

# ACCOUNTABILITY OF GOVERNMENT AND THE ROLE OF THE PRESS IN THE PROCESS OF INTERNATIONAL INTEGRATION - EMERGING ISSUES FROM “VIETNAM 2035 REPORT”

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**Abstract:** *legal framework of Vietnam has created certain space for citizens to participate in governance processes. “Government of the people, by the people, for the people”, “people know, people discuss, people do and people check” are clearly stated in the Constitution; however, in reality there still exist gaps between these commitments and the actual participation of citizens in governance and restrictions on access to information, which are keys for people to express their voice about the government's accountability. Therefore, what is the role of the press and media in the government's accountability, how to facilitate the press and media to play a constructive role in the process of making Vietnam a prosperous, creative, fair and democratic country.*

**Keywords:** *governance process, actual participation of citizens, government's accountability, press, media.*

## ПОДОТЧЕТНОСТЬ ПРАВИТЕЛЬСТВА И РОЛЬ ПРЕССЫ В ПРОЦЕССЕ МЕЖДУНАРОДНОЙ ИНТЕГРАЦИИ - ВОЗНИКАЮЩИЕ ВОПРОСЫ ИЗ «ОТЧЕТА ВЬЕТНАМА 2035»

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**Аннотация:** *правовая база Вьетнама создала определенное пространство для участия граждан в процессах управления. «Правительство людей, Правительство людьми, Правительство для людей», «Люди знают, Люди обсуждают, Люди делают и Люди проверяют» четко прописаны в Конституции; однако в действительности все еще существуют разрывы между этими обязательствами и фактическим участием граждан в управлении и ограничениями доступа к информации. Это ключ к тому, чтобы люди высказывали свое мнение о подотчетности правительства. Следовательно, какова роль прессы и СМИ в подотчетности правительства, как помочь прессе и СМИ сыграть конструктивную роль в процессе превращения Вьетнама в процветающую, творческую, справедливую и демократическую страну.*

**Ключевые слова:** *процесс управления, фактическое участие граждан, подотчетности правительства, пресса, СМИ.*

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### **Vietnam's Vision until 2035**

In February, 2016, the Report “Vietnam until 2035: Towards prosperity, creativity, fairness and democracy” co-compiled by the Vietnamese Government and the World Bank was released. This is an important report about Vietnam in the next 20 years, after 50 years of Renovation (Doi moi). The report's suggestions were going to be addressed by the Vietnamese Government in its policy-making process, first of all in developing the 5-year plan for socio-economic development in 2016-2020 and preparing for the Strategy for socio-economic development 2020-2030. It mainly focuses on six important changes to be made by Vietnam in order to become a *high middle-income economy*. Along with the crucial aspects such as economic modernization, the development of innovative and creative capacity, the improvement of urbanization's effects, sustainable development, etc. the Vietnam 2035 Report emphasizes the need for a modern Rule of law with a comprehensive and integrative market economy and a democratic, highly advanced society. The reforms attached to these changes are included in three main pillars: *economic prosperity in conjunction with environmental sustainability; social fairness and integration; government's capacity and accountability.*

Regarding “government's accountability” itself, to assess the participation of citizens in policy-making and the mechanisms through which citizens can accurately and promptly access information related to the process, the Vietnam 2035 Report utilizes the World Governance Indicators with 6 key dimensions, which provides for

the understanding and measurement of institutional quality (governance quality). Generally, these indicators measure: *the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced; the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies; and the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them.* Among these indicators, Vietnam achieved the highest scores in political stability and government's effectiveness. However, Vietnam scored relatively low in two indicators, namely the degree of citizens' voice and state's accountability, in which it only ranked among the worst 10 countries, and compared to that of other countries its position has actually declined since 1996.

The idea behind the Vietnam 2035 Report is that countries with more open and tolerant political system are better prepared for innovation and creativity, and therefore can promote the improvement of productivity and living standards. As for Vietnam, finding a way to make its political system more open and accountable is becoming increasingly important. Apart from assessing the current government's accountability, the report points to another important task, which is *consolidating the role of mass media in promoting the government's accountability* [4, The "Main messages" section].

### **The press and government's "accountability"**

Before discussing about the role of the press and media in promoting government's accountability, it is necessary to decipher the essence of this concept. "Accountability" is a recently emerging concept used to refer to the transparency and integrity of agencies, organizations, units and at the highest level, the government in their activities. Accountability is closely related to responsibility. While "responsibility" refers to the tasks and task holders, accountability is larger in its scope. It helps address such questions as What? Why? Who? When? Where [2]?

Accountability is crucial to the working relationships between individuals, as well as those between an organization and the regulators and its public, and is especially important in the areas that involve public interest at large, e.g public policy or the use of public budget. Accountability is the acknowledgement of responsibility in every action, product, decision or policy during the process of task supervision, management and implementation; it is associated with reporting, explaining and justifying all of the consequences of the current and upcoming deeds. Accountability is understood as the capacity to provide adequate information, the ability to justify one's actions in the past and the future, and the recognition of punishment if such actions violated moral and legal rules.

The press fulfills its role and makes its impact on "government's accountability" through the following actions:

- *Create transparent information and raise the citizens' awareness:* The press and media are most useful in providing information on the policies, guidelines and legal regulations that concern every aspect of civil life. It is necessary for press agencies to effectively communicate information about the country's socio-economic, policy and legal situations, as well as the Party's leadership and State's management in the most concerning issues; promote dialogues and discussions among citizens and businesses. Article 4 of the Press Law also remarks: "Citizens are allowed to be informed by the press about every aspect of the country and the world", therefore the execution of the right to information and its effectiveness depend largely on whether the press and media can actively provide and disseminate an adequate amount of information even when there is no requirement. The press plays an important role in updating on a daily and hourly basis the instructions and activities of the Government, ministries, sectors, and in receiving feedback about all guidelines and policies to which necessary corrections and improvements will be made, and in helping citizens to disentangle the complex issues. For example, programs such as "*The Government and the people*" (VOV1), "*People ask – The Minister answers*" (VTV News and the Vietnam Government Portal)...have become "communicators" between the Government and its people, in order for the Government to "speak for the people" and "listen to them" at the same time.

- *Monitor the society and promote democratic behaviors:* The press encourages the interaction and increases citizens' participation in policy-making, thereby promoting democratic behaviors, and ensuring that citizens engage in state management. By directly tackling the most concerning social issues that attract the most attention from public opinion, the press is an important solution to resolving bureaucratic and corrupting behaviors and reforming the state apparatus; the press is indispensable for any state in incorporating its citizens' intellect into management activities and a prerequisite for successful integration into the world. It is also one of the effective measures to prevent and undermine corruption.

- *Advocate transparent information in a "proactive" and "interactive" way:* The need for "active" information from the press is mentioned in many legal documents, for example in Vietnam's Law on Anti-corruption that provides 07 ways to publicize the activities of agencies, organizations and units, including information published by the mass media and on Web sites. Different kinds of press have proven to be increasingly proactive and open, especially after a series of online dialogues on the Vietnam's Government Portal between the Government's members and their citizens, which received huge acclaim. This is considered an improvement of the press in proactively providing information for the public and ensuring its relevance to the Government and Prime Minister's instructions and guidelines.

- *Create a stimulus for “taking responsibility”*: In many cases, pressure from the public, usually reflected in the press and media, is what mainly drives the public authorities to take responsibility. What is interesting is to what degree social responsibility is publicly acknowledged and discussed by the press and media, and whether the public authorities adapt to their public’s pressure by performing their tasks in a responsible way.

- *Take offensive measures against “unofficial” and false information and prevent any “information crisis”*: A recent development is the fact that unofficial, even false pieces of information such as secret political documents and confidential stories of the officials and cadres, etc. have quickly spread and damaged the reputation of many national leaders [3]. Rumors about tsunami in Quang Ngai and earthquake in Quang Nam caused fear among millions of people. Many unofficial sources caused economic loss such as those that spread fear about certain kinds of food. If genuine information is adequately provided, there is no need for unofficial information that is unnecessary in an open and transparent environment. Problems related to unofficial information can cause citizens to distrust public authorities and the press, thus leading to excessive demand for information, such as when a large number of people signed on a petition to ask for information on the meeting at Beijing on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012 between Vietnam’s Deputy Foreign Minister Ho Xuan Son and his Chinese counterpart Zhang Zhijun, as well as Chinese State Councilor Dai Binggu, after unofficial sources were released by foreign newspapers [1]. This led to a counterargument that one of the reasons the citizens chose to access unofficial pages is because they had no other sources that provided them with accurate information about the current socio-economic situations in Vietnam, which resulted in “counter-effective” needs among the citizens for the government’s accountability.

- *Promote “the culture of accountability”*: Apparently, quite a few cadres and government officials consider transparent and open information as well as accountability a kind of “pressure” instead of a personal responsibility, and in no way do they consider public audition with the press a chance. Therefore, the proactive engagement and impact of the press on every aspect...to support the State agencies in creating a forum through which citizens can “inquire about” the most concerning issues is a big change. One of the relevant cases can be found in 2015, when for the first time the Ministry of Finance revealed sufficient details about how it determined the gasoline price, a few days after its leader had claimed to do so in the program “*People ask – the Minister answers*”. This move immediately received acclaim from the press and public opinion, not only because it was about a sensitive issue such as gasoline price.

#### **Improve the “autonomy” of the press and media**

Vietnam is a country of 90 million people, ranking 14<sup>th</sup> worldwide in terms of population, in which the middle class has been rapidly on the rise and increasing urbanization has brought great opportunities for the country. Its current economy of US\$ 200 billion will have reached US\$ 1 trillion by 2035 and over half of its population will be joining the global middle class in 2035 when its consumption rate reaches 15USD/day or higher, compared to nearly 10% today, which will create a new engine for economic growth. The rise of the middle class generates both opportunities and expected challenges. As citizens become more affluent, they tend to make more actual contributions to national governance, are inclined to generate a concrete impact on the process of public policy-making, and want more freedom (in economic, social and political terms) – what the citizens of developed countries are enjoying [4, c.19].

The widespread participation of the citizens in policy-making enables the synchronization of government’s policies and programs with the popular needs and aspirations. Any reform by the government without the participation of its public cannot produce fruitful results. The objective set forth by the Vietnamese government until 2035 is to create an effective check and balance system within the state and increase the citizens’ capacity in assessing its accountability. The press plays an important role during this process.

As indicated by the Report “*Vietnam until 2035: Towards prosperity, creativity, fairness and democracy*” co-created by the Vietnamese Government and the World Bank, the primary differences between low middle-income countries and high middle-income countries are reflected in their regulatory quality, rule of law and control of corruption. Improving the citizens’ voice and accountability also becomes more important as countries transit from a low income position to a higher one, although it is difficult to identify the exact time to make such an improvement and the nature of the said relationship. The development of citizens’ ability to monitor the government’s accountability is split into 3 basic contents, namely the *loosening of restrictions upon the scope of activities of popular social organizations* (based on the Law on Associations) and *increasing accessibility to accurate and timely information* (based on the Law on access to information), and most importantly *increasing the autonomy of the media*. The separation between state management and media governance, the encouragement rather than criminalization of citizens’ monitoring of civil responsibility to improve the quality of media, can open ways for various media to play a more constructive role in the process of making Vietnam a prosperous, creative, fair and democratic country.

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