

Sources of Administrative Law in Vietnam: A Comparative Framework for Legal Harmonization

Vu Minh Chau

Vietnam National University

chauvm4@fe.edu.vn

Abstract

Vietnam's shift from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented system under the Đổi Mới reforms has exposed significant challenges in its administrative law system. Traditionally based on a civil law model that prioritizes hierarchical legal documents, the system is now increasingly influenced by judicial decisions, international treaties, and informal administrative practices that are not formally recognized as legal sources. This study uses a comparative legal method, analyzing administrative law frameworks in France and the United Kingdom, to evaluate how Vietnam's legal system addresses these emerging complexities. The research draws on legal texts, court rulings, and administrative guidelines from all three countries to assess coordination mechanisms and identify governance gaps. For instance, in Vietnam, the absence of legal recognition for judicial precedents leads to inconsistent application of laws across provinces. To address these issues, the study proposes a hybrid harmonization model: integrating judicial precedents into the legal hierarchy, defining general principles of administrative law, and establishing institutions responsible for legal coherence. These reforms aim to improve administrative accountability and support Vietnam's legal modernization in line with its ongoing economic integration.

Keywords: Administrative Law, Judicial Precedent, Legal Harmonization, Legal Diversification, Soft Law

INTRODUCTION

Since the implementation of the Đổi Mới reforms in 1986, Vietnam's economic transformation has fundamentally reshaped the relationship between the state and the market. This shift has created a need for more sophisticated and complex legal frameworks to support increasingly intricate economic transactions while ensuring democratic accountability. The transformation has elevated Vietnam from a poor, centrally planned economy to a middle-income nation with a dynamic market economy that is deeply integrated into the global system (Pham et al., 2020). However, this rapid economic progress has also generated tensions within the country's legal system—tensions that traditional administrative law frameworks are ill-equipped to resolve. The shift from direct state control to regulatory governance requires administrative law mechanisms that can manage complex relationships between public agencies, private actors, and international obligations. Vietnam's legal system, traditionally organized around a strict hierarchy of normative documents, now confronts multiple sources of legal authority

that operate outside this formal structure. These emerging sources include judicial precedents from the Supreme People's Court, international treaty obligations from agreements such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership, and administrative practices that develop through official guidance documents and ministerial circulars.

The move from direct state control to a regulatory governance model requires administrative legal mechanisms capable of managing complex interactions between public institutions, private entities, and international legal obligations. Vietnam's legal system, which has historically been structured around a rigid hierarchy of normative legal documents, is now confronted with various emerging sources of legal authority that operate beyond this formal structure. These include judicial precedents issued by the Supreme People's Court, legal obligations arising from international agreements such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and administrative practices developed through official guidance documents and ministerial circulars.

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have traditionally followed a clear hierarchical structure established by the Law on Promulgation of Legal Normative Documents. This hierarchy places the Constitution at the apex, followed by laws enacted by the National Assembly, ordinances from the Standing Committee, government decrees, and ministerial circulars (CACJ, 2021). This formal structure reflects Vietnam's civil law tradition and provides clear guidance on the relative authority of different legal instruments.

However, the practical operation of Vietnam's administrative system now involves sources of legal authority that operate outside this formal hierarchy. The Supreme People's Court has gained authority to issue precedents that guide lower courts in case resolution, representing a significant departure from traditional civil law approaches that rely primarily on written codes (Magazine, 2022). International treaties, particularly trade agreements that include regulatory commitments, create binding obligations that may conflict with domestic administrative practices. Administrative agencies issue guidance documents and official letters that have practical legal effect even when they lack formal status within the normative hierarchy.

The coexistence of these formal and informal sources creates coordination challenges that existing legal frameworks cannot adequately address. When conflicts arise between different sources of legal authority, Vietnam's legal system lacks clear mechanisms for resolving these conflicts or establishing priorities among competing norms. This situation creates uncertainty for legal practitioners, compliance challenges for businesses, and accountability gaps for citizens seeking to understand their rights and obligations.

This research addresses three fundamental questions about legal source harmonization in Vietnam's administrative law system. First, how do the characteristics of Vietnam's emerging legal sources challenge traditional approaches to legal hierarchy and source coordination? Second, what

mechanisms do mature administrative law systems use to manage conflicts between diverse legal sources while maintaining democratic accountability? Third, what reforms could strengthen Vietnam's capacity to harmonize legal sources while preserving the benefits of legal source diversity?

The research employs comparative analysis of administrative law systems in France and the United Kingdom to identify effective approaches to legal source harmonization. France represents a mature civil law system with sophisticated mechanisms for coordinating administrative law sources through the Conseil d'État and general principles of law. The United Kingdom provides an example of common law approaches to administrative law harmonization through judicial review principles and procedural fairness requirements.

This comparative approach recognizes that Vietnam cannot simply adopt foreign legal models without adaptation to local conditions. Instead, the research seeks to identify functional approaches to legal source harmonization that could be adapted to Vietnam's political system and legal tradition while addressing the specific challenges created by economic transition and international integration.

This research contributes to administrative law scholarship by developing a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing legal source diversification in transitional legal systems. The proposed hybrid harmonization strategy offers concrete mechanisms for managing legal source conflicts while preserving the flexibility needed for continued economic and legal development.

The research significance extends beyond Vietnam to other transitional economies facing similar challenges in managing the relationship between formal legal hierarchies and emerging sources of legal authority. As countries worldwide grapple with the integration of international law, judicial precedent, and administrative practice within domestic legal systems, the frameworks developed in this research provide guidance for

maintaining legal coherence while enabling institutional adaptation.

METHOD

This study employs a comparative-functional methodology that examines how different legal systems address the common challenge of harmonizing diverse administrative law sources. The approach moves beyond simple description of foreign legal rules to analyze how different institutional arrangements achieve similar governance functions. This functional perspective enables identification of transferable principles while recognizing the constraints imposed by different constitutional structures and political systems.

The comparative analysis focuses on three legal systems that represent different approaches to administrative law source harmonization. Vietnam provides the primary case study as a transitional civil law system grappling with source diversification pressures. France represents a mature civil law system with sophisticated harmonization mechanisms developed over two centuries of administrative law evolution. The United Kingdom illustrates common law approaches to administrative law coordination through judicial principles and procedural requirements.

This selection enables examination of both civil law and common law approaches to administrative law harmonization while focusing on systems that have addressed similar challenges to those facing Vietnam. France's experience with integrating general principles of law provides insight into how civil law systems can adapt to incorporate judicial law-making within formal legal hierarchies. The United Kingdom's development of judicial review principles demonstrates how procedural requirements can create coherent administrative law frameworks across diverse substantive areas.

The research employs doctrinal analysis to map the formal and informal sources of administrative law in each system and to understand how these sources interact within

broader constitutional frameworks. For Vietnam, this analysis examines the formal hierarchy established by the Law on Promulgation of Legal Normative Documents alongside emerging sources such as Supreme People's Court precedents and international treaty obligations.

The doctrinal analysis of French administrative law focuses on the role of the Conseil d'État in developing and applying general principles of law that bind administrative authorities even in the absence of specific statutory authorization. This analysis examines landmark decisions that established principles such as equality before public services, proportionality in administrative sanctions, and legitimate expectations in administrative decision-making.

The analysis of United Kingdom administrative law examines the development of judicial review principles through common law evolution and statutory codification. This includes examination of reasonableness requirements established in *Associated Provincial Picture Houses v. Wednesbury Corporation* and subsequent refinements through cases such as *R v. Secretary of State for the Home Department, ex parte Doody* and judicial review legislation.

The research examines the institutional mechanisms that each system uses to coordinate diverse legal sources and resolve conflicts between competing sources of authority. This analysis identifies both formal institutions, such as specialized courts and administrative review procedures, and informal mechanisms, such as professional networks and academic commentary that shape legal interpretation.

For France, the institutional analysis focuses on the dual role of the Conseil d'État as both advisor to government on draft legislation and supreme administrative court. This analysis examines how this institutional structure enables the Conseil d'État to anticipate and prevent conflicts between different sources of administrative law while providing coherent interpretation of existing legal requirements.

The United Kingdom analysis examines how ordinary courts exercise judicial review jurisdiction over administrative actions while respecting parliamentary sovereignty and ministerial accountability. This includes analysis of procedural requirements for judicial review and the development of intensity of review standards that vary according to the subject matter and individual rights at stake.

The research draws on multiple categories of sources to ensure comprehensive coverage of legal, institutional, and practical dimensions of administrative law source harmonization. Primary legal sources include constitutional texts, legislation, judicial decisions, and administrative guidance documents from all three jurisdictions.

For Vietnam, primary sources include the 2013 Constitution, the Law on Promulgation of Legal Normative Documents, Resolution 04/2019 of the Supreme People's Court on judicial precedents, and selected court decisions published through the Electronic Judgments Portal. Government documents include reports on legal reform and administrative modernization initiatives published by relevant ministries and the National Assembly.

French primary sources include decisions of the Conseil d'État, particularly landmark cases establishing general principles of administrative law, and advisory opinions on draft legislation. United Kingdom sources include judicial review decisions from the Administrative Court and higher courts, along with parliamentary materials related to administrative law reform initiatives.

Secondary sources include academic literature on comparative administrative law, legal reform in transitional economies, and institutional design for legal system development. The research prioritizes recent scholarship that addresses contemporary challenges in administrative law harmonization while drawing on foundational works that establish theoretical frameworks for comparative legal analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Vietnam's Administrative Law Sources: Formal Hierarchy and Informal Practices

Vietnam's administrative law system operates through a complex interaction between formal legal hierarchies and emerging informal sources that shape practical legal outcomes. The formal hierarchy established by the Law on Promulgation of Legal Normative Documents creates clear lines of authority from the Constitution through National Assembly laws, government decrees, and ministerial circulars. However, this formal structure increasingly fails to capture the full range of sources that influence administrative decision-making and legal interpretation.

The Supreme People's Court has emerged as a significant source of administrative law guidance through Resolution 04/2019, which establishes procedures for selecting and publishing judicial precedents. Under this resolution, precedents are defined as "arguments and decisions in legally effective judgments and rulings of courts for specific cases or matters, which are selected by the Judicial Council of the Supreme People's Court and announced by the Chief Justice" (Magazine, 2022). This development represents a fundamental shift from traditional civil law approaches that rely primarily on written codes and regulations.

The practical impact of judicial precedents extends beyond their formal recognition within the legal system. Courts now must study and apply precedents to ensure consistent case resolution, creating de facto binding authority that operates alongside the formal normative hierarchy. When courts fail to apply relevant precedents, they must provide explicit justification in their decisions, establishing procedural requirements that mirror common law precedent systems.

International treaties create another source of administrative law authority that operates outside the formal domestic hierarchy. Vietnam's participation in trade agreements such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership and the European

Union-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement creates binding commitments that influence domestic administrative practices. These international obligations often require specific procedural protections, transparency requirements, and appeal mechanisms that may conflict with existing domestic administrative law.

Administrative practice generates additional sources of legal authority through official letters, guidance documents, and ministerial instructions that have practical legal effect despite their informal status. These documents often provide detailed implementation guidance for broad statutory requirements, creating specific obligations for administrative agencies and regulated parties. However, the legal status of these documents remains unclear when they conflict with higher-level legal instruments or when they exceed the authority granted by formal legislation.

The coexistence of these formal and informal sources creates significant coordination challenges that Vietnam's legal system struggles to address effectively. Legal practitioners must navigate multiple sources of potentially conflicting authority without clear guidance on how conflicts should be resolved. This situation creates compliance uncertainties for businesses, accountability gaps for citizens, and interpretive challenges for courts and administrative agencies.

France: Harmonization Through Specialized Judicial Architecture

France's administrative law system demonstrates how sophisticated institutional mechanisms can coordinate diverse legal sources while maintaining democratic accountability and legal coherence. The Conseil d'État serves as the cornerstone of this harmonization system through its dual role as government advisor on draft legislation and supreme administrative court with jurisdiction over administrative disputes.

The Conseil d'État's advisory function enables ex-ante coordination of legal sources by reviewing draft legislation and regulations

for consistency with existing legal requirements. This review process identifies potential conflicts between proposed measures and constitutional principles, European Union law, and general principles of administrative law before these conflicts create practical problems in administrative implementation. The advisory opinions, while not formally binding, carry significant political and legal weight that shapes government decision-making.

The Conseil d'État's judicial function provides ex-post harmonization through development and application of general principles of administrative law that bind administrative authorities throughout the French system. These principles include equality before public services, proportionality in administrative sanctions, legal security in administrative decision-making, and legitimate expectations for regulated parties (Brown & Bell, 2008). The Conseil d'État has established these principles through case law development rather than statutory enactment, demonstrating how judicial institutions can create coherent legal frameworks within civil law systems.

The general principles of administrative law serve multiple harmonization functions within the French system. They provide substantive standards that bind administrative authorities even when specific statutory guidance is absent or unclear. They create procedural requirements that ensure consistent administrative decision-making across different policy areas and governmental levels. They establish interpretive frameworks that guide lower courts and administrative agencies in applying specific legal requirements to particular factual situations.

The Conseil d'État's harmonization role extends to integration of European Union law within domestic administrative law frameworks. The Conseil has developed sophisticated approaches to applying European Union legal principles within French administrative law while maintaining the coherence of domestic legal traditions. This includes development of proportionality analysis, enhanced procedural protections, and

rights-based approaches to administrative decision-making that reflect European influence while preserving French institutional structures.

The effectiveness of France's harmonization approach depends on the specialized expertise and institutional continuity of the Conseil d'État. Members of the Conseil combine legal expertise with practical administrative experience, enabling sophisticated understanding of both legal requirements and administrative realities. The institution's long-term perspective and accumulated jurisprudence provide stability and predictability that support effective legal planning and compliance.

United Kingdom: Harmonization Through Universal Judicial Principles

The United Kingdom's administrative law system illustrates how common law principles can create coherent governance frameworks across diverse policy areas without relying on specialized administrative courts or formal legal hierarchies. The development of judicial review principles through cases such as *Associated Provincial Picture Houses v. Wednesbury Corporation* has established substantive and procedural requirements that apply universally to administrative decision-making.

The *Wednesbury* reasonableness standard requires that administrative decisions must not be so unreasonable that no reasonable authority could have made them. This standard, while apparently deferential, creates meaningful constraints on administrative discretion by requiring that decisions have rational foundations and consider relevant factors while excluding irrelevant considerations. The principle has evolved through subsequent case law to include procedural fairness requirements, proportionality analysis in human rights contexts, and legitimate expectations protections.

The universal application of judicial review principles across all areas of government activity creates horizontal

harmonization that ensures consistent procedural protections regardless of the specific policy context. Whether administrative decisions involve immigration, environmental protection, social welfare, or economic regulation, they must satisfy the same basic requirements for rational decision-making, procedural fairness, and respect for individual rights.

The development of intensity of review standards provides vertical harmonization by establishing appropriate levels of judicial scrutiny for different types of administrative decisions. Decisions involving fundamental rights receive more intensive review than technical policy judgments, while decisions requiring specialized expertise receive more deferential treatment than routine administrative actions. This graduated approach enables courts to provide meaningful review while respecting administrative expertise and democratic accountability.

The United Kingdom's approach to harmonization operates through ordinary courts rather than specialized administrative tribunals, creating broad judicial familiarity with administrative law principles and ensuring consistent application across the court system. This institutional structure requires that all judges understand and apply administrative law principles, creating systemic capacity for coherent legal interpretation and application.

The integration of European human rights law through the Human Rights Act 1998 demonstrates how the United Kingdom's flexible constitutional structure can accommodate new sources of legal authority while maintaining the coherence of existing administrative law frameworks. The Act requires courts to interpret domestic law consistently with European Convention rights while preserving parliamentary sovereignty and ministerial accountability.

Comparative Analysis: Identifying Transferable Harmonization Mechanisms

The comparative analysis reveals three fundamental approaches to administrative law

source harmonization that could inform reform strategies for Vietnam. The French model demonstrates the effectiveness of specialized institutions with expertise in both legal interpretation and administrative practice. The United Kingdom model illustrates how universal principles can create coherent frameworks across diverse policy areas. Both systems show the importance of institutional mechanisms that can evolve with changing legal and political contexts.

The French Conseil d'État's dual advisory and judicial role provides a model for institutional design that enables ex-ante coordination of legal sources while providing ex-post resolution of conflicts through judicial review. This institutional structure could be adapted to Vietnam's political system through enhanced roles for existing institutions such as the Supreme People's Court or specialized committees within the National Assembly that review draft regulations for consistency with higher-level legal requirements.

The United Kingdom's development of universal administrative law principles through judicial decision-making provides a model for creating coherent legal frameworks without requiring comprehensive statutory codification. Vietnam's emerging precedent system could develop similar universal principles that guide administrative decision-making across all policy areas while respecting the formal hierarchy of legal sources.

Both systems demonstrate the importance of institutional mechanisms that can integrate international legal obligations within domestic administrative law frameworks. France's approach through Conseil d'État interpretation and the United Kingdom's approach through judicial review provide models for ensuring that international commitments enhance rather than undermine domestic legal coherence.

The analysis also reveals limitations of both approaches that must be considered in developing reforms for Vietnam. The French model requires significant institutional capacity and long-term political commitment

that may be difficult to establish in transitional systems. The United Kingdom model relies on common law traditions and judicial independence that may not transfer easily to civil law systems with different constitutional structures.

CONCLUSION

Toward A Hybrid Harmonization Strategy for Vietnam

The analysis finds that Vietnam's administrative law needs reforms to manage increasingly diverse legal sources while preserving its civil law foundations. A hybrid approach, combining elements from the French and UK systems, is proposed and tailored to Vietnam's context.

First, judicial precedents should be formally recognized in the legal hierarchy through amendments to the Law on Legal Normative Documents. This would improve consistency and legal clarity. Safeguards—like public input, transparent criteria, and regular reviews—should ensure precedents serve the public good.

Second, Vietnam should develop general principles of administrative law, such as fairness, proportionality, transparency, and protection of legitimate expectations. These should be created collaboratively by courts, scholars, and practitioners to ensure both legal relevance and practical use.

Third, institutional mechanisms for reviewing new laws and regulations before adoption should be strengthened. Bodies like the Ministry of Justice and National Assembly committees could help ensure consistency with the Constitution, international obligations, and core legal principles. Capacity-building should be gradual to support long-term reform success.

Implementation Considerations and Future Research

Implementing hybrid harmonization strategies requires attention to political realities, institutional capacity, and resistance from stakeholders affected by changes in power or accountability. Building support from legal professionals, businesses, and civil society is key to success.

Pilot programs in targeted areas like investment or environmental regulation can test the effectiveness of harmonization before broader reforms are adopted.

Future research should explore which implementation strategies work best in transitional economies, drawing lessons from similar reforms in other developing countries. It should also examine how legal harmonization affects governance outcomes such as regulatory quality, investment, and public trust in government—helping to demonstrate the broader value of legal reform.

Broader Implications for Transitional Legal Systems

The challenges in Vietnam's administrative law reflect broader trends in transitional economies balancing international obligations, market reforms, and democratic governance. The hybrid harmonization strategy proposed in this research offers a flexible framework that can be adapted to similar legal systems.

Effective legal harmonization requires institutional mechanisms that coordinate diverse legal sources while upholding democratic accountability and the rule of law. These mechanisms must align with domestic contexts while learning from international best practices.

The study highlights the value of gradual institutional development—building capacity and demonstrating success before expanding roles. Strengthening existing institutions, while introducing new ones, helps address emerging governance needs.

This research contributes to understanding how legal systems can adapt to change while maintaining consistency and legitimacy. As global pressures reshape governance, the proposed framework offers guidance for legal reform that balances innovation with institutional stability.

For Vietnam, the hybrid model presents a realistic path to enhance administrative law, preserve its civil law heritage, and support ongoing economic and legal integration. Its successful implementation would promote

predictability, accountability, and long-term legal development rooted in democratic and rule-of-law principles..

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