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Background Briefing:

Vietnam: Nguyen Thien Nhan as Party Chief in Ho Chi Minh City

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Q1. Do you think the choice of Nguyen Thien Nhan as Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) party secretary was a result of the Party's shift to "consensus-based collective leadership"? Dinh La Thang was said to be individualistic, like Nguyen Tan Dung, whereas Nhan has kept his head low and "avoids saying or doing anything that offends anyone," according to an analyst. Was he chosen because he will stick to the consensus?

ANSWER: Nhan's appointment resulted after the Politburo decided to remove Dinh La Thanh after a prolonged period of consideration of his case file. The decision would have been made by the Politburo collectively because it was an internal party matter.

Dinh La Thang's rise was unexpected. He was not on the initial list of candidates approved by the Politburo for election at the 12th party congress. His name was put on the ballot and he won but not by an impressive majority of the vote. His elevation to the Politburo came as a surprise to many Vietnamese party members as did his unexpected appointment as party chief in Ho Chi Minh City. Thang was dismissed because he did not exercise effective control over a network of corrupt officials.

Nhan was appointed because he was one of the junior incumbents of the Politburo. No major reshuffle of senior posts was necessary. He did not blot his copybook as head of the Vietnam Fatherland Front and indeed gained valuable experience in working with mass organizations. Because of his previous service in Ho Chi Minh City his appointment was welcomed locally.

This assessment is not incompatible with the analyst you quote. Nguyen Tan Dung could operate individually because the office of the prime minister grew in importance within Vietnam's political system as Vietnam integrated into the global economy. The state bureaucracy that Dung commanded arguably grew more powerful than the party in everyday decision-making.

Nhan was not in a position of comparable power. Under the principle of democratic centralism he was free to express his opinions within the Politburo but bound by consensus once a decision had been made.

Q2. When the Central Committee voted on the matter in May, Nhan name's was just one of many considered. One source claims he was backed by Truong Tan Sang - who acts as a special adviser to party Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong. Nhan was

chosen because of his southern ties, which would allow the north to carry more say in the south (in effect, expanding the Party's reach) and because Nhan is seen by the public as one of the few "clean" Politburo members. What is your assessment?

ANSWER: Vietnam's 19-member Politburo had two choices: appoint one of the seven incumbent senior member or appoint one of twelve new members.

In the past, the top leadership was appointed to balance regions – north, centre, and south; in addition, the party secretaries of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City were given de facto slots on the Politburo. Over time regional considerations were blurred; in recent years the Politburo was once top heavy with southerners.

Nguyen Thien Nhan must have performed his duties as chair of the Vietnam Fatherland Front satisfactorily to be moved to Ho Chi Minh City. Nhan's southern ties would have enhanced his qualifications to head the party committee in Vietnam's largest city. I don't agree with the assertion that "the north" would be able "to carry more say in the south (in effect, expanding the Party's reach)." It is clear from Vietnam's political history that the Vietnam Communist Party, and its previous iterations, was the only political party in Vietnam to span three regions under French colonial rule. Seating on the Central Committee included representatives from the north (Tonkin), centre (Annam) and south (Cochinchina) from the very beginning.

Nhan's selection was to find the best senior party leader to head a bustling cosmopolitan city and implement the party's program. It also makes political sense to appoint a person familiar with the south. Nhan was born in Ca Mau about as far south as you can get. Besides, Vietnamese political culture values education and higher degrees, Nhan fits the bill and his father was a professor as well.

Q3. It has been reported that Truong Tanb Sang supported Truong Hoa Binh; and it seems that Nhan was the compromise choice.

ANSWER: Truong Hoa Binh is a new member of the current Politburo. He was born in Long An province south of Ho Chi Minh city and held local posts (police and procuracy) before being elevated to Deputy Minister of Public Security and then head of the People's Supreme Court in Hanoi.

Nhan as a compromise sounds eminently reasonable.

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