Vietnam became known as "Indochina" under French colonial rule between 1887 and 1954. Its tumultuous 20th-century history of wars with foreigners and amongst internal ruling parties has caused political instability and economic insecurity in the country. Since Vietnam liberalized its economy in 1986, it has observed significant economic growth and becomes a key player within the global economic and political arenas. However, its human rights record of abuses continue to concern many observers.

1900-1954: French Colonialism and Japanese Occupation

By 1900, Vietnam along with Cambodia and Laos had been under French colonial control for almost 10 years. The three countries were collectively governed as "French Indochina." Under the French, Vietnam was divided into three federations: Tonkin (North), Annam (Central), and Cochinchina (South). During World War II (1941-1945), Vietnam temporarily came under the control of the Japanese. It remained as a French colony until 1954, when the French lost the Dien Bien Phu battle to the Viet Minh, a Vietnamese nationalist movement led by Ho Chi Minh, and had to withdraw its colonial administration.

1954-1975 The Vietnam War and American Involvements

The Geneva Accords of 1954 divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel north, with Ho Chi Minh’s Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North and Emperor Bao Dai’s State of Vietnam in the South. In 1955, the U.S.-supported Ngo Dinh Diem toppled Emperor Bao Dai’s government and declared himself as the President of the newly-established Republic of Vietnam. The communist government of North Vietnam began a guerilla campaign against the Republic of Vietnam, which it saw as a colonial puppet. The Vietnam War between the North and the South ensued until 1975, when the U.S.-backed South Vietnam was defeated by communists of the North. The U.S. Immediately placed an embargo against all of Vietnam. On July 2, 1976, Vietnam was officially unified and formed the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, with its capital in Hanoi.

1975-1982: Socialism and Its Transformations

After the war, the communist-led Vietnamese government seized private enterprises and embarked a mass campaign of collectivization. The abrupt economic transformation pushed Vietnam into triple-digit inflation by the 1980s and seriously slowed post-war recovery. Massive
waves of more than one million Vietnamese people risked their lives and fled the country, with elites having access to U.S. planes while others relied on boats or escaped on foot.

Meanwhile, Vietnam became increasingly aligned with the Soviet Union. This created tensions with China, which was competing with the Soviet Union to become a regional power. In 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and replaced the Khmer Rouge regime with a government that ruled until 1989. The Cambodian intrusion further aggravated relationships with China, which allied itself with the Khmer Rouge. As a result, Vietnam became more dependent on the Soviet Union for military support.

**1986–present: Doi Moi and Economic Liberalization**

In 1986, the Vietnamese government instituted “Doi Moi” (renovation) policies that loosened the control of central state planning and slowly transitioned the country toward a socialist-oriented free-market economy. The economic liberalization pushed Vietnam’s economy toward substantial growth in all sectors.

Since the 1990s, Vietnam has been strategically integrating itself into the global community. In 1995, it normalized relations with the U.S. By 2007, Vietnam has also become a member of more than 60 international organizations, including the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. The country has also implemented favorable policies to encourage the return and investments of overseas Vietnamese, such as allowing them to purchase land and granting them visas with special privileges.

However, despite the economic boom and international integration, violations of human rights in Vietnam continue to concern NGOs and international observers. Human rights such as the freedom of expressions and press continue to be under the strict control of the Vietnamese government. In 2004, the U.S. State Department reported Vietnam’s human rights record as “poor” and has “serious abuses.”

See Also: Anti-colonialism, Communism and State Capitalism, Ho Chi Minh

**Further Readings**


McHale, Shawn. *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism and Buddhism in the Making of*


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