

Critics Raise Concerns About Vietnam's New Constitution

Welcome to As It Is from VOA Learning English. I'm Mario Ritter. Vietnam is changing its constitution. But critics say the document does not include reforms that will improve the economic competitiveness of the Southeast Asian nation. Then we hear an update about the cost of Typhoon Haiyan and how the disaster may affect the Philippines' future growth.

Vietnam Makes Changes to Its Constitution

Vietnam's National Assembly voted in favor of changes to the constitution last week. However, critics say the changes are a step back instead of a step forward for the country. Christopher Cruise has Marianne Brown's report from Hanoi.

Ninety-eight percent of lawmakers voted in support of the changes to Vietnam's 1992 constitution. Nguyen Sinh Hung is chairman of both the National Assembly and the drafting committee. He said the final document was the result of a lot of discussion and suggestions from many different groups of people.

But there are many critics. Phil Robertson is deputy Asia director of Human Rights Watch. He said the new document does not include reforms that could have brought the nation in line with international human rights policies. He said it did not deal with important issues like the independence of the judiciary.

One of the biggest disputes is with Article 4, which restates the central role of the Communist Party. The new changes require that the armed forces be loyal to the party.

"Article 4 is important because it goes against the international covenant on civil and political rights, which sets out that people have the right to participate in their governance and elect governance through period exercise of free elections."

The amendments also add that the government can seize land for economic or development purposes. This expands on the original wording in the 1992 constitution, which simply said “national interests.”

A group raised the issue of land reform earlier in the year. They signed a petition calling for changes in the constitution to include free and fair elections and private ownership of land. They posted the petition on several popular Internet blogs after the government asked for public comment on a proposed draft.

Phil Robertson said the new document does not make it clear what the state’s limits are in its effort to seize land and what rights citizens have to appeal.

“That sort of grant of authority for the state to essentially seize land for projects again raises some significant questions of what limitations will be placed there.”

Local media said the amendments would provide a sustainable legal structure for Vietnam’s continued development and improve cooperation between public and private industry. But, critics say the amendments only confirm the state’s central role in the economy.

Adam Sitkoff is the director of the American Chamber of Commerce. He said the American business community is disappointed with the final document. He said it fails to deal with problems in the state-owned enterprises, or SOEs. This, he said, could hurt negotiations on the U.S.-led trade agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

“One of the things in TPP is the state-owned enterprise chapter that seeks to level the playing field and so the fact that in the final text that that somehow snuck back in is almost seen as a step backwards.”

Mr. Sitkoff said Vietnam must reform in order to be competitive. While the country has done well attracting foreign investment, he said it is only in certain industries. He said the government cannot afford to take anything for granted.

I’m Christopher Cruise.

How Will Typhoon Haiyan Affect the Philippines Economy?

The economic damage to the Philippines from Typhoon Haiyan is likely to be less than other storms in recent years. However, officials say there remains a strong need to help farming areas and provide jobs to communities directly in the path of the storm. Bob Doughty has Simone Orendain's report from Manila.

Three weeks after Typhoon Haiyan hit the central Philippines, government numbers show damages cost \$635 million. The losses are about \$300 million less than those of Typhoon Bopha, which struck the southeastern Philippines late last year.

Last week, the National Economic Development Authority said the economy grew by 7 percent in the third quarter. The agency says the Philippines had the second best economic growth in East Asia after China. However, the areas affected by the typhoon contribute 12 percent to the gross domestic product. Experts predict that they will hold back the year's growth by half a percent.

Philippine Central Bank Governor Armando Tetangco says the economic problems will last for the next three months.

"But the counterforce to that would be the increased government spending for relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction."

Tetangco says the Philippines has shown the ability to recover from crises because it has sustained a steady growth rate and kept inflation down. In addition, it has a surplus in domestic savings and keeps significant international reserves, which permits it to keep up with debt payments.

The Central Bank predicts a five percent increase in payments from overseas, or remittances. These were at \$21 billion last year. However, Tetangco says there could be additional money coming in to the country as relatives send extra money to support storm survivors.

While the losses from the typhoon will have less of an effect on the overall economy, many Filipinos are looking for work. Rice, coconut farming and fishing are main sources of income in the hardest hit areas. The United Nations says the typhoon affected more than 13 million people and left 5 million people without an income.

Government agencies last week presented a proposal to the president requesting immediate reconstruction needs in the typhoon-stricken area. Officials say it includes plans for providing shelter, restoring jobs and rebuilding public structures such as schools and hospitals. The agencies plan to make changes to the immediate needs proposal and resubmit it this week.

I'm Bob Doughty.

And that's our show for today. I'm Mario Ritter. Thank you for joining us! For the latest news, be listening to VOA at the top of the hour, Universal Time.