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Vietnam Human Rights Play Role in House Race

By JENNIFER MEDINA

SANTA ANA, Calif. — The flagging economy came up, of course. So did the high unemployment rate. But it is not every Congressional debate that turns on the question of how to improve human rights in Vietnam.

Yet there were [Loretta Sanchez](#), a Latina Democrat, and Van Tran, a Vietnamese-born Republican, eagerly discussing their credentials in fighting for human rights in Vietnam on behalf of the voters of California's 47th Congressional District.

Ms. Sanchez wore the yellow and red colors of the former South Vietnam flag, a symbol of pride in the large enclave of Vietnamese refugees here in Orange County. During the debate Wednesday, she proudly recounted being kicked out of Vietnam during a recent visit because, as she put it, "I talked to the dissidents." Mr. Tran dismissed this as just talk.

Soon their focus turned to the question of granting amnesty to illegal immigrants, with each candidate walking a fine line to avoid alienating both conservatives and Mexican-American voters. All in all, it was a kind of tri-cultural debate in a place formerly known as the land of [Richard Nixon](#) and [John Wayne](#).

In this central part of Orange County, once a Republican bastion, immigrants now make up more than half of the population. For the last 14 years, Ms. Sanchez has been the sole Democrat in the county's Congressional delegation and, as a daughter of Mexican immigrants, a potent symbol of power in the predominantly Mexican community. But she is now facing her toughest battle since she ousted the conservative [Robert K. Dornan](#), as Republican leaders see Mr. Tran as their best chance at snatching back the seat.

The race has attracted big names — former Mayor [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#) of New York campaigned with Mr. Tran and former President [Bill Clinton](#) is scheduled to headline a rally for Ms. Sanchez on Friday.

Mr. Tran, a state assemblyman who is a formidable power in the Vietnamese political community, has managed to amass more than \$1 million, he said. The Sanchez campaign declined to release its most recent fund-raising figures, but in June the campaign had nearly \$1.3 million on hand.

Although there has been little public polling, a recent survey by a conservative group showed Mr. Tran within striking distance of the incumbent. He is counting on a base of conservative voters — whom he called “anti-incumbent, anti-Democrat and anti-Sanchez” — and the Vietnamese community to propel him to a win next month. Ms. Sanchez is clearly feeling the pressure, calling him a “failed Sacramento politician” in the hopes that voters like their state leaders even less than they like their Washington ones.

“I would never go on some kind of suicide mission,” Mr. Tran said in a recent interview near his office in a part of town known as Little Saigon. “This area has one of the lowest Congressional turnouts, so you can put your arms around the coalition relatively easily. A substantial number of people will cross party lines to vote with their background.”

During a September interview with Univision, Ms. Sanchez remarked that “the Vietnamese” and Republicans were trying to take the seat from her, a comment that Mr. Tran seized on and that sent an uproar through the conservative blogosphere. Ms. Sanchez has since said that she was referring only to Mr. Tran's supporters.

“Yes, those Vietnamese and Republicans who are supporting him are trying to take the office — that’s what an election is about,” Ms. Sanchez said. “But to say that I was on a racist rampage is just ridiculous.”

After news of Ms. Sanchez’s comments surfaced, Mr. Tran said she was a “trying to create a wedge where there isn’t one.” He said there had rarely been tensions between the two communities.

For its part, Ms. Sanchez’s campaign bristled at a particularly nasty Tran campaign mailer, a hefty booklet in Vietnamese that showed several unflattering photographs of Ms. Sanchez, including one of her speaking with Ramón Castro, [Fidel Castro](#)’s oldest brother, in Cuba — a potentially powerful image for those who fled Communism. (Mr. Tran has also taken to repeatedly using the term “socialist conspiracy” when referring to Ms. Sanchez’s votes for the economic stimulus and health care bills.)

In a list comparing the candidates, the leaflet described Mr. Tran’s beliefs as “conservative and maintaining traditional Asian values.” It pointed out that Ms. Sanchez was divorced and described her way of life with a term that roughly translates to “loose” or “carefree.”

While the Vietnamese community makes up roughly 9 percent of the vote here, history has shown that these residents go to the polls in far larger numbers than their Latino counterparts, who are estimated at more than 60 percent of registered voters and make up a substantial part of Ms. Sanchez’s base. Her supporters acknowledge that a low turnout could hand Mr. Tran a victory.

The Vietnamese community here is hardly new — refugees began flocking to Westminster, just six miles west, in the 1970s. But they have come to political power more slowly.

“The real change is the heightened understanding, the heightened interest of that community — there has been a bump in the numbers of the Vietnamese in the school board and City Council,” said Adam D. Probolsky, a Republican political strategist. “These communities have a new sense of empowerment and a new organized effort to elect some of their own.”

Claudia Alvarez, a Santa Ana city councilwoman and supporter of Ms. Sanchez said it was unfortunate that “two communities are really fighting over the same pieces of the pie,” rather than electing another immigrant from other parts of the county.

“There is a lot of cynical attitude in the Hispanic community and the sense that nothing in government matters,” Ms. Alvarez said. “My fear is we are going to lose because of that divide and apathy.”



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