

Spotlight: Nguyen Minh Triet - Vietnam's business-friendly face [Print](#)

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As a mathematics and political science student at the elite Saigon University in the early 1960s, Nguyen Minh Triet, the son of a farming family, was caught up in the leftist student movement, joining – in the words of his official biography – “the revolutionary base”.

For a decade after his graduation, Mr Triet was an activist in southern Vietnam with the Communist party's youth movement, an organisation that drummed up popular support for the communist resistance to the US-backed Saigon regime. He was also sent to the battlefield in My Tho province, the site of heavy fighting between US-backed forces and Viet Cong guerrillas.

But with the communist-ruled, reunified Vietnam now focusing on “the battlefield of the market”, Mr Triet, the president, will next week make his first visit to his old war-time enemy, the US, now Vietnam's biggest single trading partner.

Mr Triet, who became president last June, makes an appropriate emissary for the economically burgeoning “new” Vietnam, which is now capturing the imagination of many western foreign investors hungry for a piece of the action in one of Asia's fastest-growing economies.

Charming, business-friendly and eager to project himself as responsive to the public, Mr Triet is one of the new generation of Vietnamese communist leaders who are trying to steer the country on a course of rapid economic growth and development, while ensuring that the party maintains tight control over the country's political life.

In the 1990s, he presided over a period of spectacular industrial development in his home province. Later, as Communist party chief in Ho Chi Minh City, he earned a reputation as a corruption fighter for taking down the kingpin of the city's criminal underworld, who had connections to several senior party officials.

“He really represents this generation of the so-called renovators,” said a western diplomat in Hanoi. “He is a good communicator, is quite modest in his attitude and has a good image in the population.”

Mr Triet gained credentials as an economic reformer in the 1990s, as chief of what is now known as Binh Duong province, then a little-developed, primarily agricultural inland area north of Ho Chi Minh City, as Saigon was renamed after the war.

While Hanoi was still agonising over issues of how much it should relax its hold over the state-controlled economy – and antagonising many investors in the process – Mr Triet laid the foundations for an economic boom in his province, opening its doors to foreign direct investment and encouraging locals to set up their own businesses.

“He was one of the main breakers of the rules – one of the main breakers of the orthodox system,” says Thomas Vallely, director of the Vietnam program at the Kennedy School for Government. “My clear impression is that he was experimenting without permission.” It was an experiment that evidently paid off. Today Binh Duong is one of the prime sites for foreign

direct investment, generating a significant portion of Vietnam's booming export industries.

In 1997, Mr Triet was moved to Ho Chi Minh City, the booming business capital, where he led a crackdown on a notorious local Mafia don, "Nam Cam," or "Fifth Orange", who ran brothels, gambling dens and other illegal businesses with the tacit tolerance of high-ranking government officials, including two members of the elite central committee, and lower-ranking police officers.

More than 155 people were tried in the case.

Given the Mafia don's high-level connections, Mr Triet "really took a lot of risk in this case", the Hanoi-based diplomat said.

As president, Mr Triet is officially the head of state but the role is largely ceremonial, compared with the more powerful roles of the prime minister, and the secretary-general of the Communist party. Yet, as part of Vietnam's ruling "troika", Mr Triet has ended up with at least one crucial portfolio – heading a committee overseeing reforms of the justice system, essential if Vietnam's economy is to continue to progress.

During his first trip to the US, Mr Triet hopes to focus attention on the two countries' soaring bilateral trade, which was valued at \$7.8bn (€5.8bn, £3.96bn) in 2005, and to woo fresh foreign investment from US companies.

His itinerary includes a visit to New York where he is expected to meet the leaders of big US companies, including General Electric, Intel and American International Group.

But there is little doubt that Mr Triet will also be criticised for Vietnam's human rights record when he meets George W. Bush, US president, and other US politicians.

In recent months, Hanoi has come under fire for a harsh crackdown on dissent, in which several dissidents – including two human rights lawyers, a Roman Catholic priest and members of an outlawed trade union – have been sentenced to imprisonment.

Mr Triet has publicly rejected criticism of the crackdown, insisting that Hanoi respects human rights but must punish those who violate Vietnamese laws. Yet the criticism is likely to be reiterated on the trip.

"As much as Vietnam would like that issue to go away, it's not going to," Mr Valley says. "That is going to be part of the bilateral relationship, and that is the price Vietnam pays for relations with the US."

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