

SOCIAL CRITICISM AND SOME SOLUTIONS FOR THE COORDINATION BETWEEN THE MUNICIPAL FATHERLAND FRONT AND AUTHORITIES TO REALIZE SOCIAL CRITICISM IN HANOI

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I. Social criticism and its characteristics

Social criticism (SC) or social counter-argument is a novel concept. Vietnamese dictionaries do not yet mention the concept of social criticism, except the concept of counter-argument. Counter-argument is as defined in Vietnamese dictionaries as *the deliberation, appraisal the quality of a scientific work by the Board of examiners or Board of project appraisal* (1, pg.764). Generally speaking, counter-argument is an activity, an essential need in the daily life, because owing to it people can remove false aspects and approach to rationality in making decisions and their acts; at the same time, it is a principal mean for researchers and scientists to get closer to the truth in science (2). This is also known as counter-argument in scientific research or scientific criticism or counter-argument (*).

Counter-argument in science needs to be undertaken in a logical manner and a step-by-step process, beginning with assumptions or hypotheses that will be accepted or rejected by studies and even practical tests. Overall, counter-argument in science is a comprehensive evolving process, from commenting, assessing, appraising and evaluating by scientific methods. Social criticism is also a scientific activity (2) and embraces sharing characteristics of counter-argument in science, but it is of a wider scope and more complicated nature with broader participation.

One remarkable feature of any counter-argument activity is democracy. Social criticism is the broadest democratic activity, because it engages the broadest participation – all citizens. In other words, social criticism is of profound societal nature (by public participation),

(*) Using the term 'counter-argument in scientific research' is to differ it with the term 'scientific counter-argument'. Scientific counter-argument is meant a method of counter-argument, rather than an area or field in which counter-argument is applied. Naturally, any

counter-argument is scientifically made, meaning that it must be logistical, evidence-based rather than by individually arbitrary arguments.

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political significance; the most typical character of a democratic life; a reflection of realized political power, enhanced democracy and people's power (2, 3). As of its profoundly societal and political significance, subjects of social criticism must be matters of national, institutional importance and deep impact on all citizens living in the territory of Vietnam. Those matters are related to policies, lines, guidelines and laws of the Party and State of Vietnam. Social criticism is made equivalent to the matter arising at each level. And, to undertake social criticism as such, there is no other institution rather than the Fatherland Front of Vietnam (FFV) as the organization assembling the great national unity bloc can accomplish the exercise.

There are possible five essential characteristics of social criticism, which are as follows:

- *Legitimacy*: Social criticism attracts a great deal of participating people. It not only gets scientists, practitioners involved in, but also inspires the public – an enormous force of society – to contribute their opinions (3). It is this full participation that social criticism is deemed the voice of majority. This on the other hand indicates high democracy in counter-argument activities. Hence, policies and guidelines, decisions or legal documents that are made upon social criticism will enjoy legitimacy and high feasibility as the voice, the will and aspirations of the public are reflected in these documents.
- *Inclusiveness*: Social criticism is of profound societal nature, drawing participation of different sectors in society. Thus, social criticism can reflect views and interests of various social groups and circles. There are of course undeniably antagonistic views.
- *Professionalism*: Social criticism is a critical activity of high scientific quality. Counter-argument is not merely unilateral commenting, but reciprocity. One makes comments, contributes ideas and even criticizes; the other takes note, listens and feedbacks. And, in this process, there arises *counter-argument of counter-argument*.
- *Politick*: The politick of social criticism is demonstrated by responsibility of the populace to engage in state and social management when they make and contribute their opinions to the development of lines, guidelines, policies and laws of the Party and State. The country and nation are ours, thus everyone has the right and obligation to engage in developing and making the lines, directions and policies for the country's development and renaissance. It was the people who had sought measures and directions which were summarized and institutionalized by the Party, making them be the renewal policy of the country.
- *Being well-organized*: Where social criticism is acknowledged as effective, there must be social consensus that is based on well-organized activities. The organizing of social criticism is that one legitimate agency or organization like the Fatherland Front compiles opinions of the public and the constituents, from

which it will select the most common idea presented by the majority. Taking for granted this most common idea, applying scientific and analytical methods, the agency or organization on behalf of the majority will contribute its inputs to the development and making of major lines, guidelines, policies and laws of the Party and State in relation to the country's development.

II. Social criticism activities in Hanoi

Social criticism activity in Hanoi takes place vividly and under different forms. Over the past years, the people of Hanoi or Hanoians have proactively participated in contributing opinions and even making critical comments on policies, programmes and development projects in the area of Hanoi as well as of the country. This is the social criticism activity carried out by Hanoians, though the concept is still unfamiliar and abstract to many people. Nevertheless, the matter does not lie in the concept itself, but its nature and implementation. The fact shows that social criticism activity by Hanoians takes places in the following forms:

- *Contact with constituents;*
- *Soliciting comments on legal normative documents and major directions and guidelines of the Party, State and the municipal authorities;*
- *Dialogues in residential areas;*
- *Mass media channels; and*
- *Through Hanoi municipal Fatherland Front and mass organizations.*

In the context of increasing development of the country, the need for expanded working and living space, urbanization

is taking place as an unavoidable trend. Related to this trend are the issues of land clearance, construction of road, houses and other such auxiliary structures as recreational complexes. All of these issues are placed in the relation between administrative decisions made by competent authorities and the rights, interests and aspirations of the populace. In other words, the making of a decision must be taken into account whether or not it can guarantee the rights, interests and be commensurate with aspirations of the people. Because, taken together in the end, in a state of the people, by the people and for the people, every decision must be made for the interest of its people. To that end, it is radically important for authorities to listen attentively to the people's voices, including those are itching your ears. However, critical voices of the people are not always heard. The fact shows that a decision that wins the people's heart will be supported and successfully taken by the people in the end.

It can be said that in the past few years, the Hanoi municipal Fatherland Front has proactively contributed its opinions and recommendations to various major issues with the Party and State; to resolutions, plans, policies, programmes and significant projects initiated by the municipal Party Committee, People's Council and People's Committee. Hence, the Hanoi municipal Fatherland Front has paid a great deal of attention to the soliciting of comments and opinions from people living in the city on issues that are not only taking place, but also those are of strategic manner in

relation to development of the country and the city. The Hanoi municipal Fatherland Front also becomes a bridge connecting different strata of people in the Capital city with leaders of the municipal People's Council, People's Committee and the Hanoi Delegation of National Assembly Deputies by organizing dialogues and contacts. Additionally, contacts and dialogues between the sectors of home affairs, health, electricity in the city and people in the city are arranged by the Hanoi municipal Fatherland Front. Below are some sample social criticism activities led by the Hanoi municipal Fatherland Front.

The first example is the project for construction of a 64-storey complex of hotel, commercial centre and high-luxury apartments in the Capital's Tuổi Trẻ (Youth) Park. Though the project was approved and under preparation for its implementation, having received rejections from the public (by critical comments of people, scientists rather than demonstrations), the Hanoi municipal People's Committee temporarily suspended the project for further deliberation. On 9 January 2009, the People's Committee issued the Decision No.89/2009 on the adjustment of detailed planning of the Tuổi Trẻ Park, making it be a centre for recreational activities of the Capital's youth (5). The decision of the People's Committee immediately won the endorsement of the people. This incidence brought in two things. Firstly, it was the attribute as well as the management capacity of the leadership of Hanoi municipal People's

Committee when they learnt truth from the fact, listened to critical comments of the people and corrected boldly mistakes for the benefit of not only one but many generations of the people of the Capital city. Secondly, it clearly demonstrated the power and worth of social criticism. Comments by one individual may come from his or her private interests, but when the entire society raises its voice then it is no longer the matter of a single private person.

Another example, which is also related to hotel construction in a park, the 4-star hotel known as Novotel Hanoi on the Park, covering a major area of Thống Nhất (Reunification) Park. The project was approved by a construction licence granted back in 1991. However, it could not have been implemented due to various reasons, especially as of critical comments by architects, scientists as well as resolute reactions from the community of residents in Hanoi, people around the country, overseas Vietnamese and even foreigners (6). Concerns raised in critical comments by the people were: the average standard of a public area covered by green trees in Hanoi was too low, less than 1.2m²/person; the land area of the public park should not be cut down for the construction of a commercial hotel, while it should be expanded with larger green coverage, creating more clean and clear space in the city as it had been done in some places. The construction of a hotel in the Thống Nhất Park was not commensurate with the master plan of Hanoi, which had been approved by the Prime Minister's Decision No. 108/1998/QĐ – TTg dated on 26 June

1998, as well as the detailed planning of the Thống Nhất Park (notably, the pre-2000 detailed planning was not suitable; while the new plan was not yet available. In 2007, the Hanoi Architecture Planning Department was requested to submit an adjusted detailed planning of the Thong Nhat Park, which was not yet approved by the municipal authorities); the approval for construction of Novotel Hanoi on the Park was not compatible with the due process, procedures as prescribed in such laws as: Land Law, Construction Law, Law on Investment, etc. Finally, before approving an investment project, the investment owner and the municipal construction planning authority had not held consultations with the community as provided in the Construction Law, the Ordinance on Implementation of Democracy at Commune, Ward and Township level, or with the municipal Architecture Planning Council (6). And, facing very tough critical comments of the public, the Prime Minister had requested suspension of the hotel construction and concerned agencies to select and recommend another venue for the investor (7). This decision won the people's heart. That the Hanoi municipal People's Committee took the Prime Minister's decision in a serious manner also drew positive reactions from all strata of Hanoians. The incidence again proved significance and worth of social criticism.

There remain numerous examples on social criticism activities in Hanoi against programmes, projects and major policies on development of the city, such

as the "Golden Hanoi" by the Hoàn Kiếm Lake, the Commercial Centre 19/12, the EVN building by the Hoan Kiem Lake, etc. Lessons learnt from social criticism activity reaffirm one thing that counter-argument is not synonymous with condemnation, boycott or more seriously demonstration. It is because if counter-argument is undertaken under those forms, it will lead to conflict and opposition. While scientific social criticism will contribute to common development, the making of political decisions, directions and policies that win the people's heart.

III. Solutions for the coordination between the Hanoi municipal Fatherland Front and authorities to realize social criticism in Hanoi

Hanoi municipal Fatherland Front is an integral part of the national system of Fatherland Front of Vietnam. Hence, pursuant to provisions in the Law on the Fatherland Front of Vietnam, it is possible to construe that Hanoi municipal Fatherland Front is a component of the entire political system of the city, under the leadership of the municipal Party Committee; the political basis of the people's government; an organization that represents the will and aspirations, assembles the great unity bloc of the entire population of the city, brings into play the right of the people of Hanoi to be masters; a venue where consultations are held for coordinated and agreed actions by members to carry out successfully the modernization and industrialization drive in the area of the Capital, contributing together with

people in all parts of the country to the goal of building a strong country with prosperous people, a just, democratic and advanced society. Taken all aspects into account, the Hanoi municipal Fatherland Front is the only organization that can realize the social criticism function in the city, complying with the characteristics of social criticism and ensuring concurrently high consensus in society. As such, on what can the Hanoi municipal Fatherland Front undertake social criticism? And, how can it coordinate with the municipal authorities to realize that function?

The Hanoi municipal Fatherland Front has its network down to the grassroots level. Thus, within the united system of the Fatherland Front of Vietnam, the Fatherland Front at all levels is entrusted with two functions, namely monitoring and social criticism, as stated in the Resolution of the 10th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (2006). And, it is reasonable from the organizational perspective that the Fatherland Front at one level can only undertake social criticism activities in the same level. Therefore, social criticism activities of Hanoi municipal Fatherland Front will concentrate on guidelines, policies, legal normative documents, decisions, programmes and projects in the area of the city. This also complies with the draft amended Statutes of the Fatherland Front of Vietnam, which is being published for comments (8, 9).

Social criticism activities of Hanoi municipal Fatherland Front against the above-suggested issues can be

undertaken in two stages: drafting (formulating) a policy paper, legal normative document, programme or project, and implementation. In both stages, constructive coordination between the Fatherland Front and municipal authorities is of paramount importance. This coordination must commence from mutual consciousness of responsibility and obligation. For the municipal authorities, listening to critical comments of the Fatherland Front is meant to ensure the voices of people and constituents of Hanoi are heard. By doing that, every policy and rule adopted by the municipal authorities is a combination of the will of the authorities and the heart of the people. For the municipal Fatherland Front on the other hand, as the basis of the people's government, its social criticism activities must be undertaken in an active and proactive manner with a view to ensuring the rights and interests of the people. The fact has shown that comments submitted by the municipal Fatherland Front have contributed to making the legal normative documents, guidelines and policies of the municipal authorities closer to the practice, meeting the legitimate aspirations of the people (10).

To bring the role of the municipal Fatherland Front in social criticism into full play in both the two stages, it is necessary to establish a coordinating mechanism between the Fatherland Front and authorities of the city. Over the past years, the Fatherland Front, the People's Council, the People's Committee, and the Hanoi Delegation of

National Assembly Deputies have jointly developed annual coordination work plans. The report on coordination between these parties in 2008 mentioned some of the outcomes as follows:

- having organized successfully six sessions of the municipal People's Council. Contents of each session were deliberated, selective and agreed with high consensus among concerned parties. The preparation, appraisal of reports, submissions, draft resolutions of the People's Council were carefully made, closely coordinated in due process; resolutions adopted by the People's Council reflected correctly the concerns, urgent issues in response to the practical needs of the city.
- having coordinated effective monitoring in such fields as: law compliance, implementation of tasks for socio-economic development, settlement of complaints, denunciations, pressing well-fare issues, repeated recommendations by constituents, progress of projects implementation, the construction of structures for 1000-year anniversary celebration of Thang Long-Hanoi; the implementation of regimes, policies in Hanoi. Attention was also drawn to the realization of conclusions after monitoring missions, settlement of complaints and denunciations by citizens; emphasis was placed on the handling of outstanding recommendations, complaints and petitions, preventing these issues from becoming hot spots and causing discontent in the public.
- having continued to renew the form of contact between deputies of the National

Assembly and delegates of the municipal People's Council with the public in line with legal provisions. Dialogues, contacts between leaders of the People's Council, People's Committee, Committee of the Fatherland Front, and the Hanoi Delegation of National Assembly Deputies with different strata of people in the Capital have been enhanced. Meetings with constituents in such sectors as home affairs, health and electricity; or thematic conferences for constituents on solutions, regimes and policies for socio-economic development in the city following Vietnam's admission to the World Trade Organization (WTO), financial assistance for the Fatherland Front, People's Inspector Board, mass organizations in communes, wards and towns, assistance for stabilization of life, education, vocational training and employment for households in converted agricultural lands, have been organized.

- having brought into play democracy, proactively involved in Party building, making authorities at all levels strong and clean, development of draft laws, policies of the State and the City. The regulation "The Fatherland Front of Vietnam supervises public servants and officials, party members in their residencies", the statue on community investment monitoring, have been effectively implemented. Political campaigns have been launched to propagandize the National Congress of the Fatherland Front of Vietnam; reviews of the implementation of the Law on the Fatherland Front of Vietnam

in the 1999-2008 periods were conducted. Congresses of the Fatherland Front at local levels were successfully convened in the run up to the 15th Congress of the Municipal Fatherland Front and the 7th National Congress of the Fatherland Front of Vietnam. Confidence votings were also organized for key titles elected by the commune or ward People's Councils. These activities have contributed to raising awareness of the building of a great unity bloc of the entire population, the role and status of the Fatherland Front of Vietnam.

Notwithstanding to the above-mentioned achievements, the report also indicated some issues to which more attention should be drawn. For instance, a coordinating mechanism should be soon established to improve the quality and efficacy of public service and handling of communications, complaints, denunciations; coordination in organizing meetings for deputies of the National Assembly, delegates of the municipal People's Council with constituents needs to be enhanced; quality of response to recommendations by constituents, answers by delegates of the municipal People's Council (clearly indicating viewpoints, responsibility, solutions and handling roadmap) needs to be further improved; a plan to bring into full play the role of the Fatherland Front and people in social criticism should be agreed; every six months, affiliate offices of the People's Council, People's Committee, Committee of the Fatherland Front, and the Hanoi Delegation of National Assembly deputies jointly conduct a review of the

implementation of the coordination programme signed by these parties.

One can see that coordination between the Fatherland Front and municipal authorities has exerted in positive achievements in bringing into play democracy, drawing participation of the people, though in reality the role of the Fatherland Front in social criticism in this coordinating mechanism remains vague and doom. Furthermore, none specific plan of where and how the Fatherland Front can realize its role of social criticism or how its critical comments are taken and handled is not yet made. It is understandable that the role of social criticism of the municipal Fatherland Front is limited due to certain reasons, including the unfamiliarity and inadequate understanding of the concept of social criticism by the Fatherland Front staffs. There was no single word about social criticism in the Report on the implementation of coordination programme 2008 between the Fatherland Front, the People's Council, the People's Committee and the Hanoi Delegation of National Assembly Deputies, and in the Summary Report on performance of the municipal Fatherland Front in the 2004-2009 tenure submitted to the Congress of the municipal Fatherland Front in 2009-2014 tenure. Social criticism by the Fatherland Front was only mentioned in the action programme of coming period and tenure (10).

Having reviewed the practice in the past years, tasks set out for the coming period, particularly when the Fatherland Front at all levels are making necessary preparations for their congresses in the

run up to the 7th National Congress of the Fatherland Front of Vietnam, with a view to bringing the role of social criticism of the municipal Fatherland Front into play, below are some recommendations need to be done.

- First, as social criticism is still a novel concept, thus understanding of its nature as well as significance among Fatherland Front staffs, the people and even officials in mass organizations, administrative agencies and party organs is inadequate. Hence, it is important to boost propagation, education and awareness raising for the whole political system and the people living in the Capital city of the implication, significance and worth of social criticism in bringing democracy, particularly grassroot democracy, into play in a country where one and only one political party is in power.

- Second, it is necessary to enhance capacity building for staffs of the municipal Fatherland Front, who are strong in profession, good in scientific thinking, close to the people and getting more contact with the people in order to understand their ideas, concerns and aspirations. They must also be able to, having analyzed public opinions, make good recommendations to the municipal Party Committee, the People's Council, the People's Committee on those issues of concern of Hanoi people and constituents in relation to development of the Capital in particular and of the country in general.

- Third, social criticism is an independent activity, differing from appraisal or evaluation. The Fatherland

Front is the basis of people's government, being under the leadership of the Party. In the meantime, it is a common desire that the Fatherland Front should make critical comments on "drafts, guidelines, resolutions of the Party; policies, laws of the State on radical issues of the country" (Draft amended Statutes of the Fatherland Front of Vietnam). Thus, to realize this role, it is necessary to establish a mechanism that can ensure independence in social criticism-making by the Fatherland Front. For instance, the Fatherland Front should be provided with a budget; be entitled to involve in and to make critical comments to Party and governmental agencies.

- Fourth, it is imperative to adopt a legal normative document on social criticism by the Fatherland Front at all levels, and if necessary a law on social criticism should be promulgated. However, the promulgation of these legal normative documents or the law needs to be undertaken in line with the adoption of new legal documents or amendment to existing provisions pertaining to the access to information, referendum, grassroot democracy in order to ensure consistency of legal documents, otherwise adopted documents can not be implemented in reality. Bearing upon the existing coordination relations between the Fatherland Front, agencies of the Party, the National Assembly, the Government, the People's Council and the People's Committee, it is recommendable that a coordination regulation should be adopted to bring into play the role of social criticism of

the Fatherland Front at equivalent levels. For Hanoi, the municipal Party Committee needs to guide the Fatherland Front, the People's Council and the People's Committee to work together to develop a mechanism that can promote this role of the municipal Fatherland Front.

- Fifth, to bypass the situation where critical comments are "put in the drawer" or "not heard by responsible persons" (7), the legal normative document prescribing the role of social criticism of the Fatherland Front needs to clearly define the responsibility to take note of, listen to, explain or respond to critical comments by the Fatherland Front before the people; at the same time, it also specifies the accountability of the Fatherland Front to the people concerning the result arising from its critical comments on behalf of the people to the Party and governmental agencies. In Hanoi, reports on the performance of agencies and organizations, from the highest agency which is the municipal Party Committee to the Fatherland Front must include contents concerning social criticism activities and results, or even if necessary a separate part on social criticism activities by each level and organization.

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