

Viet Nam 9. Updating American politics in Viet Nam

(Day 6) When I left Shenzhen a few days ago, there was still no US president-elect, 2 weeks after the votes should have been counted. I'm a real spectator on this one: my man lost, didn't even get his desired 5% of the vote to qualify for federal funds the next try, so I am not too excited whether we're given Tweedledee or Tweedledumb. Democracy seems to have suffered a meltdown in Florida. For 30 years apparently, voting machines have been misreading voters' intentions. Try explaining to someone in China or Viet Nam, nations on the eve of democracy, why the US system is generally a good one. Try explaining the electoral college system -- that the candidate with the most popular vote may not necessarily win the presidency. My advice to the democratically minded in these countries is to look toward South America for instruction. Through experience many of these countries have developed systems that recognize that democracy works well with multiple political parties, not just an oligopoly of power controlled by two mega parties and their financial backers, but -- and this is a big *but* -- they realize the necessity of a run-off election so that voters, in the end, choose between only two candidates, one of whom gets over 50% of the vote. For 200 years the US has been an experiment in democracy. Perhaps it's too soon to call it a failed experiment, but it is quickly approaching political failure; without election finance reform, without vote counting reform, without multiple parties, it seems likely to fail.

On the road I don't yet know the election outcome. I'm not going to bother looking for an Internet connection in Kon Tum, a place I find less than enthralling, although the guidebook calls Kon Tum the 'garden spot' of the central highlands! I know it is a bit unfair for foreign travelers to call a place they visit (and on first impression to boot) a dump, but let's just say that Kon Tum is not even Da Nang, the latter being at least full of character. Kon Tum, like Da Nang, is not on the tourist trail; it is the virtual dead end of the QL 14. If anything it is anti-tourist. Hotels here are over-priced for Viet Nam. Mine costs \$16.50, which is 60% more than I have paid anywhere else in the country. Transportation here is a mess. Here's an example. A German backpacker spots me as I walk down the street searching for breakfast. He chases after me to beg a lift, not expecting me to be on a cycle. He got here by bus, but the driver would not take him further unless he paid double the agreed upon price, which itself was double the price paid by Vietnamese, so he tells me. Stories like this for Kon Tum are reported in the guidebook, which helps explain why there are no foreign tourists in town other than me and the stranded German. This fellow, who thinks he's being ripped off, is being asked to pay for a 200 km trip what it would cost to go just a few blocks in the fatherland. Viet Nam is so expensive, he bemoans, while he dunks his baguette in his coffee (total price US 25¢) between puffs of his imported duty-free cigarette, a carton of which protrudes out of his designer backpack. You can't be an independent traveler here; you have to join a bus tour with other foreigners, he complains. A few hours later, as I cycle (with more independence than sense perhaps) down well-paved, beautiful QL 14, a motorbike overtakes me. A big backpack rests on the driver's lap, his German passenger giving me the victory sign as they scoot past.

As I bike -- such a relief to be cycling again -- my curiosity over the election waxes. I'll definitely find the Internet in Pleiku, the day's destination, only 46 kms from Kon Tum. I think about the divisions in the US: social, political, economic, religious. The country seems to have turned into a place where there is so little consensus on so many issues, topics that make for good press and are themselves fed by this media frenzy, but ones that seem to divide the nation. I imagine Viet Nam is much like China, where there seems to be little disagreement among the people on social and political issues. Attribute this to -- blame this on, if you like -- a preference for harmony in Confucius heritage cultures, or to authoritarian political regimes that succeed in molding one's thinking. In small Vietnamese villages, for example, loud speakers atop power poles present the state-regulated media. There are, I think, different opinions on issues held by people in China and, I suppose, Viet Nam, but overall there seems to be a harmony, a civility, that is lacking in the US. I saw only occasional coverage of the US presidential contest, but to me it seemed very ugly, very *ad hominem*. Perhaps viewers from China and Viet Nam do not see this nastiness that seems to me to be an increasingly acceptable part of American politics. I hope they don't. In any case, whoever ends up in the White House will have achieved only a Pyrrhic victory. With so little mandate to govern, he'll be only a pretender who can be turned out in 4 years. 'Correct the mistake' would be an appropriate slogan.

The guidebook implies that Pleiku is a dump -- a `hole` is its exact description. But I find this town to have the charm that Kon Tum lacks (NB: to its credit, I didn't try to get to know Kon Tum). Pleiku was more or less flattened during the 60s war and rebuilt so that the architecture is not too exciting, but neither is it the stuff that dumps and holes are made of. There's a big Ho Chi Minh museum, which I'll try to visit, although since I've met the real (albeit embalmed) leader and visited the premier Ho museum in Hanoi, this can be only an imitation. Is there anyone in the world with so many museums built in his honor, surely to his posthumous disgust? There are dozens of Ho museums around Viet Nam, with photocopies of the same photographs and replicas of his famous stilt house, the original of which I visited in Ha Noi. But first the Internet.

The hotel staff directs me to the city's Internet/e-mail center in the Stalinesque youth center. This place handles computer courses but doesn't seem to sell time on line. Someone fluent in computer English directs me to the city's Internet café, a few kms away at 20 Dinh Tien Hoang. I'm on foot, for I prefer walking to riding when I'm in urban areas. I find the beginning of DTH street. One side of the street has even numbers, the other odd. They don't exactly match, nor do they follow perfectly in sequence. In any case I head up the even side until I come to the building at number 20. It is a mixed use building (is there any other kind in Viet Nam?). There's a hardware store, a little mom and pop grocery, a cobbler and a few offices and residences on the upper floors. No Internet café. I show the shop owners my scrap of paper with the café's name, but this doesn't spark a high level of awareness. They seem sure, however, it is not located in their own building. They wave me on further up the street. I venture in that direction. The next building is numbered 110, this number apparently assigned to the cross street at the intersection. I cross at the lights and come to building #112, then #22, #28 and #26 (in that order). No Internet café here either. There's a karaoke café, the closest approximation. The shop owner at #30 points me back down the street, where I came from. My level of frustration is mounting.

I walk back to the community center to get better directions. The thought of giving up the chase never crosses my mind, though the adage `throwing good money after bad` does flash by. At the community center the kind fellow who started me on this wild goose chase insists his information is accurate. His colleagues vouch for him. He adds to the scrap of paper a phone number and tells me the café is located next to Nexus, with his fingers pantomiming a pair of scissors cutting hair. He adds that the building is called the S & B Center. I return to building #20. No barber shop, no S & B Center. No one has a phone, and in any case, given the language barrier, a phone call seems like something that could only add to the frustration. So I walk back two kms to the hotel, developing a blister on my foot from all the walking in my new bike shoes. Elapsed time: 1 hour.

The hotel clerk calls the café's number for me. The Internet is indeed in building #20, they tell her, she tells me. She hangs up. We have a full discussion, maps in hands. She makes another call. They are located next to the barber shop, two doors from the corner. She hangs up. I draw my own map of the area, get out my compass to make my points. I show her that the barber shop is two doors up from the south-east corner. Building #20 is two doors down from the south-west corner. She phones again. They verify, reverify this time, their location. She hangs up. The friendly clerk -- one wonders if all tourists are as troublesome as me -- even offers to send someone with me, but I feel like I should be able to find this place by myself. You shouldn't need a Ph.D. to find one simple address! At the clerk's suggestion, I take my bicycle. As I ride back to the alleged location of this alleged Internet café, I wonder why I don't like riding the bike in cities; this quite beats walking. I find the barbershop, which is #28; it is not named Nexus, but then I guess `Nexus` is a generic Vietnamese term given to foreigners for hair salons. Next to it is a numberless door, shades pulled. Before I have a chance to decide whether to knock, the door swings open and I am met with a `we've-been-waiting-for-you` expression on the face of a man in a room with four or five PCs, an Internet café (which doesn't serve food or drinks but *café* is one of those generic terms, too). I immediately point out that building #20 is down the street, the other side of the intersection. He points to his sign, a sandwich board leaning against the outside wall. It is in Vietnamese and, I guess, reads Internet center (the Vietnamese word used for `Internet` is not `Internet` in any case) and has a number 20 on it. I don't see `S & B Center,` but I guess that's some sort of generically used Vietnamese term, too. It has taken me a half hour

to get her; it takes only a few minutes (US \$.30) to check e-mail and <abcnews.com> to learn that the election is now in the courts. Is there no end to this absurdity: we will get a court-anointed president? I read the summaries of several judicial decisions; it seems like Republican-appointed judges and justices side with the Republicans and Democrat appointments side with the Democrats (Try explaining the concept of an independent judiciary to Chinese and Vietnamese. Their judges side with the Party, too.) Newsfully updated but still in want of a future president, I return to the hotel. I am too late for the Ho museum, but I get in 50 pages of Proust before dinner. I like Pleiku, down whose streets I seem to have trodden endlessly; its building numbering could be improved, however.

Next: Just days in the office