spirit, responsibilities, and honor of the army of [the RVN] and continue the task of struggle to the end in order to build true freedom for our compatriots.” The early HR movement saw the emergence of a plethora of organizations throughout Vietnamese exiles communities. Though the movement’s early phase was led primarily by efforts in France, by 1977, at least some organizations in the United States began to emerge in conjunction with the European movement.

It was in this context of HR politics that the **National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam (Mặt Trận Quốc Gia Thống Nhất Giải Phóng Việt Nam)**, led by a former vice-admiral named Hoàng Cơ Minh, emerged. The Front rose to prominence by presenting itself as capable of waging an anticommunist revolution, and rooting its membership and goals to the South Vietnamese military past. Since 1979, various exile political organizations began meeting to strategize the overthrow of communist Vietnam, culminating in major meetings across California cities in August and September 1981. Attending these meetings were former political and military Vietnamese elites who resolved to form a united political-military coalition and develop “resistance” bases at the Thai-Lao border from which guerrilla operations could be conducted.

By the late 1980s, the political tides were turning against the Front. The secrecy of the Front, as well as its failure to produce any concrete evidence of progress in destabilizing the SRV led to disillusionment with the HR movement. The shift away from violent overthrow was reflective in a growing younger generation of Vietnamese Americans who were turned off by the Front’s “lack of openness,” and the fact that “nobody likes wars, guerrillas, jungle units. In the 21st century, people won’t buy into those things anymore.” Members within the community began to conceive of the Front as a farce, and allegations of corruption only worsened its image among Vietnamese Americans.

As the Front and the HR movement weakened, a different form of anticommunist politics emerged on the scene. The 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union spurred a new movement within the Vietnamese American community. Rather than advocating for violent overthrow, the anticommunist leadership met and announced a new political project: demanding free elections and “toppling communism in Vietnam through public pressure and internal dissent.”

In the months leading up to normalization of US-Vietnam diplomatic ties in 1994, even staunch anticommunists were expressing a different attitude. “Maybe we can introduce ideas of **democracy and human rights** to Vietnam,” said Loann Nguyen, who previously opposed the idea of establishing ties. The shift to a market economy in Vietnam led entrepreneurs to view the SRV in a fundamentally different light. Normalization seemed inevitable, and many saw opportunities for businesses in Vietnam. In Vietnam, attitudes toward normalization were similar. Even those former guerrillas who once fought against the Americans and sacrificed for the communist cause saw opportunities for peace.

Nguyen, Y. T. (2018). (Re)making the South Vietnamese Past in America. *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 21, (1), 65-103.

https://web.archive.org/web/20190427210933id_/https://muse.jhu.edu/article/685881/pdf

Human Rights Advocacy

Even before the Hồ Chí Minh poster episode in 1999, Vietnamese Americans had been gradually moderating their political views toward the Vietnamese government. Many had come to the realization that the Communist regime was not likely to be overthrown anytime soon. Instead, they offered a more constructive strategy to work toward greater democracy. First, they suggested using their newly acquired economic resources in the United States to travel back to Vietnam or send remittances to help their family and friends directly. Second, they proposed to employ their emerging political power to lobby legislators and politicians at all levels to pressure the Vietnamese regime to improve its democratic participation and human rights record.

Regarding that last strategy, the Vietnamese government has given their overseas community plenty of fodder by repeated and highly publicized incidents of political repression, severe restrictions on freedom of speech, and other human rights abuses. As summarized in Human Rights Watch's World Report 2007:

Despite having one of Asia's highest growth rates, Vietnam's respect for fundamental human rights continues to lag behind many other countries, and the one-party state remains intolerant of criticism. Hundreds of political and religious prisoners remain behind bars in harsh conditions. During 2006, the government released a handful of prisoners of conscience but arrested dozens more, including democracy activists, cyber-dissidents, and ethnic minority Christians. Authorities continue to persecute members of independent churches, impose controls over the internet and the press, restrict public gatherings, and imprison people for their religious and political views. Media, political parties, religious organizations, and labor unions are not allowed to exist without official oversight, or to take actions considered contrary to Party policies. The year saw unprecedented labor unrest, official efforts to muzzle an emerging democracy movement, and ongoing repression of Buddhists and ethnic minority Christians.

Vietnam continues to exercise harsh control over its citizens and this is what Vietnamese Americans seize upon in continuing their harsh condemnation of the Communist government. Similarly to China, Vietnam has pursued a socialist-controlled capitalist economy and offers its citizens access to the Internet and email inside the country. Vietnamese authorities still maintain strict censorship over both forms of media. They can block any website and track emails that they define as anti-government, pro-democracy, or otherwise threatening to their power.

Lê, C. N. (2009). "Better Dead than Red" Anti-Communist Politics among Vietnamese Americans. *Anti-communist Minorities in the US: Political Activism of Ethnic Refugees*, 189-209.