

"Agile government" model and policy insights for Vietnam in the new context

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● **Abstract:** This article analyzes the urgency of flexible governance in the context of a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA)⁽¹⁾ world due to strategic competition and non-traditional security challenges. Based on the systematization of the theory of the "agile government" model, the article explains the characteristics, constituent elements and levels of flexibility of the government. Thereby, it proposes five groups of breakthrough policies to contribute to shaping the Vietnam's national governance institutions in the 14th Party Congress Document, in order to realize the strategic goals for 2030 and the vision toward 2045.

● **Keywords:** "Agile government" model; adaptability.

1. Introduction

The United Nations Human Development Report 2021-2022 clearly indicated that the era facing nations is "An era of uncertainty, insecurity, building the future in a changing world"⁽²⁾, characterized by VUCA. In this context, challenges occur with increasing frequency and intensity. The Covid-19 pandemic, strategic competition among major powers, Industrial Revolution 4.0, climate change... can wipe out all human effort and accumulated achievements as well as the economic growth of localities and countries over many years, etc. These factors do not exist separately but resonate with each other, posing unprecedented challenges to the governance capacity of all nations.

Traditional public administration models are increasingly revealing their limitations: the rigid Weberian model of public administration, the fragmented New Public Management (NPM) model. Innovative approaches such as New Public Governance (NPG) or Public Value Management (PVM) lack speed and adaptability in the face of crises. A common limitation of these models is their tendency to react rather than proactively anticipate and shape the future.

Vietnam is facing a major challenge in setting the goal of becoming a developed, high-income country by 2045⁽³⁾, while institutional, infrastructure, human resource "bottlenecks"

and the mentality of “fear of making mistakes” and “fear of responsibility” still exist. In this context, studying the “Agile government” model is not only of academic significance but also urgently needed in practice. To achieve this goal, this article focuses on analyzing three aspects: (1) What is the nature and core components of an “Agile Government”? (2) What is the current state of Vietnam’s adaptability and what are the biggest obstacles? (3) What policy breakthroughs are needed for Vietnam to realize its strategic goals by 2030 and 2045?

2. Content

2.1. Perspectives on the “agile government” model

The concept of “agile” originates from the field of software development, formalized in the “Agile Software Development Manifesto” in 2001⁽⁴⁾. This manifesto emphasizes individual and interactive values over processes and tools; software that works better than complete documentation; customer collaboration over contract negotiation; and responsiveness to change rather than adherence to a plan.

Agile thinking has expanded from the technology sector to corporate governance and the public sector to meet the rapidly changing needs of society. However, the “agile government” model is not simply a mechanical copy of the private sector’s Agile methodology, but rather an adaptation to the specifics of public governance and the goal of serving the public interest, focusing on risk management, innovation, and rapid adaptation to change. This requires not only a change in methodology but also a revolution in the organization’s thinking and culture.

The term “agile government” is increasingly used in public administration, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, when many countries were forced to shift from traditional governance models to adaptive, flexible models that prioritize innovation in policymaking and governance. While there is no single, commonalities in research suggest that an “agile government” is a state model capable of responding quickly to environmental changes, adjusting strategies and governance tools promptly, while simultaneously promoting innovation, enhancing adaptability, and mobilizing resources from diverse stakeholders to address complex issues.

In essence, this model requires a dual innovation: (1) Innovation in work processes, shifting from a linear, rigid approach to an iterative, experimental, and continuous adjustment approach; (2) Innovation in organization, from a hierarchical, silo-based structure to a flexible network, enhancing interdisciplinary coordination and the participation of many stakeholders. The ultimate goal is to create public value in the fastest, most efficient way, closely aligned with the actual needs of society⁽⁵⁾.

2.2. Key characteristics and pillars constituting flexibility and levels of flexibility in governance of the “agile government” model

Firstly, the major features

(1) Interdisciplinary cooperation and diverse stakeholders. Flexible governance requires operation based on a network of cooperation and decentralization among state agencies, local governments, businesses, and social organizations, while encouraging data and resource sharing.

Flexibility must be institutionalized through project budgets, legal processes and controlled legal testing mechanisms (regulatory sandbox). At the same time, establish a public administration system operating on the principles of decentralization, empowerment and accountability.

(2) People and businesses are at the center. Instead of building policies and services based on the subjective assumptions of managers, the flexible method is based on actual needs and continuous interaction with people and businesses.

(3) Data-driven decision-making. Flexibility does not mean arbitrariness. All adjustment and change decisions must be based on real-time evidence and data, performance indicators and controlled pilot programs to quickly adjust policies and operations.

(4) Iteration and experimentation. Instead of trying to build a perfect plan from the start (which is not feasible in the VUCA world), “agile government” embraces a “trial and error” approach with controlled risk. This model views policy experimentation failures not as mistakes but as part of the public service improvement cycle.

(5) Delegation of responsibility. Delegating authority to individuals and organizations for implementation with clear objectives, risk control and accountability mechanisms.

(6) Transparency and accountability. Publicly disclose standards, results, ethical framework and risk governance mechanisms.

Secondly, the pillars that constitute flexibility capabilities

(1) Leadership and culture. Leaders must shift their role from “directing - controlling” to “supporting - empowering”. An organizational culture needs to be built that encourages innovation, accepts (controlled) risks and sees failure as an opportunity to learn, creating a safe environment for implementers to work confidently for the common good, instead of the fear of making mistakes when doing something new.

(2) Institutions and processes. Flexibility must be institutionalized through project budgets, legal processes and controlled legal testing mechanisms (regulatory sandbox). At the same time, establish a public administration system operating on the principles of decentralization, empowerment and accountability.

(3) Technology and data. Technology is an essential tool for flexibility. Digital platforms must be highly interoperable, allowing data to be shared seamlessly, breaking down data fragmentation. Open data infrastructure and application programming interfaces (APIs) are key to promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and co-creation with society.

(4) Human resources. This is a decisive factor in the success of the model transformation. Civil servants need to have innovative thinking, digital skills, the ability to solve complex problems, critical thinking, teamwork and interdisciplinary cooperation.

Thirdly, levels of flexibility

(1) Strategic flexibility: this is the highest and most difficult level,

demonstrating the nation's ability to forecast major trends, identify opportunities and threats, and proactively adjust its vision, strategy and national development model (... deciding to change the growth model...).

(2) Operational flexibility: this is the most basic level, demonstrated by the ability to improve and streamline daily public service delivery processes (for example, shortening the time for granting permits, deploying online public services, handling specific situations...).

(3) Structural flexibility: demonstrated by the ability to quickly restructure the apparatus, establish/dissolve organizations to solve emerging problems without being bound by the existing organizational structure.

2.3. The practice of governance under the “agile government” model in Vietnam and policy suggestions for the Party’s 14th Congress Documents

The period 2021-2025 serves as a prime example demonstrating national governance capacity and simultaneously reflects both the bright spots and systemic “bottlenecks” in Vietnam’s public administration.

Firstly, strategic flexibility in crisis response

The decision to shift from a “Zero Covid” strategy to a “Safe, flexible adaptation and effective disease control” strategy, as outlined in Resolution No. 128/NQ-CP dated October 11, 2021, is a prime example. Faced with the evolving Covid-19 virus variants and increasing socio-economic pressure, Vietnam “dared to change” a fundamental direction, accepting risks to reopen the economy and avoid widespread disruption.

From the end of 2024 to the beginning of 2025, the Politburo issued a “four-resolution set”⁽⁶⁾ to create a unified orientation framework for strategic thinking and action for the country’s development in the new period. This is also a testament to Vietnam’s ability to quickly transform its strategic state to adapt to changing circumstances.

Secondly, flexibility in macroeconomic management

In the context of the world experiencing an inflation “storm” (many economies recorded inflation at 8-10%), along with geopolitical instability and increased strategic competition among major countries, the Government and the State Bank have shown considerable proactiveness and flexibility in coordinating fiscal and monetary policies. This proactiveness has helped stabilize the macroeconomy, keeping inflation under 4.5% (average inflation in 2023 increased by 3.25%⁽⁷⁾, in 2024 increased by 3.63%⁽⁸⁾) and maintaining the growth recovery momentum.

Thirdly, structural flexibility in reforming the state administrative apparatus and personnel

Regarding the state administrative apparatus, Vietnam has implemented a strong reform to build a streamlined, compact, strong, efficient, effective, and streamlined apparatus. In 2025, the entire political system underwent a comprehensive and profound transformation, with the emphasis on transitioning from a 3-tier local government to a 2-tier government from July 1, 2025⁽⁹⁾. Prior to that, the pilot implementation of the urban government model in some localities and the rearrangement of commune-level administrative units were carried out. These decisive “steps” demonstrate the determination to restructure the apparatus towards a more flexible and streamlined direction.

Regarding personnel, during the period 2021-2025, the deployment, rotation, and restructuring of strategic-level personnel were carried out with high frequency. This reflects the adaptability and political determination in arranging personnel according to the principle of “promotion and demotion”, “entry and exit,” to meet new task requirements, while resolutely addressing violations.

Fourthly, efforts towards flexible operations based on technology

The strong political will is demonstrated through the implementation of Project 06, as per Decision No. 06/QĐ-TTg dated January 6, 2022, of the Prime Minister approving the Project on developing applications of population data, identification, and electronic authentication to serve national digital transformation in the period 2022-2025, with a vision to 2030. The establishment of the National Population Data Center shows initial efforts in transitioning to a real-time, data-driven decision-making model. The “digital literacy” movement, with the participation of the entire political system, also demonstrates the preparation of digital capabilities for citizens and civil servants to adapt to the national digital transformation process.

During the period 2021 - 2025, Vietnam demonstrated high flexibility in governance. The Government report assessed: “That success reflects the flexible governance capacity of the Government, the cooperation of businesses and the trust of the people”⁽¹⁰⁾.

Despite its positive aspects, the flexibility of public administration in Vietnam still has some shortcomings:

Firstly, the institutions are still rigid. The legal system still has contradictions, overlaps, and lacks foresight. Annual reports of the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) point out the conflict and inconsistency between core laws such as: Investment Law, Land Law, Real Estate Business Law... which are barriers to development for businesses⁽¹¹⁾. The process of amending these laws (amended Land Law) took many years with dozens of sessions, showing the difficulties of the apparatus in achieving institutional consensus, slowing down the speed of policy response.

Secondly, organizational culture and the “fear of making mistakes” mentality. A substantial number of officials and civil servants hold “fear of making mistakes” and “fear of responsibility” mentalities. This is frankly pointed out in the Government’s resolutions⁽¹²⁾. This mentality is an “antibody” that destroys all seeds of innovation and the “dare to experiment” mindset.

Thirdly, data “fragmentation”. Although Project 06 is a breakthrough, data “fragmentation” is still a challenge. The Prime Minister has repeatedly criticized the situation of “information fragmentation” and “reluctance to share data” among ministries and sectors, slowing down the progress of Project 06 and causing policy decisions to lack overall information⁽¹³⁾.

Fourthly, policy forecasting and analytical capacity. Vietnam’s forecasting capacity remains limited. Much of the policy system still operates in a reactive manner rather than proactively developing forward-looking scenarios and conducting rigorous Regulatory Impact Assessments (RIA), which would enable policymakers to formulate more anticipatory responses.

2.4. Some proposals for shaping the national governance system according to the “agile government” model

For Vietnam to successfully achieve its strategic goals, shaping a national governance system operating under an “agile government” model is essential. To incorporate these innovative ideas into the country’s development strategy, this article proposes the following five key policy directions:

Firstly, institutionalize the “right to experiment”

Supplementing the groundbreaking concept of “the right to experiment” as a basis for improving institutions and policies to encourage and protect officials who dare to innovate, be creative, think outside the box, act boldly, and experiment with new things for the common good; who accept controlled risks and learn from failures.

Based on a review and assessment of the implementation of regulations on protecting officials, as stipulated in Government Decree No. 73/2023/ND-CP dated September 29, 2023, which encourages and protects dynamic, creative officials who dare to think, dare to act, and dare to take responsibility for the common good, the goal is to develop a national-level law on institutional experimentation (Regulatory Sandbox). To establish a safe legal framework, it is necessary to allow pilot testing of digital economic models, green technologies, new social governance models, and other new practical issues not covered by current regulations. This is key to eliminating the fear of making mistakes, the fear of responsibility, and encouraging innovation in the public sector.

Secondly, build institutions that can adapt quickly

Develop a legal system that is streamlined, modern, and capable of adapting quickly and flexibly to changes in practice, especially urgent issues and recent technologies.

Institutions must lead the way, while technology only creates flexibility when linked to institutions that encourage and protect renovation, allowing for experimentation, adaptation, and controlled risk acceptance. Research should focus on developing “dynamic law-making” mechanisms for emergencies (epidemics, natural disasters, economic crises, etc.), allowing for rapid issuance, revocation, and cancellation of regulations under the law (decrees, circulars) through streamlined, closely monitored processes. Simultaneously, a “revolution” is needed to review and eliminate unnecessary assessment and approval processes, empowering leaders with real authority and accountability.

Thirdly, overcome “bureaucratic silos” through “inter-agency task force coordination mechanisms” with real authority

Innovate interdisciplinary coordination methods towards a more substantive and effective approach; establish interdisciplinary coordination organizations with real authority to address strategic, complex, cross-sectoral, interdisciplinary, and regional issues among localities.

Vietnam can learn from Singapore’s experience in establishing Inter-Ministerial Committees (IMCs). When a complex issue arises (e.g., population aging, food security, or recently Covid-19), the Government quickly establishes an IMC chaired by a Senior Minister, with full authority to coordinate inter-ministerial resources and budgets to definitively resolve the issue. This ensures horizontal compliance and cooperation,

overcoming local “fragmentation”. Along with that, Singapore also developed the “Agile Playbook - a handbook for civil servants who want to learn more about Agile methodology and implement projects using the Agile approach”⁽¹⁴⁾ and flexible governance practices in GovTech, emphasizing cross-functional teamwork, short iterative cycles and data-driven decision-making.

Fourthly, use data as the foundation for flexibility

The main focus is on creating a unified national data system that enables real-time interoperability and sharing of information. This infrastructure supports adaptable, evidence-driven leadership and management.

Data interoperability and multi-center governance are essential. Without data, forecasting is impossible; without forecasting, there is no flexibility. Building a “Government Data Analytics Platform” integrated into the government’s command and control center is crucial. This platform must be able to “pull” data from multiple sectors (taxation, customs, population, health, etc.), use AI for analysis and forecasting, and provide scenarios to enable leaders to make flexible decisions.

Fifthly, reform the civil service and build a team of elite and outstanding civil servants

Promote civil service reform by transitioning the recruitment, evaluation, and compensation framework from a model focused on seniority and credentials to demonstrate competence and measurable job performance, with particular emphasis on digital expertise and complex problem-solving abilities.

Human capabilities determine the feasibility of the model. An agile government requires civil servants who know how to use data, understand technology, have an open mind, are not afraid of innovation, and possess the capacity for reform. Superior incentives and mechanisms for protection and recognition are needed to attract, encourage, and retain innovative and challenging talents in the public sector, rather than allowing a mass exodus of personnel to the private sector.

3. Conclusion

As analysis has shown, building an “agile government” in Vietnam is not just about investing in technology or digital platforms. It is a challenging dual reform of institutions and governance culture. At its core is a revolution in institutional thinking - shifting from a control-oriented mindset to one of creation, support, and partnership. It is a revolution in organizational and leadership culture, moving from directives to empowerment and the acceptance of controlled risks.

In the context of the global VUCA model and Vietnam’s development goals for 2030 and 2045, a mandatory “mandate” has been set: the national governance system needs to change to adapt. “Agile government” is no longer a distant academic concept, but a practical model, a state capacity for national development and breakthroughs in a constantly changing world.

Shaping a flexible and adaptable national governance model will be a powerful impetus for institutional reform, creating the necessary impetus to remove the “bottleneck of bottlenecks” and the fear of making mistakes and taking responsibility. It is necessary to

mobilize all resources, create momentum for innovation throughout the system, and enable the country to overcome the “middle-income trap” and realize the aspiration for national development ■

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