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Anti-Corruption Experiences in Some Countries in the Americas and Lessons for Vietnam

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Abstract

This article analyzes the diverse approaches to addressing anti-corruption challenges in three groups of American countries (the leading group; the promising group; and the group considered a "black hole" in the 2023 and 2024

Corruption Perceptions Index rankings by Transparency International - TI) to identify experiences and reference lessons for Vietnam.

Keywords: Experience, Corruption, Lessons, Americas, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Corruption is a phenomenon of power abuse that negatively impacts all aspects of social life. Each nation faces different manifestations and consequences of corruption, and there is still no universal approach to effectively resolve this issue. In developed countries, corruption often occurs seriously in specific economic sectors, local and central government structures, and even in fields like media. Meanwhile, in underdeveloped and developing countries, corruption can be widespread across many economic sectors, the political system, and social welfare. The success or failure of anti-corruption efforts in most countries stems from the perception of corruption challenges. How can a government best approach anti-corruption methods and learn from experiences in resolving this problem? Through studying the experiences of three groups of countries in the Americas, this paper will address these experiences and insights, thereby drawing lessons and reference values for Vietnam in its anti-corruption efforts. Specifically, the article will first focus on the experiences of Uruguay and Canada nations regarded as leading beacons of transparency in the Americas, consistently ranking low on corruption indices. Next, it will present the experiences of Guyana and the Dominican Republic countries recognized for their persistent efforts to improve their CPI scores over decades, in a context where many regional counterparts face stagnation or worsening gridlock in the fight against corruption. The article will also highlight the deteriorating and difficult-to-control corruption situation in Venezuela, Haiti, and Nicaragua. From the anti-corruption experiences of these three groups of American nations, the article will derive lessons and insightful reference values for Vietnam.

2. Anti-Corruption Experiences of Selected American Countries

2.1 Uruguay and Canada - The Leading Group in Anti-Corruption in the Americas

- *Uruguay:* Since the end of its dictatorship over three decades ago, Uruguay has built a political system based on strong parties and consensus-driven policies that support the consolidation of the rule of law, enhance government transparency, and expand its new democracy. The rise of the left-wing faction to power in the mid-2000s forced the traditional Colorado and Nacional parties to abandon political cronyism to compete for votes, focusing instead on areas such as public safety, pro-business policies, and building an open government that promotes effective accountability.

In recent years, Uruguay has consistently maintained its leading position in the Americas and has even improved its performance, ranking among the top 20 countries globally in anti-corruption. Compared to previous years, in 2024, Uruguay was ranked the 13th least corrupt nation globally, now on par with Estonia¹. This achievement stems from the strong response

¹ Transparency International (2024), *Corruption Perceptions Index 2024*, <https://www.transparency.org>.

of its security and judicial institutions to corruption challenges, as well as its promotion of democracy, political institutional innovation, economic consolidation, and decisive elimination of cronyism in politics. Concurrently, it has implemented effective solutions to tightly control high-risk sectors such as state-owned enterprise management (including water supply, telecommunications, oil import and refining); strictly controlled personnel appointments in the public sector and anti-corruption agencies; and enforced stronger and tighter control over financial and banking activities.

However, this achievement comes with several caveats, as the index only ranks countries based on perceived public sector corruption and does not include analysis of issues like organized crime, tax evasion, money laundering, or the private sector. Therefore, in the near future, these aspects could heavily impact Uruguay's leading position. Furthermore, these accountability advancements are not irreversible, and significant work remains in Uruguay's anti-corruption efforts. For example, campaign financing remains an area where unclear regulations can increase opportunities for illegal contributions to politicians, including from criminal organizations.

Thus, political dynamics are the key experience and the cornerstone of Uruguay's success in its anti-corruption fight and governance improvement, achieved through long-term institutional reforms based on a strong democracy, a dynamic society, and a prosperous business sector². This progress is starkly different from many countries in the Americas, where a common scenario is to elect political figures who champion anti-corruption, promise to purge the "corrupt establishment," and use the issue as a weapon against political rivals. Additionally, economic stability and development, along with its small geographical and administrative size, have also contributed to Uruguay's anti-corruption achievements³.

- *Canada*: Although Canada is considered one of the world's leaders in combating corruption, challenges persist across various aspects, at all levels of government local and federal and within the private sector⁴, from bribery, extortion, and embezzlement to financial fraud. The consequences of corruption in Canada have been undermining integrity and public trust in public service institutions. It also severely affects economic growth, social equity, and political stability, which are crucial for overall stability.

In practice, Canada does not have a single, unified anti-corruption strategy. Instead, it relies on specialized agencies, a robust legal system, and various tools to address corruption risks. The Management Accountability Framework is a key oversight tool used by the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat to ensure federal departments and agencies are well-managed and accountable. The Financial Administration Act, Lobbying Act, Conflict of Interest Act, Canada Elections Act, Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act, the Criminal Code, and the

Access to Information Act all contain provisions related to the current integrity system. Institutionally, in addition to central bodies, Canada has several oversight agencies responsible for different parts of this integrity system.

Furthermore, Canada has a strong legal framework for internal controls based on international standards, clearly defining the objectives of internal control and establishing management responsibility for it. The country also sets standards for conduct and professional ethics applicable to ministers, members of parliament, politicians, and public servants. Its risk management framework explicitly addresses public integrity risks, and internal audit regulations specify operational mechanisms for internal auditing, including several important safeguards to ensure internal auditors can perform their work with independence and integrity. However, Canada does not provide specific information on the practical application of these internal audit and risk management practices.

2.2 Guyana and the Dominican Republic - Countries with Persistent Anti-Corruption Efforts Over Decades in the Americas

- *Guyana*: Before 2015, Guyana faced rampant corruption, which not only negatively impacted its people and government operations but also hindered national development. However, over the past decade, there have been some optimistic signs regarding the results of preventing and controlling corruption. This is closely linked to the changes in Guyana's government since 2015, specifically a regime change after 23 years of a single political party's monopoly over access to state contracts and resources (for instance, party leaders established a privileged housing program for themselves, paying below-market prices for land). In 2015, Guyana ranked much lower, at 119th out of 180 countries with a CPI score of about 29/100. The period from 2016-2023 saw a marked improvement, with its CPI score increasing from 29 to 41. In 2024, Guyana scored 39/100 on the CPI, ranking 92nd out of 180 countries⁵.

The new government has taken several positive steps, including publicizing oil and gas contracts; dismissing employees found guilty of corruption; halting corruption-related contracts (such as a major parking meter contract in the capital, which was stopped due to procurement law violations following public protest); re-establishing the Integrity Commission; updating the public service code of conduct; appointing an ombudsman; establishing a state asset recovery agency; activating anti-money laundering laws; passing whistleblower protection legislation; and implementing various other interventions impacting public life integrity.

In summary, the positive developments in Guyana's fight against corruption in recent years are commendable. However, it must be recognized that establishing anti-corruption bodies and enacting numerous laws, coupled with the government's strong determination, does not guarantee that everything will function perfectly. The fight against corruption and the challenge of convincing the Guyanese public still face many obstacles ahead. In the future, Guyana must exert greater effort to address pressing issues, such as

² Maira Martini (2016), Uruguay: Overview of Corruption and Anticorruption, Transparency International.

³ Roberto Simon (2020), Why Uruguay Finished First in Our Anti-Corruption Ranking, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/why-uruguay-finished-first-in-our-anti-corruption-ranking/>.

⁴ Corruption in Canada, <https://kcc.com/corruption-index/corruption-in-canada/>.

⁵ Transparency International (2024), *Corruption Perceptions Index 2024*.

enforcing laws against bribery within the police force, establishing political financing laws, and ending impunity.

- *The Dominican Republic*: For over half a century, the Dominican Republic has faced numerous challenges threatening its national security, social safety, and public trust due to a series of corruption scandals.

To address this, the Dominican government has led the development of a data-driven anti-corruption risk monitoring system and has vigorously promoted reform groups to strengthen governmental institutional capacity. It has improved inter-agency coordination and enhanced collaboration with civil society through participatory anti-corruption initiatives, an innovative and broadly participative model aimed at improving governance and combating corruption from a comprehensive governance perspective. The system of solutions and the participatory model implemented by the Dominican Republic aim to provide comprehensive, detailed assessments of every aspect and contribute to the analysis and discussion of the benefits and challenges in government administration and the fight against corruption. The combination of political will, technical capacity, and a broad alliance of state and non-state actors has been key. Through these measures, governance challenges have been overcome, previously stalled reforms have been advanced, and a new social contract has been established among social stakeholders to combat corruption, reduce poverty, and increase shared prosperity.

The results indicate that although the Dominican Republic has not completely eliminated corruption through its extensive efforts, solutions, and initiatives, and much work remains to be done, it is clearly a step in the right direction. The perception of corruption among the government and the public has changed, and assessments like the regional Anti-Corruption Capacity Index show that the Dominican Republic has improved its capacity for several consecutive years. The country achieved a score of 60/100 in the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index, its highest since 2012⁶. These measures appear to have increased confidence in the reforms and reinforced the relentless anti-corruption efforts of the past decade.

2.3 Venezuela, Haiti, and Nicaragua - Countries Still Considered Corruption Black Spots in the Americas⁷

- *Haiti*: Haiti is one of the American countries mired in political instability and institutional insecurity following the assassination of its president in 2021. Currently, corruption is likened to the primary source of illicit revenue for political forces, surpassing crimes such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, and smuggling. "These individuals... are abetting the illicit activities of armed gangs that are terrorizing the population and threatening peace and security in Haiti" ⁸ (Canadian Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly). Widespread corruption in Haiti is the main reason for the country's dire and stagnant situation. Assessments of Haiti,

both domestically and globally, are currently at an all-time low.

- *Venezuela*: The current Venezuelan government has shown persistence in pursuing corrupt officials, military and police officers, and members of the judiciary involved in corruption through its "iron fist" operations, resulting in Venezuela being ranked 178th out of 180 countries in the 2024 CPI with a very low score (10/100)⁹. However, these operations are highly selective, avoiding government loyalists. To buy loyalty, the government even allows the military or state governors to accept bribes to maintain their operations. A 2024 report by the ICJ on the implementation of certain provisions of the international anti-corruption convention in Venezuela indicated that the Venezuelan Public Prosecutor's Office often avoids prosecuting corruption cases involving high-ranking officials or those close to the government, due to a lack of independence and clear political influence ¹⁰. On a smaller scale, these governors also oversee and profit handsomely from large criminal organizations, exacerbating the country's corruption challenges.

- *Nicaragua*: Nicaragua remains one of the most vulnerable and impoverished nations in the Americas, with poverty deeply intertwined with the extremely high levels of corruption that permeate its entire political and administrative system. According to Transparency International (2024), Nicaragua scored only 14/100 on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), ranking 172nd out of 180 countries¹¹, placing it at the bottom of the world in corruption control. Corruption in Nicaragua is a chronic issue with a long history, deeply entrenched in the highest echelons of power and spreading throughout the institutional system and public apparatus at all branches and levels of government. This phenomenon is closely linked to the previous dictatorial regime, years of socio-economic crisis, and the complete absence of the rule of law. Changes in the current legal and institutional framework in Nicaragua have not altered the existing corruption challenges. In some respects, certain elements of the institutional system even condone and arbitrarily legitimize repressive measures against civil society, the church, the business community, the media, and political parties to shield many officials engaged in corrupt acts across all sectors of social life.

Therefore, it can be said that the solution to the current and future corruption challenges in Nicaragua is bleak. The core issue that needs immediate action is not just changing the anti-corruption structures, but more importantly, rectifying the unconstitutional path, promoting government accountability and transparency in the use of public resources, ensuring public access to information, implementing necessary legal reforms, and restoring violated freedoms.

2.4 General Remarks on Anti-Corruption Experiences in Selected American Countries

Corruption remains a universal challenge across the Americas, manifesting in various forms and degrees, deeply influenced by the historical, political, and institutional

⁶ Transparency International (2024), *Corruption Perceptions Index 2024*.

⁷ Sean Doherty (2023), Latin America Makes Little Progress Against Corruption, <https://insightcrime.org/news/latin-america-makes-little-progress-against-corruption/>.

⁸ Mélanie Joly (2023), Thông cáo báo chí của Bộ Ngoại giao Canada, ngày 21 tháng 9 năm 2023.

⁹ Transparency International (2024), *Corruption Perceptions Index 2024*.

¹⁰ ICJ, 2024.

¹¹ Transparency International (2024), *Corruption Perceptions Index 2024*.

factors of each nation. A comparative study of anti-corruption efforts in Uruguay, Canada, Guyana, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Haiti, and Nicaragua reveals a diverse landscape of national governance and anti-corruption paths, from models of transparency to systemic weaknesses. Despite differences in economic conditions or political ideologies, the experiences of these countries demonstrate a key reality: effective anti-corruption is not merely a matter of legal design but depends primarily on political will, institutional strength, and societal participation.

Uruguay and Canada serve as prime examples of the role of strong institutions and sustained political commitment in curbing corruption. In Uruguay, the process of democratic consolidation after decades of dictatorship has fostered a political culture grounded in accountability and transparency. The nation's success relies not only on formal anti-corruption laws but also on the maturity of its party system, consensus-based policymaking, and a civic culture that values ethical governance. Institutionalized political competition within a framework of trust and restraint has compelled parties to abandon cronyism in favor of substantive action programs. Canada also exemplifies the successful interplay between institutions and cultural norms. Although corruption exists at some levels, the integrity of Canada's public administration is maintained by a dense network of legal instruments like the Financial Administration Act, Lobbying Act, and Conflict of Interest Act, forming a complex structure to prevent and address misconduct. Canada's anti-corruption model typifies the harmonious operation of law, accountability mechanisms, and social norms in upholding public service ethics. Both Uruguay and Canada show that the fight against corruption cannot rely solely on punitive measures or a few specialized agencies but must be built on a comprehensive governance structure. A transparent administration, a professional civil service, and a political environment that encourages ethical behavior are the foundations of clean governance. In these two countries, anti-corruption is not a situational policy but an integral component of national governance itself.

Meanwhile, the experiences of Guyana and the Dominican Republic represent a group of nations striving to overcome corruption challenges through incremental and multi-faceted reforms. While their efforts have not yet yielded complete success, they testify to a reformist determination to escape corruption-related crises, even as the influence of political cronyism and institutional weaknesses have not been fully overcome. In Guyana, a series of reforms were implemented after 2015 to break the political monopoly and enhance competition in public governance. The disclosure of oil and gas contracts, the establishment of the Integrity Commission, and the enactment of whistleblower protection and asset recovery laws mark a clear shift from an opaque governance model to a more transparent one. However, these reforms remain fragile, lacking a corresponding shift in political culture and social institutions, which makes anti-corruption bodies susceptible to distortion or becoming mere formalities. The Dominican Republic, on the other hand, has chosen an approach that emphasizes participatory governance. By integrating civil society into its monitoring system and using data analytics to identify risks, the government has transformed the fight against corruption from an administrative procedure into a new social commitment. This approach has enhanced policy

coordination and gradually restored public trust. The case of Dominica confirms that while a legal framework is necessary, the roles of government and the efforts of all of society are decisive for the sustainability of reforms. Both Guyana and the Dominican Republic show that progress against corruption in transitioning countries depends on continuity and consistency. Short-term political will must be translated into long-term institutional capacity. Legal reforms, strong citizen participation, and administrative modernization must proceed in tandem; otherwise, achievements will be temporary and potentially reversible.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the anti-corruption narrative in Venezuela, Haiti, and Nicaragua nations where corruption is not just a failure of public governance but has become the very nature of power. Here, corruption is not a deviation but the operating principle. In Haiti, corruption is the "lifeblood" of the political system. With the state nearly paralyzed, anti-corruption slogans have lost all practical meaning. Venezuela presents a "paradox of anti-corruption," forming what scholars call a "corruption equilibrium" in an autocratic regime, where corruption does not collapse the system but rather sustains its stability. Similar to Venezuela and Haiti, Nicaragua paints a grim picture where the fusion of political repression and institutional decay has turned corruption into a closed, self-sustaining system. Although the Ortega administration claims to adhere to international anti-corruption conventions, in reality, laws are distorted to protect the ruling elite and suppress civil society. Anti-corruption regulations in Nicaragua have their functions inverted, becoming tools of control rather than oversight. This can be seen as the most dangerous form of corruption, as it is legitimized by legal provisions. These "black hole" cases demonstrate that in an environment of loose governance and disregard for the rule of law, all anti-corruption efforts are merely formalistic.

The anti-corruption experiences of American countries show that outcomes depend not on wealth or stable political ideology, but on the quality of governance in both the public and private sectors. In Uruguay, its small scale and social homogeneity are favorable factors, but the core lies in its political culture, civic ethics, and habits of accountability. Similarly, Canada's case proves that modernization does not confer immunity to corruption but requires constant vigilance and institutional innovation. Conversely, in Haiti and Nicaragua, the weakness of the rule of law leads to what is called a "normative breakdown," where morality and legality diverge; the erosion of the legal order is both a cause and a consequence of corruption. Countries like Guyana and the Dominican Republic show that reform is a cumulative process. Building institutions is not enough; building trust is crucial. When anti-corruption strategies are implemented transparently and with societal participation, even small improvements can lead to growth and changes in the economy and social welfare. Conversely, when reforms are imposed top-down without social dialogue, they are easily perceived as political tools or administrative rituals devoid of moral value. This experience also indicates that the sequencing of reforms is critically important. Legal reform without judicial integrity, or institutional reform without political accountability, is prone to failure. Success requires a gradual and substantive process of "political-institutional" renewal that balances power and governance effectiveness.

From a research perspective, the experiences of the Americas offer insights into the interplay between corruption, democracy, and development. Uruguay and Canada represent an institutionalized model where democratic consolidation and administrative professionalization are mutually supportive. Guyana and Dominica reflect a transitional model, where reform is ongoing but potentially reversible. Meanwhile, Venezuela, Haiti, and Nicaragua exhibit a model of weakness, where power and corruption merge into a unified entity. These models suggest that anti-corruption is not a single, quickly solvable policy, but a comprehensive, holistic governance strategy. The prevalence of corruption reflects the equilibrium between state capacity, political incentives, and social oversight. Therefore, an effective strategy must concern itself not only with enacting laws but also with how those laws are implemented in social life. For developing countries, including Vietnam, important lessons can be drawn from these experiences.

3. Lessons and Reference Values for Vietnam

From the anti-corruption experiences of the three groups of American nations, the following lessons and reference values can be drawn for Vietnam:

First, the experience of American countries shows that anti-corruption should not be viewed as a purely legal issue. Instead, corruption must be seen as a systemic problem with persistent negative impacts on the economy and all aspects of social life. More than that, anti-corruption is part of how wealth and power are distributed in society. Anti-corruption solutions or strategies need to focus more not only on the daily issues of citizens but also on policy matters such as national security and the country's international image. When developing and adjusting strategies or approaches to anti-corruption, it is necessary to emphasize surveying or seeking relevant data from less conventional sources. Strategies and solution sets must have clear domestic and international political orientations. It is essential to build anti-corruption strategies that are strong in initiatives and action-oriented solutions for each sector, while also identifying high-risk sectors where the government needs to have priority, comprehensive, and specific action plans.

Second, besides building a national strategy or a comprehensive anti-corruption system, success in this struggle can also be achieved by other means. This means that corruption can also be addressed through specialized reforms rather than relying solely on a national strategy or purely legalistic approaches. The experience of the three different groups of American countries indicates that relying on a single national strategy or one or two initiatives is insufficient. Furthermore, national anti-corruption efforts require political champions and support from relevant ministries and agencies responsible for mechanisms and coordination structures that not only demonstrate a whole-of-government role and responsibility but also facilitate civil society organizations in exercising their critical role and demanding better government accountability. Success in anti-corruption can only be achieved when a nation builds strong democratic and rule-of-law institutions. The role of social organizations and the press is extremely important in detecting, monitoring, and creating public pressure, thereby contributing to preventing corruption. Transparency in public financial management, especially in natural resources, public investment, and public procurement, is a

vital element in limiting opportunities for corruption. The application of information technology, e-government, and the digitization of administrative procedures can significantly reduce direct contact between citizens and officials, thereby minimizing opportunities for harassment, while creating public data for monitoring (as seen in the experience of the Dominican Republic). Additionally, a culture of integrity in the public sector and the exemplary conduct of political leadership play a crucial role in orienting and consolidating social trust in any fight against corruption.

Third, to respond to the continuous evolution and emergence of new and more complex forms of corruption, it is necessary to develop new modes of cooperation to address corruption at both transnational and national levels. The experience of the three groups of American countries shows that sharing solutions and addressing persistent challenges from corruption between developed countries, promising countries, and underdeveloped countries will promote and encourage the development of more comprehensive and useful national anti-corruption strategies, experiences, and solutions.

Fourth, the above experience also shows that most of the highest-ranking American countries in the corruption perception index participate in at least one transnational anti-corruption initiative across various sectors and types. The results and recommendations from these transnational initiatives should be integrated and can form a foundation for developing a technically useful strategy or approach in the fight against corruption. However, it should also be noted that these initiatives are not sufficient to be considered a substitute for a nation's own strategy or practical actions in anti-corruption, as they often focus on highly technical measures and may not inspire a spirit of coordination or national accountability for the recommendations made.

4. Conclusion

The anti-corruption experiences from three different groups of nations in the Americas present a diverse picture. The experience of the leading group affirms the value of strong and transparent institutions; the promising group demonstrates the power of reform and technology. In contrast, the "black hole" group reflects the severe consequences of weakened institutions, abuse of power, unconstitutionality, and a refusal of accountability and transparency, where the current government lacks the will to change. Vietnam can reference and appropriately apply these experiences to consolidate its political system, enhance the effectiveness of national governance, and continue to advance its fight against corruption with the goal of building a truly clean and transparent socialist rule-of-law state.

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