



# Autonomy and Accountability Framework

Independent governmental institutions are an essential part of the democratic fabric in many countries. While some are created to provide important oversight of government functions – mitigating corruption, protecting human rights and increasing transparency – others serve to insulate important democratic processes from political manipulation. The form and function of these institutions can vary drastically between countries, but they often include supreme audit institutions, national human rights institutions, anti-corruption commissions, ombudsmen, judicial councils and election management bodies.

When leveraged effectively, these institutions can bolster democratic systems. Sometimes, however, they fall short of their potential. Many operate in highly political environments and often work on contentious topics. They require autonomy from political leaders to withstand attempts at manipulation, as well as the appropriate accountability mechanisms to ensure that they do not themselves fall prey to corruption, partisan behavior or poor leadership.

IFES' evidence-based *Autonomy and Accountability Framework* emphasizes five dimensions of autonomy necessary for an independent agency to fully engage in its mandate and three types of accountability measures that enable an institution to achieve public credibility and support.

Autonomy and Accountability Framework	
Autonomy Category	Indicators of Autonomy
<p><b>Institutional autonomy</b> The institution's independence is enshrined in the legal framework.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independence of the institution from the executive branch is codified in law.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Personnel autonomy</b> Selection, remuneration and stability of tenure of independent institution leadership and staff enables impartiality and professionalism.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Security of tenure is codified in law. The institution's founding law includes transparent selection, appointment and dismissal processes, with the aim of ensuring that appointees are insulated from removal or retaliation for political reasons.</li> <li>• Timely appointments are made, based on both behavioral and functional competencies.</li> <li>• A requirement is included in the independent institution's enabling law that vacancies in membership be filled within a reasonable timeframe.</li> <li>• Staggered terms of office are codified in law.</li> <li>• Adequate remuneration and benefits are included in annual budget for independent institutions, in line with other similar institutions and the judiciary.</li> <li>• A provision on immunity for actions taken in an official capacity is included in the institution's enabling act.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Financial autonomy</b> The institution has sufficient resources and control over their use to fulfill its mandate.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A sufficient budget is provided to enable the independent institution to carry out its legal mandate, with a realistic timeline for disbursements as needed throughout the year.</li> <li>• Reviews of the budget proposed by the independent institution consider the institution's strategic plan and/or annual operational plan.</li> <li>• Budgets are allocated directly to the independent institution.</li> <li>• The independent institution has control over decisions on how to use allocated funds to meet its mandate.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Functional autonomy</b> The institution has decision-making powers and resources that prevent political, executive or other powerbroker interference in its activities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution's decision-making power is defined in the law.</li> <li>• The mandate and responsibilities for the independent institution are clearly codified in the law, and any overlap with other institutions is limited to areas where there is a benefit to institutional multiplicity.</li> <li>• Government avoids interference in policymaking of the independent institution within its defined mandate.</li> <li>• Government avoids interference in internal rule-setting and process of the independent institution.</li> <li>• There are no statutory or other requirements for government approval of planning processes and outputs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Behavioral autonomy</b> The institution clearly demonstrates its independence through its decisions, actions and activities.</p>	<p>The independent institution in practice is able to establish and maintain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impartial policy and decision-making.</li> <li>• An administrative culture that places a priority on mission, public service, ethics, integrity, impartiality, competence and professionalism.</li> <li>• Institutionalized transparency, including via an accessible and comprehensive web presence.</li> <li>• Effective and consistent collaboration with external stakeholders.</li> <li>• Effective monitoring, evaluation and learning.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Accountability Category</b></p>	<p><b>Indicators of Accountability</b></p>
<p><b>Statutory accountability</b> Accountability mechanisms and reporting requirements for independent institutions are enshrined in law.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A requirement for periodic reporting is codified in law with specific format and content requirements.</li> <li>• The relevant parliamentary oversight committee has the resources necessary to apply rigorous and appropriate scrutiny of reports and draft responding reports or statements if necessary.</li> <li>• Independent institutions are required to develop and report on strategic goals and/or annual performance expectations.</li> <li>• An annual internal audit is required of all independent institutions as well as periodic audits by an external body.</li> <li>• Freedom of information legislation is in place with appropriate parliamentary oversight mechanisms and resources to assess efficacy of implementation.</li> <li>• A legal framework is established for the adjudication of complaints and disputes involving independent institutions.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Public accountability</b> The implementation of outreach, public accessibility and transparency measures to ensure that the independent institution remains accountable to the public interest.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open question sessions and periodic performance reviews of independent institutions are held.</li> <li>• The periodic reports submitted by the independent institutions to the relevant oversight committee(s) are publicized.</li> <li>• Freedom of information legislation is fully respected and applied by independent institutions.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Internal accountability</b> The adoption of robust standards for professional and ethical conduct and internal performance monitoring that contribute to a culture of integrity throughout independent institutions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent institutions are legally empowered to report to parliament and stakeholders on their own initiative.</li> <li>• Disclosure of ethics violations in independent institutions is required in their annual reporting.</li> <li>• Whistleblower and nonretaliation policies are in place.</li> <li>• Codes of conduct and ethics are in place.</li> </ul>

**Additional IFES Publications and Resources:**

- [IFES COVID-19 Briefing Series: Preserving Independent and Accountable Institutions](#)
- [IFES Executive Curriculum in Electoral Leadership \(iEXCEL\)](#)
- [Parliamentary Oversight of Constitutional Bodies in the Maldives: Introducing an Autonomy and Accountability Framework with Global Comparative Practices](#)

**Other Sources Consulted to Develop the IFES Framework:**

- [Independent Electoral Management Bodies and International Election Observer Missions: Any Impact on the Observed Level of Democracy? A Conceptual Framework](#) (Anne van Aaken)
- [Independent Oversight Institutions and Regulatory Agencies, and their Relationship to Parliament](#) (Westminster Foundation for Democracy)
- [National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights: Report of the Secretary-General](#) (United Nations Human Rights Council)