State Reformation and Improvement – towards a Vietnamese State of Law

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Awareness and Improvement towards a Vietnamese State of Law

Adjusted awareness of the position and role of the state and of the Vietnamese Socialist state of law under new conditions is especially important. Our understanding of the state of law and of its development was made clear by the Party at the 2nd Plenum of the 7th Executive Committee (November 1991), and then was mentioned in successive speeches by the General Secretary of the Executive Committee Do Muoi at the 11th Plenum of the 8th National Assembly and the National Congress of judicial officials (August 10th 1992) in which he stated: “The development of a state of law is one of the central tasks in reforming the political system”. The statement was officially confirmed at the 8th National Congress of the Party (under article 3 on state construction and improvement):

“State construction and improvement must be performed on the basis of these points: (...) – Consolidate the legal system and develop a Vietnamese Socialist state of law.”

The construction of a socialist state of law in our country is also proposed and made clear. Document of the 3rd Plenum of the 8th Executive Committee (June 1997) confirms:

1 Do Muoi (1993), 143–149.
“Construction of a socialist state of law is a new mission (...) there are various tasks and experiences to be gained. But we are slowly developing our viewpoints and principles on the construction of a socialist state of law.”

Up to now, the Party Documents have proposed three main features of a Vietnamese socialist state of law:
- The state of law must ensure all civil rights. Its legislature, executive and judiciary must be of the people.
- Close supervision between the branches of power must be ensured to avoid abuse and exploitation of civil power.
- Human rights must be protected; the state is to serve popular sovereignty.
- The state of law must foster and generate substantive legal awareness among all public organs, organizations and individuals so that they abide by the constitution and law.

These viewpoints on the construction of a state of law are in conjunction with the general criteria in the world now. First of all, it is necessary to develop a strong mechanism that serves popular power, sufficient task allocation between power branches to ensure efficiency and effectiveness; and close supervision of state authorities to avoid abuse and exploitation of state power. Democratic centralism must be followed and socialist legislation must be consolidated. Also, society must be regulated by the law and moral education must be promoted. According to legal theory and practice, a state of law has four main features:
- (1) The state of law upholds and is regulated by the law and has appropriate mechanisms to ensure the supremacy of law.

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3 In many countries, a state of law is said to consist of the following elements: the state is legally bound, performs and ensures individual rights and freedom, applies the separation of powers and devise mechanisms to control power enforcement among different power branches.

4 See the first documents such as: Document of the 2nd Congress of the 7th Central Executive Committee (November 1991); speech by General Secretary of the Central Executive Committee at the 11th Plenum of the 8th National Assembly and in the National congress of judicial officials (August 10th 1992); Document of the 8th National People’s Congress of the Party (1997), Document of the 9th National People’s Congress of the Party (2001).
The first basic feature of a state of law is the supremacy of the law. Law is the basis for the organization and implementation of public power, which means that every policy and “command” of the state must be based on and serve the law, and all state-individual relations are also maintained by it. The state of law carries out its activities primarily on the basis of legislation and strictly follows it. This state makes clear and acknowledges that all state organs and public officials are bounded by the law, which means that their activities are based on their authorities and responsibilities as regulated by the law.

(2) The state of law ensures individual freedom and makes sure that the state and its citizens are equal in terms of their rights and responsibilities. Freedom, democracy and human legitimate interests must be protected by the state through legal measures.

The state of law must facilitate the protection of individual rights and freedom against the abuse of public authority. In civilized societies, the state is primarily and of necessity concerned with protecting human interests and rights. A state of law seeks to protect human freedom and respect the law and human rights. In legal terms, it means civil and public liberty is recognized and state interventions are minimized, and the state is subject to the law and thus has to adhere to it.

In a state of law, personal liberty, rights, interests, honor and dignity are protected, ensured and infrangible. Also, reciprocity between the state as the holder of political power and individuals who partake in its execution is emphasized. This reciprocity is based on the following principles:

- Individuals have the upper hand in their reciprocal relations with the state. This means that a state of law is supposed to serve individual interests. Its goal is to serve social and individual rights. State organs hold responsibilities (obligations) in relation to the people. They cannot ask the people to beg for these rights.

- Civil rights and liberties must be applied in realistic conditions.

- The supremacy of the law must be respected in the regulation of state-individual relations, and random, harmful or arbitrary decisions in policy-making and law enforcement must be minimized. Binding regulations are created to govern these relations.

- Administrative procedures to ensure civil rights are simplified.

- The state is supposed to serve the individual.
The state and its organs are liable for their violation of the law. To this end, judicial bodies and independence must be respected. Only courts can make decisions on legal disputes.

(3) In a state of law, state power is properly managed, the separation of powers between the legislature, executive and judiciary is clearly demarcated based on a checks and balances system to stabilize state power as a whole and produce popular power.

In the past, outdated thinking led Vietnam to disregard the separation of powers in favor of a centralized power, in which the National Assembly was endowed with absolute power. Other organs were not independent but were only part of the National Assembly and tasked with fulfilling its ongoing work, and at the same time were put under its supervision and management. The past showed that this method of organization was highly deficient. Since the 1992 Constitution, separation of powers has been included and introduced as a principle to ensure power coordination and distribution among the legislature, executive and judiciary.

(4) The state of law must ensure efficient review of the constitutionality and legality of public organs through such institutions as constitutional and administrative courts.

The state of law creates a review system to check the constitutionality of legal documents made by the legislature and the legality of decisions and documents made by the executive. This system is responsible for monitoring all three power branches, namely the legislature, executive and judiciary. The constitutional bodies (constitutional council, constitutional court) are even superior to the legislature. Constitutional review is highly developed and functional in countries where the state of law is taken as a basis for development goals. In general, the basic features of a state of law are supremacy of the law, the assurance and protection of human rights and the separation and balance of powers and responsibilities.

Before the Renovation Policy (1986), our Party never used the concept “state of law”, but the features and requirements of such a state had been recognized and clarified in its documents such as the 1946 Constitution, 1959 Constitution and 1980 Constitution and other specific legal documents. Since the introduction of the Renovation Policy (1986), Vietnam has commenced the construction of a state of law by specifying its requirements and features, studying and investigating vital institutions that enforce the state to obey the
law and respect democracy, that promote social administration based on the law, which eventually leads to a state of law of the people, by the people and for the people. Especially after the 5th Party Congress, ideas on the state of law have been regularly included in the Party’s documents,⁵ reflecting an ever more inclusive, rational and complete understanding of the state of law in human history and Marxist-Leninist and Ho Chi Minh’s viewpoints on the construction of a socialist state of law under the Party’s leadership.

The construction of a socialist state of law in our country is also proposed and made clear in various documents. The document of the 3rd Plenum of the 8th Executive Committee (June 1997) confirms: “Construction of a socialist state of law is a new mission (...) there are various tasks and experiences have to be gained. But we are slowly developing our viewpoints and principles on the construction of a socialist state of law.”

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These viewpoints on the construction of a state of law are in conjunction with the general criteria in the world now. First of all, it is necessary to develop a strong mechanism that serves popular power, sufficient task allocation between power branches to ensure efficiency and effectiveness; and close supervision of state authorities to avoid abuse and exploitation of state power.⁶ Democratic centralism must be followed and socialist legislation must be consolidated. Also, society should be regulated by the law and moral education should be promoted.

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⁵ See National Politics Publisher (1997), 36–40.
State Reforms towards a Socialist State of Law in Recent Years

The State’s Position and Role in the Political System

The amended constitution 2013 defines the role and position of our state as follows:

“The state guarantees and promotes the people’s right to mastery; facilitates the goal of prosperous people and a strong, democratic, just and civilized country, in which all people enjoy an abundant, free and happy life and are given conditions for their comprehensive development; and severely punish any act that goes against the interests of the motherland and its people” (Article 3). The role of our state is twofold: an instrument to promote the people’s mastery and lead them to a free, abundant and happy life and a guardian of the country that protects it against any act that infringes on the fatherland and people’s interests. This is a democratic and socialist state of law. It serves the working class along with workers and nations in the world. The state creates democracy among the people but is also vigilant of their enemies and any force that may threaten the fatherland.”

Utilization of the Separation and Balance of Powers in Managing State Power

In developing a state of law, in recent years our country has been conducting state reforms based on the criteria of state of law, including the principle:

“The state power is unified and delegated to state agencies which coordinate with and control one another in the exercise of the legislative, executive and judicial powers” (Document of the 11th Congress, 2011).

Since 1986, driven by the goal of constructing a Vietnamese socialist state of law, the organization and performance of state apparatus have seen fundamental changes in both quality and quantity. The organization and performance of each state body is consolidated and improved to fulfill the requirements and demands of comprehensive national renovation and international integration. The state is organized in accordance with the development of a socialist market economy and state of law under the Party’s leadership. The separation and coordination between state powers become more and more systematic, specific and consistent. The National Assembly is regarded as the highest state body which is given constitutional and legislative powers, decides on important issues for the country, and conducts the supreme oversight over the activities of the state. Its organization is perfected while its activities are improved and renewed. The government is the highest administrative body of the Socialist
Republic of Vietnam, and is the executive body of the National Assembly. The government manages the overall performance of political, economic, cultural, social, security tasks and foreign affairs of the state. Its organization and apparatus are gradually arranged and amended towards a more simple and effective performance by a focus on inclusive and important issues of the country. The judiciary and its court system are also enhanced. The organization and performance of judicial bodies see positive changes. Local authorities are also reformed to become less bureaucratic and formal to adapt to local circumstances at different levels. Most of the public servants and cadres are trained and improved in both political consciousness and professional skills so that they are able to complete their assignments; some of them have become mature enough to handle challenges and difficulties in the process of state reforms; their activeness and dutifulness have increased; most of them uphold political standards and become intimate with the masses; and they are conscious about following the law and general principles.

It can be said that the separation, coordination and control of state power in Vietnam in recent years have contributed to effective state’s activities; improved the quality of supervision and self-supervision of administrative bodies, the control of the supreme procurator and supervision of state organs by National Assembly and people’s councils and regular assessments of state organs, public servants and state employees by subsidiary bodies of the Fatherland’s Front and the people.

Reforms of the State Organizational Structure

The position of National Assembly as the highest representative body of the people and the highest state body of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is emphasized. The principles of people-based state power, democratic leadership and people’s creative power are adhered to. State power is unified and delegated to state agencies which coordinate with and control one another in the exercise of the legislative, executive and judicial powers. The organization of the National Assembly is increasingly reformed for better performance. Its permanent members increase and their quality also improves. The Ethnic Council and Committees are upgraded. The National Assembly’s Party and Unions have improved their leadership. The legislative has increased in both quality and quantity. Legislative procedures are increasingly revamped towards more
efficiency, better and faster law-making, more unity and synchronicity to better adapt to the state of law.

The administrative system and bodies are organized and divided more thoroughly than other state organs. The role and functions of government, ministries and people’s committees in the whole administrative system are redefined; and administrative bodies are rearranged to ensure more efficiency, simplicity and less bureaucracy. The organizational structure and membership of the government are also reformed. Ministries with similar functions are combined into multi-sector and multi-area departments. State agencies are reorganized so that no agency has to be involved in state management. In 1992, the government consisted of 23 ministries, ministerial-level agencies and 25 government-attached agencies with one prime minister, five deputy prime ministers, 25 Ministers; in 2002 there were 26 ministries and ministerial-level agencies and 13 government-attached agencies with one prime minister, three deputy prime ministers, 26 ministers and heads of ministerial-level agencies. Ministries’ tasks are relocated. Local authorities have been restructured according to administrative units by removing the people’s councils at some levels and reducing the number of departments, offices, committees and people’s committees at different levels (from 40 to 25 at the provincial level and from 20 to 10 at the district level). Responsibilities of individuals and groups working for administrative bodies are clearly defined on a collegial basis. Public services and public officials are retrained to be more specialized.

The organizational structure of the people’s court, people’s public procurement and public auditing groups are gradually improved and consolidated according to judicial requirements and their performance also increases. The quantity and quality of cadres, public officials and employees in the political system increases and they are better trained for state management and public services. Other policies such as wages, retirement benefits, insurance and privileges are regularly changed.

**Shortcomings, Weaknesses and Remaining Problems**

An important requirement in state reforms at central level (National Assembly, President, Government and judicial organs) is to follow the new principle of “unity of power” as demonstrated in the 11th National Congress of the Party Resolution: “state power is unified and delegated to state agencies which coordinate with and control one another in the exercise of the legislative, executive
and judicial powers” and as included in the mission of constructing a state of law. However, even after changes were added to the Amended Constitution 2013, the coordination, delegation and control between state agencies in the exercise of the legislative, executive and judicial powers are still limited without necessary “radical” changes to realize the above principle; in particular, mutual control, checking and supervision between power branches are not sufficient to help avoid power abuse. The unity of state power is currently limited to the National Assembly and People’s Councils, while the power of other agencies is not significant and mutual control between different agencies is inadequate (if not absent). The organizational structure of local authorities is still generic and stereotypical without specific partition according to administrative units (rural, urban, basic, intermediary levels) and self-governing and self-responsible authorities are not clearly defined.

The functions and organizational structure of the National Assembly’s agencies and government-attached ministries and departments are not clearly marked so that they can fulfil their role and power. The functions and responsibilities of judicial bodies, especially the People’s Public Procuration, are not fully made clear. The organization and membership of people’s court and people’s procuration are not relevant to judicial reforms. Urban and rural authorities are not clearly differentiated. A number of cadres and public officials and employees are not responsible and enthusiastic enough. The shrinking of political, ideological and moral standards among a large number of cadres and party members is serious and unsettling.

Many agencies still retain excess and overload personnel with too many nodes and intermediaries. The goal of personnel reduction is underperformed. Many cadres, public officials and employees are not ready to complete their new missions, especially in assessing theoretical and practical events based on which to give recommendation and feedback to central organs on strategic issues in socio-economy, security, politics and foreign affairs.

Administrative and judicial reforms drag on yet produce limited results, especially judicial reforms. Many cadres and public officials today are limited and deficient in many ways: their professional skills are not sufficient, especially foreign languages and IT skills, as well as knowledge of science and technology; their pro-activeness, receptiveness, and self-discipline are still low; their management and governing skills are not ample; some of them are even involved in corruption, misappropriation and embezzlement, and display biased
and irresponsible attitudes in performing public services, causing indignation among the people.

The relations between party and state are blurred. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the influence of the ruling party on state organs and emphasize the supremacy of the law to avoid arbitrary intervention of the Party into the affairs of state organs, overlapping responsibilities and disrespect for the law.

The construction and perfection of the legal system still lacks legal consciousness. Although various reforms in the legislature have been made after 30 years of renovation, the Vietnamese legal system is currently outdated and falls short of itself. Thus, it is necessary to change our legal thinking to cope with such issues as defining a proper legal model; studying and synthesizing domestic and foreign experiences in the construction and execution of legal institutions to gain valuable experiences of our own; amend legal procedures; and change our thinking on law-making by focusing more on regulations of smaller governing scope.

Although party and state have promulgated useful measures to combat corruption and abuse of power, these problems remain serious and relatively widespread. From an objective viewpoint, this reality results from the negative aspects of the market economy. On the other hand, the Party and State themselves are partly responsible for it by not being aware of the flipside of a socialist-driven market economy, and by not providing cadres and party members with necessary ideological training to respond to this situation. It is also caused by irresolute personnel management and slow realization of effective punitive measures, policies and mechanisms against officials who commit corruption. A number of public officers, including managers and leaders, are not committed to self-improvement on a regular and conscious basis, distance themselves from the masses and fail to rally other members in the political system and society into anti-corruption and anti-extravagance efforts.

Continue to Reform and Improve the State Apparatus and Develop a Vietnamese Socialist State of Law

The Conclusion no 64-KL/TW (February 28th 2013) of the 7th Congress of 11th Central Committee on some issues such as reforming and improving the political system from central to grassroots levels stated that: the reformation and
improvement of political system must go hand in hand with improving the
day’s leadership towards efficient and effective state management, and pro-
moting the people’s mastery. Political and social stability must be maintained
to serve national development in a new era. Political organizations must be
renewed and improved in accordance with economic restructuring. In addition,
this has to go in line with the renewal of the party’s leadership in a single-
party system, the construction of a socialist state of law, a socialist-oriented
market economy and international integration. State reformation and im-
provement must be associated with improving the functionality and profes-
sional skills of public officials and cadres. The relationship between collective
leadership and individual responsibility must be identified, and power must go
hand in hand with responsibility.

The development of a socialist state of the people, by the people, for the
people is crucial to modernizing the state and fundamental to promoting the
people’s mastery and ensuring that power belongs to them. The development
of a Vietnamese state of law is the continuation of developing a Socialist State
under new circumstances. The Vietnamese state of law is a state of the people,
by the people and for the people led by the Communist Party. State power
belongs to the people and rests on the coalition between working class, farmers
and intellectuals. The state of Vietnam helps foster a happy life and compre-
hensive and free development of human, protects human legitimate rights and
interests, and commits to international treaties on human rights to which Vi-
etnam is a member.

The role of the state is emphasized under the new political system. To effec-
tively perform its role within the new political system, the state has to be nec-
essarily revamped in every aspect. This urgent renovation is driven by many
factors, both subjective and objective, and most basic among which is the need
for a simple yet dynamic state apparatus that is able to quickly respond to
external events and social requirements, and ensure that development goals are
rightly and aptly pursued. More importantly, under the current situation of
Vietnam’s revolutionary path, an appropriate state model must be found so
that: one the one hand, such a state is a useful and pertinent instrument that
not only fulfils its assigned tasks and functions but also strengthens state order
and organization; on the other hand, it can ensure a democratic and energetic
society – in which freedom, equality, fraternity and human rights become
actualized. The more society is democratic, the more social relations, especially
political and power relations, become more complicated and less apparent, thus requiring strong organization and management and strict order imposed by the state. Freedom and democracy must be realized, respected and protected, and once their safety (security) is ascertained, no one (individuals or state organs) will dare to violate and threaten them.

The execution of state power must be fixed and direct democracy extended. The organization and enforcement of state power have to be performed in a democratic way, so that the state apparatus can be flexible, dynamic and relevant to everyday activities of civil society. Currently, the abuse of power and bureaucratization are not resolutely combated. In addition, irresponsible management, disregard for the law and state power, provincialism, sectarianism, petty individualism, disorganization and partisan “democracy” are immanent and likely to emerge given the right conditions.

To stabilize state-civil relations, necessary legal safeguards must be established so that citizens are not left out of (marginalized) state power relations. To this end, we must make sure that the state as represented by state organs is established on the basis of free will, through rational election of state officials in a democratic and objective manner. With regards to the state of law and civil society, liberal election is one of the most important instruments in making sure that the people’s will is embedded in state power. Elections (especially self-nomination and nomination – liberal, direct and public election contest) must bring voters and candidates closer. Mutual understanding between the voters and candidates empowers the former to make their right choice and encourage the latter to fulfill their responsibilities, obligations and expectations in relation to voters. What is required now is to reform the current election system so that election becomes an important political occasion, where citizens are aware of their mastery to choose rightful candidates, and where capable nominees engage in fair competition.

State reforms must abide by the principle of unity of power, in which state power is delegated to state agencies which coordinate with and control one another in the exercise of the legislative, executive and judicial powers. The organization of central state apparatus must be improved so that the position, functions, tasks and rights of each agency is properly and attentively assigned according to the principle of unity of power, in which state power is delegated to state agencies which coordinate with and control one another in the exercise of the legislative, executive and judicial powers as designated by the Document
of the 11th National Congress. The boundaries between the legislature, executive and judiciary must be clearly defined and so are their direct equivalents: National Assembly – the legislature, government – the executive, courts – the judiciary. The president is the head of state that links all three branches of power which coordinate and control one another at the same time. Regulations on the position and role of the National Assembly and the Government of Vietnam should be reworked.

Power control between state organs must be established and conducted more efficiently through specialized constitutional review. In constructing a state of law, to ensure that the state and society function within legal boundaries, the Constitution should be regarded as a vital document based on which the constitutionality of all other acts and legal documents is judged. In addition, the constitution should have a direct impact on the regulation of social relations, which means that it should be directly cited to establish civil rights and responsibilities. It has been often said that legal documents are the realization of the Constitution of Vietnam and sub-legal documents are the actualization of the laws. But the question remains: does the actualization of the constitution and the laws commit to constitutionality and legality? Similarly, do executive and judicial agencies enforce the law according to the constitution and the law? To make sure that the state does not fall into formalism, one of the important requirements is to protect the constitution and review the constitutionality of state agencies from the National Assembly to lower organs. This can be done through specialized constitutional review as stated in the “Resolution of the 10th Party Congress” (2006):

“The establishment of a system to address unconstitutional acts within the legislature, executive and judiciary.”

State reforms should focus on the following goals:
- (1) The role of National Assembly should be promoted and reformed. As the highest representative organ of the people, the highest state power organ, and fully responsible for constitutional making and legislation, the National Assembly should focus on the following three functions: legislation, deciding on important issues of the country, particularly on the basic principles of state organization and activities (including the appointment

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and dismissal of heads of senior state agencies), and supreme oversight over the activities of the state.

- (2) How to help other state organs maintain power control over the National Assembly which has been long defined as the “highest state power body” is what concerns us both theoretically and practically. Power control (primarily manifested in constitutional review) over not only the executive or judiciary as in the current Vietnamese political system, but also over the legislature and eventually all three power branches, must be carried out within constitutional boundaries.

- (3) However, the National Assembly’s activities, first and foremost law-making, while not entirely constitutional (if not highly likely to be unconstitutional), are not put under the supervision of any state organ but are self-regulated by itself, thus are probably not objective and appropriate. But to assign the supervision of any organ over the National Assembly would derail its position as “the highest state power body”. This is precisely the obstacle to the recent ideas of establishing constitutional bodies (such as Constitutional Council, Constitutional Court) for constitutional review of the National Assembly. If the constitution is emphasized and its protection is highlighted through constitutional review, it will be imperative to resolve this dilemma, namely the position of the National Assembly in relation to other state organs. As long as the National Assembly is still the highest state power organ that can intervene into constitutional, legislative, executive, judicial and supervisory activities, mutual power control and genuine constitutional review are still wishful thinking.

- (4) The judiciary must be given more independence so that it is less dependent on administrative bodies and more relevant to the law. A developed and efficient judicial system indicates a civilized and democratic state. This is one of the essential conditions for the protection of human rights and civil liberty and interests. A strong judiciary also contributes to a stable legal order and state control. As a component of the state of law and according to the principle of “mutual delegation, coordination and control between state organs” introduced by the Communist Party, the People’s Court must become a truly independent, neutral and impartial institution in protecting the rights of relevant parties. The court should assume all judicial responsibilities previously performed by other institutions in a trial-and-error manner (such as providing administrative sanctions and duties;
interpreting the law or legal documents to be handled to it), and extend its scope of jurisdiction. It must be an efficient mechanism that controls and restricts the legislative and executive through constitutional and legal initiatives. If this is realized, the one-sided supervision over judicial activities and organs by state power bodies as of now will be replaced by “mutual control” and management through public litigation and trials.

- (5) The People’s Public Procuration, from a body that “oversees legal observance by all organs of the Council of Ministers, state authorities at local level, employees of public organs and citizens” (Constitution 1959) to a body that “oversees legal observance by ministries and other organs of the Council of Ministers, local authorities, social organizations and people’s armed services, public employees and citizens, and launches public prosecution” (Constitution 1980) to one that “exercises prosecution right and supervises judicial activities” (amended and revised Constitution 1992), will be transformed into a Public Prosecution Office and given more responsibilities in the mentioned areas. This is a great step that reflects our Communist Party’s new thinking in political and state reconstruction in general and in judicial renovation in particular, driven by socio-economic objectives in a new context such as the state of law, international integration and more efficient and effective state’s performance. This is a rational and positive move in the long run. First, it liberates the public procuration from administrative functions (as supervisor of legal compliance and initiator of uniform and consistent legal observance) and helps it focus more on prosecution – which currently needs more improvement and attention. Second, this step is a requirement for state reformation and the state of law according to the principle of mutual control and coordination between legislative, executive and judicial powers. And finally, experiences of countries around the world, especially developed countries, show that such a transition is inevitable.

- (6) Local authorities need reforming to become more diversified, more self-governing and autonomous. The trial removal of people’s councils at district and provincial levels must be completed as soon as possible. The institutionalization of local agencies (People’s Council, People’s Committee, Administrative Committee, Mayor (if any) at all levels, especially at communal, ward and town levels must be implemented in conjunction with new requirements, situation and tasks. Anti-corruption and the prevention
of abuse of power to purify the state apparatus are decisive in improving the effect and efficiency of state management.

References


