

— PANORAMA —
SPECIAL ISSUE
**TRUST IN
POLITICS**

PANORAMA
INSIGHTS INTO ASIAN
AND EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

Trust in Politics

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Preface

Trust is a central feature of human relations. The way in which we are able to build trust has significant impact on our social life, our ability to do business with each other and our position within a society. Trust impacts our decisions and behaviours in various everyday situations.

For the longest time, trust was also an essential ingredient for the reliability of political systems. It is the most important currency between the voter and the candidate. It enables leaders to find solutions for conflicts and challenges, both on bilateral and multilateral platforms. Without trust, diplomatic approaches to problem solving are often leading into a dead end. The escalating tensions between the United States of America and China, India's and Pakistan's blockade of cooperation in the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), or the Afghan peace process – all serve as examples.

But which role does trust actually play in politics today? In many countries, trust into the political leadership is on the decline, which is reflected in lower voter turnout at elections or in more votes going to populist or extremist parties. Leaders around the world have adopted a “nation first” approach, turning political negotiations into a zero sum game and making trust a rare commodity in the process. Social media campaigns and fake news reduce the trustworthiness of political actors further. This is a very concerning development not only for individual governments, but also for global mechanisms of cooperation. And it becomes an outright dangerous development in the times of crisis.

When we started to look into the question of trust in politics and decided on it as the theme of the Panorama special issue, COVID-19 was still a mostly unknown disease, mainly reported about in context of the Chinese city of Wuhan. Who would have known what this virus would bring to the world – and how relevant it would become for the issue at hand.

The pandemic appeared to be the ideal case study of which impact trust – or the lack of trust – can have on social cohesion, stability, elections and international relations. In Asia and Europe alike, the pandemic has challenged trust – within the society and between the diverse communities, between publics and governments, between political actors and scientific experts and between nations, states and multilateral institutions.

Despite the need of the hour, yet, it was important to us to further a more general understanding of “trust in politics” and the various roles it can play as the basis or the result of politics. Therefore, different themes and perspectives were invited to contribute to this special issue.

Several of the authors take up the role of trust in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. While Prof. Jasmin Riedl for example analyses the role of trust at the national level, Giulia Sciorati PhD looks at the international level relating Asia and Europe.

That trust matters beyond the recent COVID-19 crisis at the national, international and global level is further shown by renowned scholars and practitioners contributing to this special issue. Prof. Mark Juergensmeyer for example analyses the rise of anti-authoritarian religious movements throughout the world. The continuous relevance of this topic was sadly proven when – despite the pandemic – the Islamic State launched its first attack on the South Asian island state of the Maldives.

Towards the end of an exceptional year, this special issue of our biannual Panorama: Insights into Asian and European Affairs offers a kaleidoscope on the implications and roles of trust in politics in Asia and Europe – and beyond. I would like to thank all authors for their contributions, which help us to better understand the issue at hand, and to value a political currency which is hard to build and easy to lose.



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Trust in Politics – Introduction to the PANORAMA Special Issue

La Toya Waha

INTRODUCTION

Societies and states in Asia and Europe are facing severe challenges to social cohesion and the stability of the state and polity. The rise of populism and strong-(wo) man politics, perceptions of governments' inability to deal with effects of digital disruption, or more recently the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing polarisation and rifts within the society, the decay of long-established parties and institutions, the rise of radicalism and extremism as well as the diminishing support for governments, national as well as multilateral institutions present significant changes and challenges for the hitherto established social and/or political order. While these challenges are diverse in nature, they share one essential thing: a link to the question of trust.

Out of experience, many people locate “trust” with the individual and his/her family, friends and partners. However, trust is not only essential for human relationships, trust is essential for the survival of individuals and groups. While trust enables the needed cooperation between individuals and the subsequent formation of cooperating collectives – the basic survival strategy of humankind¹ – the lack of trust, or distrust, prevents humans from easily falling prey to competitors and enemies. What was essential in the tribes of the past retains its significance even today, where the modern (nation) state has become the central entity organising cooperation. Irrespective of group size, the lack of trust impedes or prevents cooperation, and, as a result, the security and progress of the tribe, the community, or the nation – as much as the international community.

¹ Brewer, Marilyn B. 2007. “The Importance of Being We: Human Nature and Intergroup Relations”. *The American psychologist*, 62 (8). American Psychological Association: 728–38.

The PANORAMA special issue “Trust in Politics” examines the question of trust. It seeks to analyse and portray the varied roles trust plays in states, societies, and international relations in Asia and Europe.

To broaden the scope of case studies, to improve the understanding of processes and mechanisms as well as to diversify the perspectives, the editors invited renowned scholars of the field and experienced think tankers to contribute papers, but, at the same time, made an open call for contributions. Next to the established experts with diverse disciplinary backgrounds and areas of focus, the editors sought to include themes off the apparent agenda and moreover to provide hitherto inexperienced young researchers with the opportunity to present their perspective and insights. This has led to a wide range. However, treating trust as either independent or dependent variable, that is, either the consequences of trust – or the lack of trust – for politics or the impact of politics on trust, is what all papers have in common.

THEMES AND PAPERS

The first paper treats politically significant effects of a decline in trust in established religious institutions as the result of globalisation and social change. Prof. Mark Juergensmeyer looks into one of the consequences of distrust in established religious institutions, namely the rise of anti-authoritarian religions, and its impact on politics and society. Introducing the different movements in Asia and beyond, Prof. Juergensmeyer shows that anti-authoritarian religions can lead, among others, to religious radicalism, challenges to regimes, societal conflict and violence.

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged governments and societies all over the world. The often deep-cutting restrictions, including lockdowns, business closures, home schooling, and obligations to keep a distance and wear a mask, have been evaluated differently by different populations. The second paper finds that in spite of significant restrictions, the German federal and state governments received immense public support. Prof. Jasmin Riedl analyses the reasons behind the comparatively high levels of political trust in the German coalition government throughout the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, not only societies’ trust in their own government, but also the trust in other governments and between states have been affected. Particularly the trust in China, where the pandemic’s outbreak is located and where the Chinese government’s secrecy allowed the disease to spread all over the world, has suffered, even in those states, which have joined the contested Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. Giulia Sciorati PhD examines the soft power and public diplomacy strategies China implemented during the early stages of the pandemic to preserve

Italy's – the Belt and Road Initiative's European flagship country – support on the international stage. She analyses how China seeks to rebuild public trust at what Sciorati PhD describes as an exceptionally sensitive juncture for bilateral relations. In particular, in light of Italy's "special relation" with China, the paper asks whether specific tools or narratives were employed to engage the country during the crisis.

The dangers which digitalisation and new means of communication pose for the stability of systems have recently gained wide international attention. Attempting to regulate the potentially devastating effects of fake news and online falsehoods, the Singaporean government passed the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act in May last year. The promising young scholar Tan Zhi Han analyses how the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act is intended to preserve public confidence in the Singaporean government and examines criticisms and potential setbacks on public trust in politics.

Not only due to U.S. president Donald Trump's recent decision to hastily withdraw American soldiers from Afghanistan, the question of trust in politics is raised in the country. Looking at the political and social instability in Afghanistan, Mushtaq Rahim examines the question of how public trust relates to significant challenges, such as political divides and the expansion of armed conflict in post-conflict and fragile states. Thereby, the paper shows why trust has declined throughout the democratic transition in Afghanistan.

While some relations between agents' behaviour and trust in them seem to be intuitive, others are not. Dr. Hasan Muhammad Baniamin digs into a puzzling relationship between performance and trust: there are countries which enjoy higher levels of trust in institutions despite the institutions' poorer performances than countries with far better performing institutions. Looking at the two examples of Bangladesh and Nepal, Dr. Baniamin finds an explanation in the countries' different cultural orientations.

Climate change can be considered as a further disruption with significant impacts. Particularly in Europe, the preservation of nature and the environment has set the political agendas, manifesting, among others, in the European Union's Green Deal. But what might have positive impacts for the achievement of set goals might negatively impact the trust relations with international cooperation partners. Focussing on deforestation and palm oil production, Dr. Vicente Lopez Ibor Mayor shows how a trust deficit between the EU and some ASEAN member states has emerged and suggests ways how it could be overcome.

In the junior scholar's paper, Hiruni Nathasha Fernando suggests a way out of a long-lasting problem in Sri Lanka. Fernando looks at the current situation of inter-communal trust in post-war Sri Lanka and the manifestations of the continued trust

deficit. She points out her opinion that the solution to the lack of trust between the communities could be found in secular education.

SUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVES ON TRUST IN POLITICS

Next to the scientific treatment of trust in politics, the editors sought to account for the subjectivity of trust. Hence, a new segment is introduced to the PANORAMA journal titled “Opinion”. Here, authors’ subjective takes on the issue at hand are treated. Needless to say, perspectives and arguments provided in the journal are only those of the authors and do neither represent the perspectives and opinions of the editors, nor those of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. However, they represented perspectives and opinions on trust in politics in Asia and Europe and contribute to the better understanding of the issue and its relevance.

In “Opinion”, Asanga Abeyagoonasekera opines that the current COVID-19 pandemic might give the long-stalled regional integration in South Asia a needed boost by allowing for building trust through medical cooperation between the South Asian states. Mahesh Bhatta presents his view on the lack of trust in the political elite in Nepal, resulting from broken hopes for substantial change after years of conflict and diverse struggles for political participation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST IN POLITICS

The papers and opinion pieces have shown that trust often can tip the scales for stability or disruption, peace or conflict or, to put it differently, for cooperation or confrontation. The analyses of and perspectives on trust in politics in Asia and Europe point to the need to understand it and to consider trust in political decision making. To boil down the complexities treated in this special issue: trust is more than a nice accessory. It is a vital element of politics.

La Toya Waha is Deputy Director of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Regional Programme Political Dialogue Asia in Singapore. She holds a Doctoral degree in Political Science (summa cum laude) and a degree in South Asian Studies and Psychology from Heidelberg University. Prior to her posting in Singapore, she worked as a Research Fellow on the relation between religion, migration and radicalisation in Germany at the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence (IKG). La Toya Waha has taught on Religion and Politics in South Asia at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University. Among others she has been Visiting Researcher at the Social Policy Analysis and Research Centre (SPARC), University of Colombo. Her research focus is on the emergence of political violence, the relation between religion, politics and the state as well as suicide as a political tool. She has published on political culture, collective violence as well as political parties in South Asia. Her major publications are her monograph *Religion and State-Formation in Transitional Societies: Sri Lanka in a Comparative Perspective*, and her edited book *United by Violence, Divided by Cause? A Comparison of Drivers of Radicalisation and Violence in Asia and Europe*.

The Global Rise of Anti-Authoritarian Religion

Mark Juergensmeyer

Why has religion become so political in the global era? One answer is globalisation itself. The globalisation of knowledge and the weakening of old authoritative institutions provide a space for new voices and movements to emerge. Some of these are buttressed with the traditional authority of religion, but in forms that are distinctively contemporary and anti-authoritarian. This is a striking and disturbing feature of religion in the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

The shape of organised religion around the world is shifting. Islam is statistically on the rise. Pew research reports indicate that by 2035 the numbers of children born to Muslims will outnumber those born to Christians, and Islam is by far the fastest growing religious community in the world.¹ At the same time, Christianity is decreasing in numbers. The erosion of Christian affiliation continues at what the Pew Research Center describes as “a rapid pace”.²

But those statistics do not tell the whole story, since Islam is on the rise especially in some parts of the world, such as sub-Saharan Africa. And Christianity is mostly in decline in Europe and the United States while its numbers proportionately increase in Africa, Asia, and South America.

Moreover, the kind of religiosity is changing as well. Increasingly the popularity of old traditional institutions is making way for new movements and denominations

¹ Pew Research Center. 2017. “The Changing Global Religious Landscape.” (<https://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>), accessed 27 July 2020.

² Pew Research Center. 2019. “In U.S., the Decline of Christianity Continues at a Rapid Pace.” (<https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>), accessed 27 July 2020.

that tend to be stridently anti-authoritarian, since they reject the mainstream institutional forms of Protestantism. At one time in the United States the mainstream Protestant denominations (such as Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Congregational, and the like) rivalled the Roman Catholic church in numbers. But from 1972 to 2017, the numbers of mainstream Protestants in the US dropped precipitously from 28% to almost 10 percent.³ The average age of the surviving mainstream Protestant members is 52, indicating that the denominations are quite literally dying out. The decline of mainstream Protestants has been in part due to the strength of Evangelical Protestantism, some 26% of the population, a number that has held fairly solidly even though the total number of Christian adherents have declined.

Huge megachurches that are independent and not affiliated with any traditional denomination have sprung up, not only in the United States, but among Christian communities around the world. They are often centred around charismatic preachers like Joel Osteen in America or David Yonggi Cho in South Korea. Osteen's Lakewood Church in Texas is the largest congregation in the U.S., boasting a regular attendance of nearly 50,000 believers; that impressive number is dwarfed by Cho's Yoido Full Gospel Church, which vaunts a staggering membership of over a million Christians in Seoul. (Cho was forced to preach to a smaller crowd for a while, however, as he was convicted of embezzling \$12 million from his parishioners in 2014 and sentenced to three years in prison.) At a time when many religious communities around the world are diminishing, the global rise of these enormous megachurches and megacongregations are a testament to the continuing vitality of religion. But it is not traditional religion but new anti-authoritarian ones that are on the rise.

In a five-year Luce Foundation-supported study on religion in global civil society, my co-authors and I found that much the same is true in other religious traditions around the world.⁴

³ Stetzer, Ed. 2017. "If It Doesn't Stem Its Decline, Mainline Protestantism Has Just 23 Easters Left." *Washington Post*, April 28, 2017. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/04/28/if-it-doesnt-stem-its-decline-mainline-protestantism-has-just-23-easters-left/>), accessed 27 July 2020.

⁴ Juergensmeyer, Mark, Dinah Griego and John Soboslai. 2015. *God in the Tumult of the Global Square: Religion in Global Civil Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

INDIA

In India, a glut of new religious movements have emerged, mostly based loosely on Hindu ideas and concepts, but eschewing its traditional leadership. What these movements have in common is their creation of different centres of authority, new avenues for identity, and new modes of belonging – all outside the control of the established religious authorities.

The Sathya Sai Baba movement, a spiritual organisation based around the teachings of an eponymous Indian guru who stresses the one-ness of all beings, devotes itself to humanitarian projects. Education, medical care, efforts toward clean drinking water, and aid to victims of natural disasters are its stated focus. It is true that there are tax incentives from the Indian government to provide social services, but it also is true that the philosophy of many of these movements include a devotion to *seva*, the term for “service” that is applied both to serving the needs of the spiritual masters of the movements as well as serving the population as a whole. Many of the new religious movements surging throughout the world have widened their focus from solely spiritual aims to projects done in the service of a community that goes beyond the religious group.

JAPAN – AUM SHINRIKYO

This is the case in Japan, which has witnessed a remarkable eruption of new religious movements in the country for several decades. Some of those movements have been bizarre – members of the PanaWave movement, for example, wear white gear to protect them from hidden electromagnetic rays that they imagine are harming people and bringing about the end of the world. But none have seemed especially dangerous until the advent of the Aum Shinrikyo movement in 1984. The movement developed out of a blend of Japanese and Indian forms of Buddhism, and took on an extreme eschatological character under the guidance of Shoko Asahara, the leader of the movement. In March of 1995, members of the group released deadly sarin gas into the Tokyo subway during rush hour, killing 12 and injuring thousands. This attack was inspired by Asahara’s belief that a cataclysmic event he called Armageddon would destroy the unworthy and leave only the righteous members of Aum Shinrikyo.⁵

⁵ Juergensmeyer, Mark. 2008. *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

The terrorist group did not start out advocating terrorism, of course. It was a religious movement fully engaged with the modern world. But the confrontation turned deadly in a distinctly contemporary way. Not only did it make use of a vicious gas invented through advanced chemical processes, but also it propagated the prophecies of Asahara that were related to recent history. He envisioned a third World War at the beginning of the third millennium, one that would dwarf World War II in its destruction (a fearful claim in a country that suffered the world's only atomic attack). Moreover, he prophesied that the government of Japan would both perpetrate the attacks that would initiate the end times, and ultimately fail to protect the Japanese population from the disasters that would occur. Asahara challenged the authority of the secular Japanese government by incorporating the fears of the late 20th century and its technologies into prophecies that the nerve gas attacks were meant to confirm.

The tragic loss of life when sarin gas was released in the Tokyo subways in March of 1995 by disciples of Shoko Asahara was a calculated event. Asahara had conjured up an apocalyptic fantasy of the future and the attack in the subways gave his prophecies credibility – to his followers it seemed that the apocalyptic war had begun and his prophecies were becoming real. After the attack, Japan went through a public process of collective soul-searching, trying to understand how such a thing could happen. Many of the accusations pointed to the social crises that lay behind the creation of many of the Japanese new religions. People in Japan, like those in many industrialised nations, were experiencing an increased feeling of alienation and loss of dignity in the fast pace of urban life. Breaking from traditional cultures made this new life possible, but it also unanchored people from the structures of meaning that made sense of the world around them. New religious movements such as Aum Shinrikyo blended a prophetic vision and a charismatic leader with the promise of inner peace and personal transformation. It was a heady combination. While the Aum Shinrikyo vision of the world was a violent one, many other new religious movements and many traditional religions blended the idea of a knowable future (often a dangerous one) with the individual's ability to become something more than merely ordinary. The differences among the new movements lay in the shape of that future, the practices required to achieve personal enlightenment, and the perception of what the world needed in order to be transformed.

CHINA – FALUN GONG

In the People's Republic of China (PRC), religious movements have long been seen as posing a threat to the atheist state. At least since the Communist Revolution under

Chairman Mao Zedong, religion has been charged with stunting progress and stealing loyalty away from its proper place: Chinese nationalism and the Communist Party. A fear of religion has occurred in other cultures, of course – during the campaign of John F. Kennedy for the Presidency of the United States, for example, fears were rife that being a Catholic meant Kennedy's loyalty was ultimately to the Pope, who would therefore be able to dictate U.S. policy. In China, however, any kind of religion was regarded as potentially dangerous to public life. For that reason it has been carefully controlled. Article 36 of China's constitution expressly defends freedom of religion, but only those religions sanctioned by the government and controlled by it. In China there are only five official religions – Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism – and their actions are carefully monitored by government watchdogs. Any religious group unaffiliated with the approved versions of these does not enjoy legal protection.

Such is the case with the new religious movement known as Falun Gong (or Falun Dafa), which has been under government scrutiny at least since their large-scale protest on 25 April 1999. On that day more than ten thousand adherents gathered to seek governmental recognition for their movement. Their demands were ignored, and the group was banned only a few months later. Since then the persecution of the movement has persisted. Though Chinese state officials are rumoured to have been part of the group in the early 1990s, thousands of people associated with Falun Gong have been detained since the protest.

Falun Gong is a syncretic spiritual system that blends aspects of Buddhism, forms of mysticism and the popular form of exercise known as Qigong (a kind of martial arts training similar to Tai Chi and sometimes called shadow-boxing). The movement has repeatedly stressed that it seeks only legal recognition for its practices, not political power. Still, the PRC has condemned the group as an enemy of the state. What frightened the Chinese officials were two things: the fact that it is not controlled by the government, and its effortless ability to mobilise mass numbers of members in protest rallies. If it can gather such impressive crowds so quickly, the officials reasoned, it could threaten government itself if it chose to do so. Their sheer potential political power, therefore, made them scary.

In Hong Kong, which allows freedom of speech even though it is controlled by the government of China, adherents of Falun Gong have been able to voice their anger against what they regard as a Chinese government pogrom against their movement. At the entrance to the Star Ferry that plies between Hong Kong Island and the peninsula of Kowloon, posters have been mounted that vividly portray what the Falun Gong supporters state are savage attacks on their members by the Chinese police. Clearly, the urban, educated, and middle class supporters of the

Falun Gong movement have not been afraid to speak out against its opponents when they have the chance. They have publicised the Chinese government's discrimination of their movement around the world. Needless to say, this has not helped the politics-free image of an organisation sometimes described as an 'exercise group'. But the worldwide support has shed light on the treatment of Falun Gong practitioners, further calling into question the Chinese government's already spotty record on human rights.

Criticisms of China's human rights record have regularly appeared in global media, but perhaps ironically China has based their charges against the group on the same ground. Chinese officials contend Falun Gong's beliefs cause its practitioners to rely too much on meditation and paranormal methods of healing in opposition to modern medicine. It has also claimed that the group has hijacked state run satellite signals, and even murdered vagrants in order to achieve some sort of ideal spiritual state.⁶ The result of the state's programme has been the removal of many of the movement's spiritual leaders, and the forcing of adherents to move their practices underground. Its charismatic leader in exile Li Hongzhi, often referred to as simply 'Him', continues to attract devotees to his particular brand of spirituality blended with exercise, and the groups numbers have swollen in spite of the PRC's ban. The ban itself has been interpreted by Hongzhi as a test from heaven to be endured, and the actions of China have been read as acts in a kind of apocalyptic scenario.⁷ Tensions continue between the movement and the Chinese government, and vividly portray how a new religious movement with global connections can become politically potent and challenge the authority of nation-states.

MIDDLE EAST – ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS

The rise of new Islamic religious movements and figures has also presented a global political challenge. The political challenges of movements such as Hamas, al Qaeda, and the Islamic State are well known. But even when the movements are not violent in character they can challenge the old religious regimes.

⁶ These accusations came from the Embassy of the People's Republic of China to the United States, "Falun Gong Followers Cruel in Killing the Innocent, July 14, 2003, (<http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/ppflg/t36618.htm>), accessed 27 July 2020.

⁷ For his poetry where he references "The day of reckoning draws near," see "The Red Tide's Wane" at the Falun Dafa's official website: (<http://en.minghui.org/html/articles/2005/10/19/66050.html>), accessed 27 July 2020.

The use of television and the internet to convey religious thoughts and practices has proven very effective in the Middle East, where charismatic personalities challenge traditional religious authorities by directly addressing large numbers of people not only in mosques and in the streets but also in the living rooms of private homes. A model well-known in Western nations, especially in the United States where demagogues such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell are household names, televangelists can spread their message beyond the walls of both church and mosque. The voices of Muslim televangelism in the Middle East speak to all sides of the spectrum – conservative, liberal and moderate – and their popularity has the potential to change the religious discussion without recourse to conventional religious officials. No longer do spiritual teachers require a brick and mortar building; their temples are satellites, beaming their broadcasts on satellite television or YouTube, and the new breed of preachers have harnessed this democratic medium to great effect.

Perhaps no televangelist in the Middle East has proven more effective than 'Amr Khaled, an Egyptian who was ranked by Time Magazine in 2007 as the thirteenth most influential person in the world. A former accountant, Khaled's particular brand of tele-preaching stresses an understanding of Islam that is tolerant and open, and promotes cross-cultural understanding as well as harmony with the West. He has explicitly attacked the mindsets of ultra-conservatives and Salafi Islamic extremism, emphasizing instead the ability for Muslims to be modern, successful and religious with no contradiction. This approach has won him an enormous audience across the Middle East and North Africa, especially in urban areas. His television shows are especially popular in places that have experienced a loss of local traditions and customs, and where individuals are searching for a new way to be Muslim outside the religious rituals and doctrines of their parents. Khaled's preaching has filled that vacuum, and his message has likely spread farther than previously would have been possible.

Khaled himself is both an agent and product of global processes. Fluent in English, he uses an Egyptian vernacular in his programmes as opposed to the formal, classical Arabic favoured by the more traditional Islamic leaders. This choice decreases the distance between him and his viewers, and merges with the general populist trend across the world. His shows are produced by multinational companies, which provided the funds to continue his preaching even after being banned from television in his home country of Egypt. The increased connectivity of the global world made possible by satellite and internet technologies has thwarted any possibility for traditional religious and political leaders to control Khaled's message.

Those technologies have also allowed Khaled to reach and influence huge numbers of people across national boundaries.

The central message of Khaled's preaching is a focus on piety over politics, making him theoretically as apolitical as any other strictly religious organisation, but of course the same can be said of Falun Gong. Moreover, Khaled emphasises the need to demonstrate one's piety in action, rather than in mere words. This emphasis led to the development in 2010 of a television show that put a religious twist on the popular U.S. show *The Apprentice*, brainchild of Donald Trump. The shows are as different as their creators, and Khaled's programme *Mujaddidun* centred on using religious principles to inspire projects aimed at poor and troubled communities. Teams that did the least good in an episode were confronted with 'Amr Khaled himself telling them "you're fired."

Khaled's use of the boardroom format and catch phrase of Donald Trump's show is the only relationship between the two programmes. *Mujaddidun* challenged young Muslims to create effective and sustainable programmes to help those in need across the Arabic world.⁸ The title of the show comes from an Arabic word meaning 'reviver' or 'renewer', and carries the sense of an agent who appears at the end of an era to revitalise Islam itself. This seems to be precisely what Khaled is aiming at: a vision of Islam that highlights care for community and activism rather than obeying strict Islamic rules for behaviour – following what is approved (halal) or avoiding what is forbidden (haram).

Khaled's show has wide influence across national borders. It can focus on humanitarian aid for the poor in Amman, Jordan and be watched by viewers in Sanaa, Yemen and impact viewers' understanding of Islam in both locations. The emphasis on what is possible through faith has shown to be extremely popular with many young Muslims dissatisfied with traditional interpretations of religious doctrine. Khaled's ability to mobilise young believers, however, carries the potential of political power. Like the Falun Gong in China, Khaled's public influence is a concern by governments that are primarily concerned about their own self-preservation. This fear caused Hosni Mubarak's Egyptian government to terminate all of Khaled's projects in his native country after the start of the Arab Spring uprisings. But Khaled is not easily muzzled, and his iconic status has also spawned a wave of other new televangelists, such as Mostafa Hosni whose show *Love Story* discusses issues of faith in the setting of a pop music show.

⁸ Clip of *Mujaddidun* from CNN available at: (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7XWkGqm034>), accessed 27 July 2020.

Khaled's brand of religious television is not the only form of televangelism growing in popularity in the Middle East. The waves of information that allow for voices like Khaled's also carry more conservative voices. One of the more well-known and vociferous Egyptian tele-preachers is Ahmed Abdallah, also known as Abu Islam. Abdallah made international headlines in 2012 when he tore a Christian Bible to shreds before the U.S. Embassy in protest over the inflammatory film *Innocence of Muslims*. Produced by an Egyptian-American in California, *Innocence of Muslims* was considered a vicious attack on the Prophet Muhammad and his followers, which sparked outrage when it was translated into Arabic and linked to the blog of the National American Coptic Assembly. Abdallah's protest was one of many that took place around the Middle East, and the film was initially thought to be the catalyst of the deadly attack on the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi, Libya.

Like the Christian extremist, Florida Pastor Terry Jones, whose public burning of the Qur'an was met with global fury, Abdallah's burning of the Bible brought him a great deal of attention. Previously well-known for his hateful speeches about the Coptic Christian community, his actions in front of the American Embassy in Egypt were part of a demonstration driven mainly by the Muslim extremists, the Salafis, who are the main audience for Abu Islam's sermons. Those sermons found a new home when Abdallah founded the Islamic satellite television channel Al-Omma in 2012. In 2013, however, Abdallah was convicted on charges stemming from Egypt's anti-blasphemy laws, which declare it a crime to show contempt toward any of the 'heavenly religions' of Islam, Christianity and Judaism.⁹ This was one of the few examples of the law's application to the contempt of a religion other than Islam.

Abdallah's conservative style of preaching has a complement in Khaled Abdullah (no relation to Abdallah, nor to the moderate Muslim televangelist, Amr Khaled). Abdullah claims to be a Sheik and his Salafist message closely resembles that of his contemporary, Abdallah. On his talk show, set in Egypt and broadcast on satellite television channel Al-Nas, Abdullah also railed against the film perceived as blasphemous and blamed Coptic Christians for its creation and production. He spread that message at least as far as the estimated 300,000 viewers who visited his YouTube channel.

Abdullah's rants do not only fall upon the Copts, as much of the world finds its way into his tele-preaching. He has accused secularists of being homosexuals, Shi'ites of planning the downfall of Islam, and has spit hatred against the West, the

⁹ Al Youm, Al Masry. 2013. "Abu Islam to Serve Five Years in Prison for Defaming Christianity." *Egypt Independent*. Online, posted December 18, 2013.

Jewish people and the nations of Israel and Iran. On his programme he blamed the uprising in Egypt on foolish children who were being controlled by Western interests, and spoke for the need of a return of traditional moral values that are contained, he claims, only in the Salafi ideology.

These examples highlight the conflicting narratives playing out on satellite and internet television channels. On the one hand are those television celebrities who might be said to be of the Facebook generation: liberal, secular, university educated and led by the popular televangelist 'Amr Khaled. Traditional government and religious leaders find them threatening. On the other hand are the televised conservative, anti-Western Islamist voices. They have likewise been suppressed but still find internet and television outlets that allow them to reach a large transnational audience. And in the middle are the traditional religious institutions that for centuries have had a virtual monopoly on the religious communications that are conveyed to the masses. Their place as guardians of the faith have been bypassed by a genre of popular religious figures that have broken all the old institutional boundaries and no longer have any need for their custody or support.

CONCLUSION

In the multicultural era of globalisation, religion has often been used as a badge of identity politics. It has been used by extremist Muslims to demarcate what they regard as the true definition of the faith, and with it a clear distinction between those who are legitimately Muslim and those who are not. It creates a religious in-group. Exactly the same phenomenon is at work among right-wing Evangelical Christians who want to assert the social and political primacy for their kind of people – an identity that is partly defined by race and ethnicity, and partly by religious affiliation.

The explosion of membership in these new religious groups appears to be symptomatic of the challenges posed by the new shape of the global world. With the unstable boundaries of identity and increased interconnection between people, religion is often seen to offer stability amidst the shifting sands. Even religious movements that are considered 'new' locate themselves in relation to ancient traditions based in the cultural makeup of the populace. People taking part in these new movements can find a sense of community, a *trusted* authority that is an alternative to the establishment's authority, and meaning for their lives within the bounds of religion, all of which link back to traditions anchored in the past.

Dramatic social changes in the global era have upset the old national centres of power. The weakening of the nation-state, the emergence of transnational

communities of identity and interaction, and the ability of modern technology to give voice to individuals and once-marginal elements of society have all challenged the national status quo. A new global anti-authoritarianism is in the works that in its best moments looks like democratic populism and in its worse moments looks like anarchy. These changes are shaking the foundations of the old religious establishments. Sometimes this anti-authoritarian religiosity has resulted in an explosion of violence, self-harm and hatred. Other times it has forged new concepts of communal support and administration. In yet other instances it has joined forces with political leadership to attempt new forms of religious nationalism. It is not clear which, if any, of these alternatives to the traditional status quo religious institutions will dominate, or indeed if the expressions and organisation of religion in the 21st century will ever look the same as they have in the past.

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Political Trust in the Time of COVID-19 in Germany

*Jasmin Riedl*¹

1. GOVERNMENTAL DECISION MAKING AND PUBLIC SUPPORT

During the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis in Germany that lasted from March to May 2020, parliamentary participation in political decisions declined in the face of executive-dominated decision making. However, the majority of citizens supported the measures taken and the governmental actions at federal and state levels, which thus underlines a high degree of output legitimacy. Moreover, the input legitimacy in the sense of specific support for the governing staff has increased during the COVID-19 crisis. At least regarding the first wave of COVID-19,² citizens in Germany had confidence in the government's problem-solving capacities. This development is a glimmer of hope for the current federal coalition government, because findings on the permanence of political support in times of crises are equivocal.³ Before March 2020, support for the federal government parties had sunk to a historic low but increased significantly after the COVID-19 pandemic started in Germany, whereas the opposition parties lost the favour of the electorate across the board.⁴

¹ I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Dirk Lüddecke, Dr. Wiebke Drews and Rabea Barth for their helpful comments on the paper.

² The paper was written in August 2020, when the second wave slowly started.

³ Healy, Andrew, and Malhorta, Neil. 2009. "Myopic Voters and Natural Disaster Policy". *American Political Science Review*, 103 (3): 400; Bechtel, Michael M., and Hainmueller, Jens. 2011. "How Lasting Is Voter Gratitude? An Analysis of the Short- and Long-Term Electoral Returns to Beneficial Policy". *American Journal of Political Science*, 55 (4): 865–866.

⁴ IfD Allensbach Institut für Demoskopie. 2020. Sonntagsfrage, (<https://www.ifd-allensbach.de/studien-und-berichte/sonntagsfrage/gesamt.html>), accessed 30 July 2020.

This trend is also evident in other European countries.⁵ Against this background, the present paper wants to examine the reasons behind the comparatively high levels of political trust in German coalition government in times of Covid-19.

Times of crisis are not just times when governments are at the centre of attention and political decisions are (largely) made without parliamentary involvement – for example, by decrees or orders. They are above all also times of short-term cross-party consensus. This is the only reason why this kind of executive-driven governing is possible in Germany:⁶ members of parliament are willing to put competition and rivalry aside for a short time period. Party colours have become pastel shades.

Crises increase the urgency to act, especially those crises with an overwhelming, widespread economic impact. This is the case with the COVID-19 pandemic, of course in conjunction with the massive health challenges. In addition to the urgency, voters are particularly aware of how well politicians cooperate. Party-political skirmishes are perceived as unnecessary in these times. The party-political debate, which is generally essential from a democratic point of view, is then quickly interpreted as poor prioritisation. The electorate punishes the elected quickly and effectively by withdrawing votes. In particular, voters expect the representatives to be able to act.⁷ If expectations are not fulfilled, the incumbency effect – according to the retrospective voting assumption – can have a negative impact during the next election.⁸ Conversely, if representatives fulfil their responsibilities, “retrospective performance evaluation”⁹ can strengthen trust in political actors, and those in government have an advantage, because they are officially in charge and can more easily reap the rewards for successful action.

In the course of the COVID-19 crisis, the population in Germany has had to accept significant limitations: week-long exit restrictions (but no nationwide curfew),

⁵ Bol, Damien, Giani, Marco, Blais, André, and Loewen, Peter John. 2020. “The effect of COVID-19 lockdowns on political support: Some good news for democracy?”. *European Journal of Political Research*.

⁶ Riedl, Jasmin. 2019. “Uncovering legislative pace in Germany: A methodical and computational application to answer temporal questions of law-making”. *Government Information Quarterly*, 36 (4).

⁷ Healy and Malhorta. Op. cit.: 388.

⁸ Achen, Christopher H., and Bartels, Larry M. 2004. “Blind Retrospection. Electoral Responses to Drought, Flue, and Shark Attacks”. *Estudio/Working Paper*; Fiorina, Morris Paul. 1981. *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁹ Bol et al. Op. cit.: 6.

home schooling, short-time work, business closures, and the obligation to wear masks. Visits to nursing homes and hospitals were prohibited. The deceased could not be buried as usual. These measures do not only have short-term economic and social consequences; the medium- and long-term consequences are already becoming evident.¹⁰ Despite these restrictions, the federal and state governments – insofar as they followed a strict course of action – have garnered enormous support. However, this support goes beyond the mere voter’s consent to laws passed and infection control measures taken: trust in the federal government with regard to the management of the COVID-19 crisis has been extraordinarily high. At least temporarily, there was little sign of a crisis of confidence in politics.

The federal government has been considered capable in overcoming the greatest health crisis since the Federal Republic of Germany was founded, although the competence in infection control measures in the federal system of Germany was and still is mainly in the hands of the German Länder. The COVID-19 crisis in Germany shows that political actors can win the support of the people they represent, but they must demonstrate their ability to act and convince the electorate of the necessity of measures taken and policies adopted. Here, media coverage has helped to assess politics by showing that countries such as Italy, Spain and France were being overrun by COVID-19 and that populist behaviour by heads of state in countries like the USA and Brazil was exacerbating the disaster. Thus, developments in other countries have made it easier for the people to assess the quality of German decision making. At the very beginning of the crisis, this was the primary reference point against which government action and measures were positively assessed, which subsequently increased trust in the coalition government. This paper explores this phenomenon. It shows that the COVID-19 crisis has created very specific conditions that have made it easier for citizens to trust the government in advance. The latter is fostered further by governmental actions to deal with the pandemic. Chapter 2 briefly explains the general importance of trust and distrust in democratic states and highlights the specific characteristics regarding political trust during the COVID-19 pandemic. This reveals that and why the people initially trusted the federal government to deal with COVID-19 independent of a retrospective performance evaluation. Chapter 3 is then based on a survey by the GESIS Leibniz Institute and focuses on the policy evaluation. The results show that the retrospectively awarded high level of trust in the federal government in the

¹⁰ Fetzer, Thiemo, Hensel, Lukas, Hermle, Johannes, and Roth, Christopher. 2020. “Coronavirus Perceptions and Economic Anxiety”. arXiv, (arXiv:2003.03848v4).

COVID-19 crisis resulted from the following factors: the assessment of the effectiveness of government action in various areas, (to some degree) the assessment of the effectiveness of concrete measures, voting intentions, and the willingness to obey further measures.

2. POLITICAL TRUST IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

In recent years, research on trust has become a popular topic in political sciences, sociology, and philosophy. This chapter cannot fully capture these debates; thus, after a few general remarks, I focus on a small section of the topic: specific trust in political actors, which is strengthened by the individual, positive evaluation of policy outputs.

Trust is an accomplishment for the future. Generally speaking, it is given because past experience and possible futures cannot be brought into complete alignment; otherwise, we would not have to trust, we could align both by calculation. However, trust is granted due to uncertainty in order to close the gap between the past and the future. Trust insures uncertainty. During the first COVID-19 wave, this gap between the experienced past and the expected future was particularly pronounced. In general, crises make people more sensitive to uncertainty.

Trust can refer to different aspects of political life: trust in the political system, trust in political processes, and trust in political actors. The latter is closely linked to the responsibility for an entrusted office¹¹ and thus representation.¹² Consequently, trust is a core concept of democracy: modern democracies only function if the people can and will trust that representatives will responsibly use the power delegated to them. By the same token, mistrust is also part of democracy. With distrust, a society fulfils its control function over the elected actors: “democracies emerged from *distrust*, particularly of elite power-holders.”¹³

Citizens place their trust in advance. In doing so, they act in advance for the future actions of their elected representatives. From an individual perspective, political trust is usually also based on individual experience. However, at the beginning of the pandemic, there was a lack of concrete experience regarding the federal

¹¹ Rosanvallon, Pierre. 2018. *Die gute Regierung*. Berlin: Suhrkamp: 283–285.

¹² Ottmann, Henning. 1993. Verantwortung und Vertrauen als normative Prinzipien der Politik. In: *Philosophie der Gegenwart – Gegenwart der Philosophie*, Schnädelbach, Herbert, and Keil, Geert, ed. Hamburg: Junius Verlag GmbH: 368.

¹³ Warren, Mark. 2018. Trust and Democracy. In: *The Oxford handbook of social and political trust*, Uslaner, Eric M., ed. New York: Oxford University Press: 76.

government's ability to act in this area. Instead, there was first alarming reporting from abroad and second a large consensus in and between politics, science, and the media. This is a major difference from other crisis situations: climate crisis and the so-called refugee crisis offer significantly more space for ideological critique and political conflict. In the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, the absence of the ideological loading of the debate made it easier for citizens to place their trust in the government.

Political actors can strengthen or weaken the trust of those represented.¹⁴ In times of crises, political personnel's ability to shape the public debate is even higher.¹⁵ Political actors, especially governments, can demonstrate their performance more immediately: the time lag between the problem and the answer is extremely short, and the public attentively follows crisis management and communication. This enables political actors to shape the debate more directly. Crises are therefore particularly suitable for gaining trust if citizens approve the measures taken to overcome the crisis and if they consider a government's action effective. On the other hand, the negative evaluation of policies and their implementation can cost political trust.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the people in Germany have placed a significant, high level of trust in the federal government. This has been given on the basis of crisis management, which has been perceived as successful. Prior to this, months of party political and personnel disputes within the CDU/CSU and SPD tended to cast doubt on whether the governmental actors do their jobs. However, in March 2020 the public debate shifted towards the question of how political actors are dealing with the challenges of the pandemic. The public debate began to be more oriented towards policy outputs.

The trust attribution with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic can in principle be either a consequence of the "rally around the flag"¹⁶ – which means it is the crisis it-

¹⁴ Bechtel and Hainmueller. 2011. Op. cit.

¹⁵ Healy and Malhorta. 2009. Op. cit.: 399; Sibley, Chris G., Greaves, Lara M., and Satherley, Nicole et al. 2020. "Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide lockdown on trust, attitudes toward government, and well-being". *The American psychologist*, 75 (5): 619–620; van Bavel, Jay J., Baicker, Katherine, and Boggio, Paulo S. et al. 2020. "Using social and behavioural science to support COVID-19 pandemic response". *Nature Human Behaviour* (4).

¹⁶ Skitka, Linda J. 2005. "Patriotism or Nationalism? Understanding Post-September 11, 2001, Flag-Display Behavior". *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 35 (10): 1995–2011; Hetherington, Marc J., and Nelson, Michael. 2003. "Anatomy of a Rally Effect: George W. Bush and the War on Terrorism". *Political Science and Politics*, 36 (01): 37–42.

self that increases trust in politics – or the evaluation of policies.¹⁷ This could only be tested in a longitudinal study, which is not possible with the cross-sectional nature of the data used here. However, Bol et al. found no evidence for the “rally around the flag” effect but rather for “retrospective policy evaluation”.¹⁸

3. TRUST IN THE GERMAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT DURING THE FIRST WAVE OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS

At the beginning of the pandemic, specific conditions were certainly helpful for the initial attribution of trust to the federal government. Media coverage showed that Germany was doing well in coping with the pandemic. In addition, there was a broad consensus between politics and science. If such actors had different positions, these were not substantially ideological. This increased the federal government’s credibility and thereby strengthened citizens’ willingness to trust the government to deal with the COVID-19 crisis.¹⁹ After this initial phase, however, fostering said trust through concrete political action which could be evaluated directly by the public was essential and is examined in more detail here.

In this chapter, trust in the federal government’s coping with the COVID-19 crisis is considered from an individual perspective. In a first explanatory model based on a special survey by the GESIS Panel,²⁰ government-specific trust as the dependent variable is measured on a scale from 1 (“don’t trust at all”) to 5 (“entirely trust”). The explanatory variables are derived from five areas: (1) evaluation of the effectiveness of governmental action, (2) evaluation of the effectiveness of concrete measures, (3) willingness to obey future measures, (4) voting intention, and (5) socio-economic status (SES), all of which are explained in more detail below. The regression analysis includes 2,223 respondents who expressed their opinions on the relevant items between 17 March and 29 March 2020. The coefficient of determination (R^2) provides information about the models’ explained variance: with a value

¹⁷ Sibley et al. Op. cit.: 626; Bol et al. Op. cit.: 6; Kumlin, Staffan, Stadelmann-Steffen, Isabelle, and Atle Haugsgjerd. 2018. “Trust and the Welfare State”. In: *The Oxford handbook of social and political trust*, Eric M. Uslaner, ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁸ Bol et al. Op. cit.: 6.

¹⁹ The anti-Corona demonstrations as a sign of dissatisfaction and criticism of the government followed much later. Moreover, although they are an expression of the change of mood in a part of the population, they are by no means capable of winning a majority.

²⁰ GESIS Panel Team. 2020. GESIS Panel Special Survey on the Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 Outbreak in Germany, Cologne.

of 0.459, this is particularly high and shows that the independent variables explain approximately 46% of the variance in government-specific trust. The enumerated variables will be explained below.

The table presents the results of the linear regression analysis. All variables are treated categorically.²¹

Trust in the Federal Government in Dealing with COVID-19

	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Government Measures		
<i>Provision of Medical Care</i>		
Too few		<i>Reference Category</i>
Rather too few	.273***	.062
Just right	.543***	.064
Rather too many	.219	.180
Too many	.888*	.376
<i>Restriction of Social Life</i>		
Too few		<i>Reference Category</i>
Rather too few	-.029	.070
Just right	.106	.067
Rather too many	-.007	.090
Too many	-.312†	.179
<i>Reduction of Economic Damage</i>		
Too few		<i>Reference Category</i>
Rather too few	.309***	.064
Just right	.456***	.066
Rather too many	.171†	.093
Too many	.200	.192
<i>Communication with Population</i>		
Too few		<i>Reference Category</i>
Rather too few	.560***	.075
Just right	.966***	.075
Rather too many	.700***	.097
Too many	.898***	.186
Concrete Measures		
<i>Closure of Day-Care Centres, Kindergartens, and Schools</i>		
Not effective at all		<i>Reference Category</i>
Less effective	.733†	.435
Partly effective	.897*	.437
Quite effective	1.061*	.435
Very effective	1.108*	.437

²¹ An overview of all items can be found in the survey's codebook.

	Coefficients	Standard Error
Closure of Shops		
Not effective at all		<i>Reference Category</i>
Less effective	-.556*	.217
Partly effective	-.370 [†]	.217
Quite effective	-.201	.219
Very effective	-.095	.221
Closure of Bars, Cafés, and Restaurants		
Not effective at all		<i>Reference Category</i>
Less effective	-.373	.436
Partly effective	-.133	.444
Quite effective	-.086	.444
Very effective	-.137	.446
Closure of Sports Clubs and Fitness Centres		
Not effective at all		<i>Reference Category</i>
Less effective	1.042*	.520
Partly effective	.925 [†]	.520
Quite effective	.827	.517
Very effective	.822	.520
Ban on Visiting Hospitals, Nursing Homes, and Old People's Homes		
Not effective at all		<i>Reference Category</i>
Less effective	-.052	.294
Partly effective	-.032	.278
Quite effective	-.054	.275
Very effective	.038	.274
Future Measures		
Obey Curfew		
Yes		<i>Reference Category</i>
No	-.249***	.066
Work in a critical profession	-.071	.054
Voting Intentions		
Intention to Vote		
No, would not cast vote		<i>Reference Category</i>
Yes, would cast vote	.377*	.166
Choice of Party		
Government Parties (CDU, CSU, SPD)		<i>Reference Category</i>
FDP	-.079	.059
Die Linke	-.285***	.056
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	-.082*	.040
AfD	-.716***	.059
Other	-.454***	.100
SES		
Education		
Low		<i>Reference Category</i>
Moderate	.011	.059
High	.015	.056
Constant	.370	.398
R ²		0.459
N		2,223

[†]p = .10, *p = .05, **p = .01, ***p = .001

1. Trust in the federal government is first and foremost trust in the governing personnel.²² The federal government must be perceived as a responsible actor and in its communication activities must demonstrate that diverse interests, concerns and needs are considered in governmental actions. The government must therefore prove that it fulfils its representative functions. Consequently, trust should be high among those respondents who rated the government's actions in different fields as effective. The respondents' evaluation of governmental action was measured with four items: the effectiveness of government action with regard to (1) the provision of medical care, (2) the restriction of social life, (3) the reduction of economic damage, and (4) communication with the population. The scale ranges from 1 ("too few") to 5 ("too many").

Regarding the evaluation of communication behaviour, trust in the federal government is significantly and substantially higher for all respondents who did not evaluate measures as being "too few". Trust is highest among those considering communication to be "just right" ($\beta = 0.966^{***}$). Those respondents are almost one point higher on the 5-point Likert scale compared to the "too few" category. A similar picture emerges with regard to government action to reduce economic damage. Again, all respondents who do not consider the efforts to be "too few" trust more. Trust is highest among those who consider economic policy action to be "just right" ($\beta = 0.456^{***}$). The evaluation of government measures regarding medical care also covaries with governmental trust: interestingly, however, those responding that the government took "too many" measures trust most ($\beta = 0.888^*$). In terms of restrictions on social life, the only statistically significant relationship exists between respondents rating measures as "too many" ($\beta = -0.312^\dagger$) compared to "too few", with the former demonstrating a substantial loss in trust.

2. Support is also based on the evaluation of concrete measures that have an immediate impact on daily life and work. Consequently, trust in the federal government should also be based on individual evaluations of the effectiveness of such concrete measures. Here, a direct effect of policy evaluation on trust should become visible, especially because the federal government has been highly present in the media and has been perceived as a rigorous mediator and coordinator between the sometimes-diverging interests of the German Länder.²³ Accordingly, trust in

²² Newton, Kenneth, Stolle, Dietlind, and Zmerli, Sonja. 2018. "Social and Political Trust". In: *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*, Uslaner, Eric M., ed. New York: Oxford University Press: 41.

²³ Käppner, Joachim, and Rossbach, Henrike. 2020. "Kontaktverbot in Deutschland". *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 23 March 2020: 1.

the federal government should be high among those respondents who consider concrete measures effective, even if responsibility lies at the state level due to the administrative federalism (“Verwaltungsföderalismus”).²⁴ Hence, citizens in the German states, districts, and cities have been affected by the measures to varying degrees, especially in the initial phase of the pandemic.

To measure the individual evaluation of concrete measures, five items were included in the model: the evaluation of the effectiveness of (1) the closure of day-care centres, kindergartens, and schools; (2) closure of all shops except supermarkets and pharmacies; (3) closure of bars, cafés, and restaurants; (4) closure of sports clubs and fitness centres; and (5) ban on visiting hospitals, nursing homes, and old people’s homes. The scale ranges from 1 (“not effective at all”) to 5 (“very effective”).

Significant correlations with trust in the federal government exist for three measures. In this respect, the results differ from those of other researchers who have not found any effect of such “policy responses of smaller scale” on “political support”.²⁵ Overall, the results are less clear-cut than is the case for government action, and the effects are in part negative. A clear, positive, and significant correlation exists only with regard to the closure of kindergartens and schools. Here, all response categories are significant: compared to those who considered such closures “not effective at all”, all other respondents have significantly and substantially more trust in the government. The more effective the measure was considered, the stronger both the substantial and statistical significance. Those who consider such closures “very effective” ($\beta = 1.108^*$) demonstrated the highest trust. They are more than one point higher on the 5-point Likert scale than respondents who rated the measure “not effective at all”.

The evaluation of sports clubs closures also shows a correlation with trust in the government. However, compared to those who believe those measures to be “not effective at all”, respondents deeming them “less effective” ($\beta = 1.042^*$) or “partly” effective ($\beta = 0.925^{\dagger}$), revealed a higher level of trust. In contrast, there is a negative and in some cases significant correlation in the evaluation of store closure. Respondents who consider shop closures “not effective at all” trust the federal government more than those respondents who consider them “less effective” ($\beta = -0.556^*$) or “partly effective” ($\beta = -.370^{\dagger}$). The evaluation of restaurant closures

²⁴ Whereby a reform in the end of March shifted some competencies toward the federal level.

²⁵ Bol et al. Op. cit.: 7.

or hospital visitation bans are not statistically significant and thus do not contribute to the explanation of trust in the federal government.

The lack of clarity of the connection between concrete measures in the local area and the attribution of trust to the federal government seems to indicate that the measures are associated with different territorial levels and are weighted differently for the attribution of trust. Whereas day-care centres, schools, shops, and sports are (partly) important and are associated with the government, restaurants and hospitals seem to be less relevant for the attribution of trust. However, it is also possible that the respondents tend to attribute measures concerning hospitals and restaurants locally – that is, to responsible local actors – rather than associating them with the federal government.

3. People who would be willing to obey curfews – which have not been enforced nationwide in Germany – should have more trust in the federal government. There is a reciprocal effect here: curfews are a possible future measure. For this reason, their acceptance is, on the one hand, a consequence of the infectiological situation and the individual assessment of whether or not a curfew could be appropriate. On the other hand, it can also be assumed that respondents would comply with a curfew because they support the current executive approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the answer to the question “Would you obey the curfew?” is also an expression of confidence that such a drastic measure would not be taken imprudently. Overall, the willingness to obey curfews should correlate positively with trust in the federal government.

The willingness to obey curfews has a positive and significant correlation with trust. Those who would be willing to obey a curfew trust the federal government more than those who would not. Thus, those who refuse to comply are about 0.25 points lower on the confidence scale ($\beta = -0.249^{***}$). This also shows that the willingness to follow drastic infectiological measures can be positively influenced by the trust given. To this extent, the federal government can strengthen the people's willingness to comply with infectiological measures if it succeeds in winning their trust.

4. Voting intention influences trust in the federal government. People affiliated with governing parties evaluate their policies more positively than supporters of opposition parties. There is also a reciprocal effect here: voters who support the government's actions should be more likely to vote for those parties. During the COVID-19 pandemic, all opposition parties have lost voters' support in favour of the governing coalition. Differences in the attribution of trust should be most clearly visible compared to AfD voters. Accordingly, trust in the federal government should

be higher among those respondents who answered the “Sonntagsfrage”²⁶ in favour of the governing parties. Both the respondents’ answers regarding their intention to vote (“no, would not cast vote”, “yes, would cast vote”) as well as the party they would cast their ballot for were included in the model. Thereby, cabinet parties (CDU/CSU and SPD) were counted as one entity.

The individual voting behaviour is statistically significant. Voters with voting intentions ($\beta = 0.377^{***}$) trust the federal government more than people who do not want to vote. The disenchantment with politics expressed in the act of not voting and the associated lack of trust in political personnel is also evident in the time of COVID-19. The effect of the intended voting decision is also clear. Those who would cast their ballot for one of the governing parties trust the federal government the most, which resonates with other empirical findings.²⁷

There is no significant difference in levels of trust in the federal government between FDP voters and cabinet parties. With regard to all other parties, the loss of trust seems to be lowest among the supporters of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen ($\beta = -0.082^*$): green voters trust the federal government in the COVID-19 crisis less than government supporters but more than supporters of the left ($\beta = -0.285^{***}$) and “other” parties ($\beta = -0.454^{***}$). The differences are greatest between AfD (-0.716^{***}) and cabinet parties’ supporters. The former trust the federal government the least.

5. Finally, one argument is that those who are economically and socially better off are more likely to trust political actors, because they are more capable of coping with potential disappointments as they have more resources to handle disappointment.²⁸ If one assumes that the better off have this status because they enjoyed more education, then a high level of educational attainment among respondents should have a positive effect on trust during this pandemic.

However, contrary to this assumption, educational background has no relevance for political trust and is not statistically significant. Regarding trust in the time of COVID-19, educational attainment is apparently irrelevant when it is modelled together with the evaluation of government action, the effectiveness of concrete measures, and party affiliation.

²⁶ The Sunday question is a standard question for voting intention in Germany. It asks: “If next Sunday there was a parliamentary election, which of the following parties would you choose?”

²⁷ Bol et al. 2020. Op. cit.

²⁸ Zmerli, Sonja, and Newton, Ken. 2011. “Winners, Losers and Three Types of Trust”. In: *Political Trust: Why Context Matters*. Zmerli, Sonja and Hooghe, Marc, ed. Colchester: ECPR Press: 67–94.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper presents a brief initial explanation for the reasons of trust in the coalition government during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. It shows that the federal government was able to gain the people's trust. Trust increased because people positively evaluated the government's action and (to some extent) concrete past and possible future measures. Moreover, trust is given by those who are willing to give their vote to the governing parties.

Trust is an achievement for the future. Generally speaking, it is given because past experience and possible futures cannot be brought into complete alignment. This is especially virulent in times of crises. Therefore, people need governments who take their responsibility for the entrusted office seriously and act effectively and transparently. As Sibley et al. concluded concerning the COVID-19 pandemic in New Zealand, the "results suggest that in the short term, bold and decisive action – even that which puts the economy at risk – has the potential to bring people together at the national or state level."²⁹ The German government was able to increase the peoples' willingness to bear the costs³⁰ to combat the pandemic.

The optimistic view drawn in this paper has its limits though, which is reflected in recent anti-COVID-19 demonstrations in Germany. The infectiological measures taken by the government to cope with the pandemic also provoke anxieties and, simultaneously, bring together very different (ideological) perspectives that seemed incompatible before: For some demonstrators the sheer obligation to wear a mask is unbearable. Others are scared of compulsory vaccination. These positions are partly mixed with conspiracy theory and right-wing extremism. Such individuals are united by the perception that the measures are a sign for the government's alleged intention to curtail individual freedoms and basic civil rights and to increase the state's power over society. However, the demonstrations are no symptom for a general and decreasing lack of governmental trust of society at large. On the contrary, support and trust remains high as various polls report. The demonstrations, therefore, reflect by no means a majority opinion. Nevertheless, politicians need to take measures carefully and explain their necessity patiently as communication is key here. Independent of the demonstrations, criticism is already increasing as the pandemic confronts many citizens, businesses, students, and parents among others with wide-ranging consequences in both private and public spheres.

²⁹ Sibley et al. Op. cit.: 625.

³⁰ Tomankova, Ivana. 2019. "An Empirically-Aligned Concept of Trust in Government". NISPAcee Journal of Public Administration and Policy, 12 (1): 169.

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Pandemic Trust: China-Italy Relations during COVID-19

Giulia Sciorati

INTRODUCTION

Before the global spread of COVID-19, China was reaping victory after victory through the massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the country's vast international infrastructural project that has increasingly come to resemble a real foreign policy strategy. Other than the considerable success achieved in the Pacific, where China has managed to snatch away from Taiwan two of the island's few remaining allies by offering economic support and favourable trade agreements,¹ the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed with Italy on 23 March 2019 remains one of China's greatest victories.² However, COVID-19 has not only presented the world with the main modern health and economic crises, but also challenged China's international rise, calling into question the reputational approach the country adopted to engage the world.

Based on this premise, this paper examines the soft power and public diplomacy strategies China implemented during the pandemic to preserve Italy's support on the international stage and re-build public trust at an exceptionally sensitive juncture for bilateral relations. In particular, in light of Italy's "special relation" with

¹ Dezan Shira and Associates. 2020. "China Completes Pacific Islands Sweep As Kiribati Signs Up To The Belt & Road Initiative". *Silk Road Briefing*. January 13. <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2020/01/13/china-completes-pacific-islands-sweep-kiribati-signs-belt-road-initiative/>.

² Baldassarre, Rita, trans. 2019. "Via Della Seta, Ecco Il Testo Dell'Intesa Italia-Cina". *Corriere Della Sera*, March 12. https://www.corriere.it/economia/19_marzo_12/via-seta-testo-dell-intesa-l-italia-cina-versione-inglese-traduzione-italiano-9ea09020-44c2-11e9-b3b0-2162e8762643.shtml.

China, the paper asks whether specific tools or narratives were employed to engage the country during the crisis.

The analysis is divided into three sections. First, the main principles of China's foreign engagement are presented, together with a discussion on the challenges the country faced to preserve them in recent years. The second section looks at the specific case of Italy, discussing the state of bilateral relations during the pandemic and identifying the tools China employed to raise its status with the European partner, both at institutional and public levels. Lastly, the main narratives constructed in China's political discourse towards Italy are discussed in relation to the principles that govern China's modern foreign policy. The paper concludes by reviewing the main findings.

REBRANDING "CHINA" ABROAD

China's pandemic challenge has proven to be different from the rest of the world. In addition to being forced to confront a health and economic crisis like the entire international community, China has also faced a significant reputational challenge as the place where the outbreak started. Because it is the country of origin of the virus and a superpower that exercises influence through investments and development projects, during the pandemic, China witnessed public opinion shutter around the world, on the one hand, jeopardising its international standing and, on the other, shaking its core principles of foreign engagement. Seven-years-worth of engagement-building through the BRI and 850-billion-dollars-worth of investments around the world,³ in fact, are now endangered by the potential estrangement of the international community from the country.

China is actually no stranger to the issue of foreign support. The country has often had to come to terms with the risks of dealing with negative foreign public opinion in the recent past. In July 2018, for instance, Malaysia's newly elected Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad suspended the BRI-sponsored East Coast Rail Link, a planned 640kilometrelong double-track high speed railway connecting the South China Sea to the Straits of Malacca.⁴ Mohamad in fact distrusted China's goodwill after the Hambantota port *affaire* in Sri Lanka, as the island's government had

³ The number includes BRI and non-BRI projects. See Scissors, Derek. 2020. "China Global Investment Tracker". Washington D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (AEI). <http://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>.

⁴ Sipalan, Joseph. 2019. "China, Malaysia Restart Massive 'Belt and Road' Project After Hiccups". *Reuters*, July 25. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-silkroad-malaysia-idUSKCN1UK0DG>.

become insolvent on Chinese loans and had then been forced to lease the port to China for 99 years the year before.⁵ Malaysia's distrust eventually cost China a year's suspension of works and 5.4 billion dollars of cost reduction.⁶ A similar experience on a larger scale would prove devastating for the country, especially now that China is experiencing a deep economic crisis like the rest of the world.

As exemplified by the Malaysian case, China's global reputation remains a priority, even more so as the country starts the post-pandemic recovery phase. After all, the virus has struck directly at the concept that regulates Chinese foreign engagement – that is, the presentation of the country as a “responsible stakeholder”. However, it is worth noting that this concept entered Chinese discourse from the outside. It was Robert Zoellick, Deputy Secretary of State of the United States (US) in fact who made the connection in a 2005 speech, during which he stated: “[T]he essential question is – how will China use its influence? ... We need to urge China to become a responsible stakeholder ... China has a responsibility to strengthen the international system that has enabled its success”.⁷

Since then, the concept has stuck with Chinese leaders, who commonly adopt it as the baseline for presenting an alternative model of engagement to the US. The issue of China's international responsibility is thus frequently raised in comparison with the actions of the US administration, which are qualified as being “less responsible”, especially when East Asia is involved. American regional influence is in fact presented as a destabilising force, as it risks precipitating unresolved tensions between China and neighbours such as Japan and South Korea.⁸ At the same time, the concept is also employed to highlight China's positive contributions to the in-

⁵ Sautman, Barry, and Hairong Yan. 2019. “Truth About Debt Traps”. *South China Morning Post*, May 6, sec. Comment.

⁶ Grassi, Sergio. 2020. “The Belt and Road Initiative in Malaysia: China's Geopolitics and Geoeconomics Challenged by Democratic Transformation”. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/16766.pdf>.

⁷ Zoellick, Robert. 2005. “Whither China? From Membership to Responsibility”. Presented at the Remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, New York, September 21. https://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/Zoellick_remarks_notes06_winter_spring.pdf.

⁸ Bowie, Julia. 2016. “China: A Responsible Stakeholder?” *The National Interest*, May 10. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/china-responsible-stakeholder-16131>.

ternational system and the United Nations (UN) in particular, emphasising the role played by the country in UN peacekeeping operations.⁹

It is worth noting that a substantial difference exists in the concept when it is applied in American or Chinese discourse. In Mandarin Chinese, the concept is in fact rendered as 负责任大国 (Fù zérèn dàguó), which literally means “responsible great power” instead of “responsible stakeholder” as it is presented in the US.¹⁰ This phrasing entails that China’s role in the international system is interpreted differently, on the one hand, as a contributor to the international order and, on the other, as one of its key players. For instance, in the traditional Work Report of the 2015 “Two Sessions”, Premier Li Keqiang affirmed that “relations and cooperation with other countries have become more and more solid, and China’s image as a responsible power on the international stage increasingly prominent”.¹¹ Li’s quote details how the concept operates in Chinese discourse, while also emphasising its primacy in the country’s foreign policy strategy, as it is included among the issues reported in the main annual event of China’s political life.

As discussed in this section, China’s image as a responsible stakeholder/power was not created during the pandemic, but is historically eradicated in the country’s political discourse. The concept thus lies at the basis of China’s foreign engagement and was especially exploited in promoting the BRI. As the pandemic raised doubts on the conformity of this image to reality, it did not only weaken the concept *per se* but also lowered the level of trust by China’s foreign partners. Therefore, attempts to direct the international narrative during COVID-19 are to be considered as an effort to build a new, positive image of the country and restore trust in China’s ability to operate as the main power in the international system. In this regard, China-Italy relations make an interesting case. On the one hand, bilateral relations experienced a revival shortly before the pandemic, strengthening the connection between the two countries in different sectors. On the other, Italy has recently acquired a

⁹ For a discussion on China’s growing role in UN peacekeeping operations, please see Sciorati, Giulia. 2020. “Chinese Tides in the Upper Western Indian Ocean”. *Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)*. March 20. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/chinese-tides-upper-western-indian-ocean-25309>.

¹⁰ Duggal, Niall. 2015. “China’s Changing Role in Africa”. In *China’s International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order?*, edited by Sebastian Harnisch, Sebastian Bersick, and Jörn-Carsten Gottwald, 207–25. London and New York: Routledge.

¹¹ See Li Keqiang as cited in Liu, Xiaopeng. 2015. “李克强：中国在国际舞台上负责任大国形象日益彰显 (Lǐ Kèqiáng: Zhōngguó Zài Guójì Wǔtái Shàng Fù Zérèn Dàguó Xíngxiàng Rìyì Zhāngxiǎn)”. *Xinhua News Agency*, March 5. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015lh/2015-03/05/c_1114527770.htm.

privileged position among China's foreign partners, as the sole economy in the "Group of Seven" officially to join the BRI and, as a consequence, offers significant external support to the project as a whole.

CRITICAL JUNCTURES IN CHINA-ITALY RELATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC/CRISIS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Italy played the unfortunate role of the first European hotspot. The epidemic started on 31 January 2020, after two Chinese tourists in Rome tested positive for the virus.¹² In the same period, coronavirus cases in China had neared 79,000.¹³ The case of the two tourists, in particular, proved to be particularly significant for stimulating China-Italy relations. Indeed, other than encouraging a visit from the Chinese embassy to the hospital ward where the two tourists and other COVID-19 cases had been hospitalized,¹⁴ it also led to an official call between China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Italian counterpart, Luigi Di Maio. It is interesting to notice that both parties made reference to the BRI during the call, with Wang mentioning future plans to work for establishing a Health Silk Road.¹⁵ References to deepened bilateral cooperation at this particular juncture should be considered in light of the tensions that had emerged a month earlier between the two countries, when Italy had suspended air traffic to and from China – the sole European country to opt for the strictest possible virus containment measures.¹⁶

¹² Severgnini, Chiara, and Redazione. 2020. "Coronavirus, Primi Due Casi in Italia: Sono Due Turisti Cinesi". *Il Corriere Della Sera*, January 31. https://www.corriere.it/cronache/20_gennaio_30/coronavirus-italia-corona-9d6dc436-4343-11ea-bdc8-faf1f56f19b7.shtml.

¹³ World Health Organization. 2020. "WHO Coronavirus Disease Dashboard". Geneva: World Health Organization. <https://covid19.who.int/>.

¹⁴ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Italy. 2020. "L'ambasciata Cinese in Italia fa Visita ai Pazienti Cinesi Colpiti dal Coronavirus e ai Turisti Cinesi sotto Osservazione". February 6. <http://it.china-embassy.org/ita/sbdt/t1740994.htm>.

¹⁵ Xinhua. 2020. "Wang Yi Had a Phone Call with Italian Foreign Minister to Express Sympathy", February 28. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1750607.shtml.

¹⁶ Berberi, Leonard. 2020. "Coronavirus, l'Italia Ferma i Voli con la Cina, gli Ultimi Aerei sono Arrivati a Roma e Milano". *Il Corriere Della Sera*, January 30. https://www.corriere.it/cronache/20_gennaio_30/coronavirus-l-italia-ferma-voli-la-cina-ma-5-aerei-stanno-arrivando-roma-milano-4c159766-43a8-11ea-bdc8-faf1f56f19b7.shtml.

However, as cases increased, so did tensions.¹⁷ For instance, a television interview¹⁸ to the President of the Veneto region Luca Zaia incurred the curt reply of the Chinese embassy because of a controversial statement on China's food culture.¹⁹ The exchange resonated among civil society, adding to discussions about the repatriation of Italian citizens from China, which had met with several issues due to the high health standards adopted.²⁰

One of the pillars of China-Italy relations during the crisis remained the Chinese diaspora community. The Chinese embassy had been the prime supporter of the community, stressing the efforts made by the diaspora to assist the country.²¹ However, during the first phases of the pandemic, the Chinese community in Italy was among the worst-hit segments of the population, economically. According to estimates from the "Italian Chinese Business Association", even before nationally imposed lockdowns, Chinese restaurateurs in Milan suffered losses of about 50-60 per cent due to a generalised fear among Italian consumers of everything that concerned East Asia.²² The situation became so negative that the city of Milan, where Italy's oldest Chinese diaspora resides, launched a solidarity initiative to support Chinese entrepreneurs.²³ Yet, in addition to economic difficulties, the Chinese community had to deal with episodes of xenophobia and racism. One of

¹⁷ At this stage, Italian cases had soared to 199,000, according to civil protection bulletins.

¹⁸ See "Zaia: 'I Cinesi Li Abbiamo Visti Tutti Mangiare Topi Vivi'". 2020. A3 News. Legnano: Antenna 3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXEYddVR6kY&feature=emb_logo.

¹⁹ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Italy. 2020. "Dichiarazione del Portavoce dell'Ambasciata Cinese in Italia in Merito alle Posizioni Espresse da un Politico Italiano sulla Cina". February 28. <http://it.china-embassy.org/ita/sbdt/t1750749.htm>.

²⁰ Santevecchi, Guido, and Fiorenza Sarzanini. 2020. "Virus, la Farnesina: Pronto il Piano di Rientro per gli Italiani". *Corriere Della Sera*, January 29. https://www.corriere.it/esteri/20_gennaio_29/coronavirus-italiani-in-quarantena-wuhan-farnesina-pronto-piano-rientro-3181aee2-421f-11ea-a986-8b98b73aaf06.shtml.

²¹ ANSA. 2020. "Comunità Cinese in Italia attivamente Impegnata". *Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata*, March 2. http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/notiziario_xinhua/2020/03/02/comunita-cinese-in-italia-attivamente-impegnata_701a0c1c-dc06-419c-a2b0-85eba1c16285.html.

²² ANSA. 2020. "Coronavirus: A Milano -50% Fatturato Ristoranti Cinesi". *Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata*, February 7, sec. Terra e Gusto. http://www.ansa.it/canale_terraegusto/notizie/business/2020/02/07/coronavirus-a-milano-50-fatturato-ristoranti-cinesi_da90934f-1045-4f17-a172-cd067b77530b.html.

²³ Maccotta, Federica. 2020. "Coronavirus, a Milano una Sera Solidale nei Ristoranti Cinesi". *Wired*, February 12. <https://www.wired.it/lifestyle/food/2020/02/12/coronavirus-milano-solidale-ristoranti-cinesi/>.

the best known cases was that of a Milanese marketing lecturer of Chinese origin being insulted on a high speed train by other passengers because of her ethnicity.²⁴ The country faced several similar episodes with some turning violent.²⁵ As anti-Chinese sentiment as well as the total number of cases increased, the embassy devoted additional resources to public diplomacy: between February and June, for instance, China's ambassador to Italy Li Junhua made no less than ten appearances on various media outlets from newspapers and magazines to national television.²⁶ Moreover, in mid-March, Chinese President Xi Jinping personally expressed support to Italy by sending a message of sympathy to Italian President Sergio Mattarella²⁷ and by contacting Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on the phone.²⁸ It is interesting to notice that Xi's messages came just a few days after his first official inspection to the city of Wuhan, the epicentre of the pandemic in China,²⁹ and the arrival of the first Chinese medical team to Italy, the third group dispatched around the world after those sent to Iran and Iraq.³⁰ When examining the two texts, some similarities among them and the Wang-Di Maio call stand out. First, the military terms adopted by the Chinese leadership to legitimize policy choices inside the country are also applied to Italy by means of warfare-related terms such as "fight", "victory" and "forcibly". Second, China's foreign engagement strategies are referenced extensively (e.g., Health Silk Road, Community with a Shared Future), along with Italy's status as a BRI country. Lastly, China's aid to Italy is also mentioned greatly

²⁴ Cavadini, Federica. 2020. "Coronavirus Italia, la Prof Cinese Derisa in Treno e il Tweet Virale". *Il Corriere Della Sera*, February 18. https://milano.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/20_febbraio_18/coronavirus-italia-professoressa-cinese-lala-hu-derisa-treno-frecciarossa-tweet-virale-45a09b94-5279-11ea-ac26-d47429c3b2e0.shtml.

²⁵ Coldani, Andrea A. 2020. "Xenofobia e Covid-19 (i): Il Ritorno del Pericolo Giallo in Occidente". *Il Caffè Geopolitico*. July 1. <https://ilcaffegeopolitico.net/125111/xenofobia-covid-19-parte-1>.

²⁶ For a partial list, see Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Italy. 2019-2020. "I Rapporti Bilaterali". <http://it.china-embassy.org/ita/sbdt/>.

²⁷ Hua, Xia. 2020. "Xi Says China Firmly Supports Italy's Efforts Against Covid-19". *Xinhua News Agency*, March 14. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/14/c_138877537.htm.

²⁸ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Italy. 2020. "Colloquio Telefonico tra il Presidente Xi Jinping e il Presidente del Consiglio Italiano Conte". March 17. <http://it.china-embassy.org/ita/sbdt/t1756976.htm>.

²⁹ Hua, Xia. 2020. "Highlights of President Xi's Inspection to Wuhan". *Xinhua News Agency*, March 10. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/11/c_138863849.htm.

³⁰ Redazione. 2020. "Coronavirus: Arrivati in Italia dalla Cina 9 Medici Specializzati". *La Repubblica*, March 13, sec. Cronaca. https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/13/news/coronavirus_italia_aggiornamento_13_marzo-251129542/.

from both parties. In particular, Xi stressed: “We [the People’s Republic of China] will send other teams of medical experts to Italy and will do our best to provide aid in terms of medical supplies and more” (Xi as cited in Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Italy 2020).³¹

These instances of “mask diplomacy” that Xi mentioned during the Conte phone call are part of a comprehensive Chinese strategy that originally focused exclusively on the worst afflicted countries in the world, but was later extended to all of China’s partners, especially in Africa and South and South East Asia. Simply put, mask diplomacy – a concept that the Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus also named the “politics of generosity”³² – consisted of dispatching medical teams and donating medical supplies in an attempt to demonstrate solidarity and control the narrative on the role played by countries during the pandemic. For China, the ultimate aim was to restore trust in the country’s ability to act as a great power in the international system.³³ In a sense, it was the most straightforward application of Joseph Nye’s idea of soft power that could be identified during the crisis.³⁴

The extent of China’s engagement with Italy is difficultly quantifiable. On the one hand, the number of medical teams despatched to the country was only three. On the other, donations came from all around China, relying on business connections, town and university twinning and the Chinese diaspora community, in addition to traditional institutional channels. Aligning with the public diplomacy efforts made by the Chinese embassy, mask diplomacy was imprinted with the most distinctive elements of Italy’s own foreign engagement. On 17 March, the “Jack Ma Foundation” (Alibaba’s philanthropic arm), for instance, donated to Italy one million surgical masks branded with some verses of the most famous *aria* from

³¹ See Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Italy. 2020. “Colloquio Telefonico tra il Presidente Xi Jinping e il Presidente del Consiglio Italiano Conte”. March 17. <http://it.china-embassy.org/ita/sbdt/t1756976.htm>.

³² EEAS. 2020. “The Coronavirus Pandemic and the New World It Is Creating”. *European External Action Service*. March 23. https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/76379/coronavirus-pandemic-and-new-world-it-creating_en.

³³ For a full discussion on “mask diplomacy”, see Sciorati, Giulia. 2020. “La Diplomazia Delle Mascherine: il Nuovo Soft Power della Cina”. Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI). March 26. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/la-diplomazia-delle-mascherine-il-nuovo-soft-power-della-cina-25554>.

³⁴ On soft power, see Nye, Joseph S. 2009. *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*. New York City: PublicAffairs.

Giacomo Puccini's opera "Turandot",³⁵ often employed by Italy when engaging Asia, as the opera is set in China. Although Chinese donations were soon joined by those of other European countries and the United States, China remained the most visible donor because of the space reserved by Italy's media outlets.

On 4 May, Italy eventually entered the so-called "phase two" – that is, the phase of the country's re-opening and re-launch. On the same day, China's ambassador to Italy published an "open letter"³⁶ that *de facto* presents a useful summary of the major tools employed by China to conduct public diplomacy in Italy during the crisis and introduces the main narratives framing the country's support.

NARRATIVES ON CHINA'S SUPPORT TO ITALY

A thematic analysis on Chinese discourse to Italy during the pandemic returned four major themes as those employed to construct a narrative of engagement with the country. As highlighted in the previous section, these themes are perfectly exemplified in the "open letter to Italian friends" released by China's ambassador to Italy Li Junhua. The letter was published at a topical moment for the country, which was about to relinquish the strictest virus containment measures after an eight-week-long lockdown. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the letter gained traction among Italy's civil society, especially as it followed up on months of China's public diplomacy efforts. In brief, these four themes are aimed at building a narrative of China-Italy relations that goes beyond the health crisis and places past positive cooperative examples as well as shared future objectives under the spotlight, so as to rely on solid foundations for future cooperation and restore trust between the two countries at different levels (i.e. public and institutional).

The first is a traditional theme of China's political discourse and uses history to increase the legitimacy of bilateral relations. This type of discourse presents current China-Italy institutional relations as the product of an extensive cooperative process between the two countries. Among others, examples of this particular theme are a considerable use of adverbs of time, the emphases placed on common

³⁵ Redazione. 2020. "Jack Ma e Alibaba Donano all'Italia 1 Milione di Mascherine e 100mila Kit per il Coronavirus". *La Repubblica*, March 17, sec. Cronaca. https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/17/news/jack_ma_e_alibaba_donano_all_italia_1_milione_di_mascherine_e_100_kit_per_il_coronavirus-251523414/.

³⁶ AGI. 2020. "L'Ambasciatore Cinese si Congratula con l'Italia, 'Amicizia Imperitura'". *Agenzia Giornalistica Italiana*. May 4. <https://www.agi.it/estero/news/2020-05-04/fase-2-ambasciatore-cina-lettera-italia-epidemia-collaborazione-8508911/>.

history and common heritage and frequent mentions of the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of China-Italy diplomatic relations. Despite being shared by many countries around the world, this particular anniversary remained prominent in Chinese discourse to Italy during the pandemic. This theme, moreover, forges a connection between historical bilateral relations and China's principle of "Community with a Shared Future", which roughly maintains that the international community needs to work collectively to create a stable international order and China is in the best position to coordinate joint efforts. From this perspective also derives that it is a common history to set the objectives through which the international system can modernise and evolve.³⁷

The second theme is directly connected to the first and looks at historical relations between China and Italy's civil societies. References to China-Italy people-to-people relations, in fact, remain particularly prominent throughout pandemic discourse. On the one hand, civil society is associated with mask diplomacy, stressing its role as one of the channels through which Chinese donations to Italy were facilitated. On the other, relations between groups and individuals in the two countries are emphasised in an effort to personalise China and avoid abstract characterisations that risked presenting stereotypical or negative images of the country, which could further damage its reputation with the Italian public.

The third theme once again makes reference to China's principle of Community-with-a-Shared-Future by building on the notion that China, Italy and the entire international community continue to stand on common ground and that China, in particular, has no greater advantage than any other country in the world in combating the pandemic. For instance, frequent mentions of COVID-19 as a common challenge are not restricted to China's discourse abroad, but are also regularly employed at the national level. Thanks to this narrative, China does not adopt a position of supremacy, but constructs the identity of an ally against a mutual enemy. In compliance with the Community-with-a-Shared-Future principle, the country is then introduced as the actor that has the most experience in containing the virus and is the best equipped to coordinate and advise on global responses. When engaging with Italy, in particular, China frequently references the similar status enjoyed by the two countries in the international system, often mentioning the mutual membership to the "Group of Twenty". By presenting this narrative, China, on

³⁷ Zhang, Denghua. 2018. "The Concept of 'Community of Common Destiny' in China's Diplomacy: Meaning, Motives and Implications". *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 5 (2): 196–207. doi:10.1002/app5.231.

the one hand, attempts to distract from the virus' origin and, on the other, develops the argument that not only is international cooperation vital to fight the virus, but also that it is cooperation with China which is crucial, as the country is the sole actor that developed the first-hand experience necessary to ensure successful containment measures.

Lastly, the fourth theme relies on Italy's participation in China's BRI. In March 2019, China and Italy had indeed signed an MoU on the margins of Xi's first state visit to Italy since assuming the office of General Secretary of the Communist Party of China in 2012 and President of the People's Republic in 2013.³⁸ The MoU formally ratified Italy's support of the Chinese project. During the visit, Italy also negotiated thirty business contracts between ten Italian companies, ministries and public organisations that amounted to 2.9 billion dollars.³⁹

When Italy signed the MoU, the country mainly aimed to deepen economic ties with China and re-launch the economy. Still, other than economic benefits, China also gained political support from this MoU, as the BRI received the endorsement of a key member of the European Union and one of the major world economies. International debates sparked off after Italy signed the MoU, especially because the text of the agreement appeared vague and arbitrary. These debates are one of the reasons why Italy's membership in the BRI remained central in cooperation discourse during the pandemic. Even at the national level, Italy was among the countries that gained the most attention. As presented at a virtual conference at the University of Edinburgh on 1 June, China's national media outlets presented a few reviews on epidemic outbreaks in other countries and Italy was the sole Western country to be included.⁴⁰ Italy certainly was the first COVID-19 hotspot in the West, but the timing of the country's BRI MoU also made it a sensitive case for China's reputation, which risked incurring even more criticism, if Italy had not been properly engaged and supported by China.

³⁸ *Supra* note 2.

³⁹ Sciorati, Giulia. 2019. "Mediating Between the EU and China: Will Italy Take Up the Task?" *Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)*. April 8. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/mediating-between-eu-and-china-will-italy-take-task-22796>.

⁴⁰ Tin, Cao. 2020. "Domestic Implications of China's Foreign Aid During Covid-19". Presented at the China's Foreign Aid during the Covid-19 Pandemic, University of Edinburgh, June 1.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper has investigated relations between China and Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic in an attempt to identify the tools and narratives China adopted to strengthen the country's international reputation after it was damaged by the health crisis.

One of the most visible and discussed strategies employed by China has been the so-called mask diplomacy, thanks to which the country dispatched teams of doctors and medical supplies around the world. By doing so, the country was partially able to modulate public opinion and detach China's image from that of the place where the virus had originated. Although diplomatic relations between the two countries have remained prominent, it is interesting to notice that the analysis points to the extensive work conducted by the Chinese embassy at the national level as well as the support given to Italy by the Chinese diaspora community, despite the several episodes of xenophobia and racism it had encountered in the early stages of the pandemic. It would then be limiting to identify mask diplomacy as the major tool China employed in Italy, as the country's engagement ran deeper and involved different segments of society. Nonetheless, the narratives constructed in China's political discourse towards Italy remained rooted in China's traditional principles of foreign engagement, especially referencing to the notion of "Community with a Shared Future" and the more operational BRI ties. Indeed, the MoU signed between China and Italy the previous year as well as Italy's inclusion among China's BRI partners remain at the forefront of the discourse.

In conclusion, although China's engagement model during the pandemic rests on pillars that are similar around the world, the Italian case stands out because of several unique elements, such as China's reliance on the diaspora community in Italy and, above all, the BRI agreement that ensures that relations continue to grow, global health crises notwithstanding.

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Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA): Regulating Fake News to Maintain Public Trust in Singapore

*Tan Zhi Han*¹

INTRODUCTION

Singapore's Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), a new legislation against fake news, was passed in parliament on 8 May 2019.² Since then, several correction notices have been issued under this law, but some of them have been met with criticism for being partisan.³ While the spread of fake news is a pressing problem facing many countries today, how governments can or should regulate online content is a policy challenge that intersects with concerns on censorship and freedom of speech. This paper explains how POFMA is intended to preserve public confidence in the Singaporean government and examines POFMA's criticisms and potential setbacks on public trust in politics.

'Falsehood' Definition

While there are different dimensions to the definition of a falsehood, this paper treats 'fake news' and 'falsehoods' as synonymous terms.

¹ I would like to thank Assistant Professor Mehmet Demircioglu, Kidjie Saguin, and Devyani Pande for their guidance for this paper. This paper does not represent the views of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy or the National University of Singapore. The author did not receive any research funding for this paper.

² TODAY. 2019. "All you need to know about the debate on S'pore's proposed fake news law." TODAY Online, October 1, (<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/all-you-need-know-about-debate-spores-proposed-fake-news-laws>), accessed May 17, 2020.

³ Tham, Yuen-C. 2020. "Falsehoods on coronavirus show why Pofma is necessary." The Straits Times, February 4, (<https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/falsehoods-on-coronavirus-show-why-pofma-is-necessary>), accessed July 6, 2020.

According to POFMA, “a statement is false if it is false or misleading, whether wholly or in part, and whether on its own or in the context in which it appears”.⁴ While this definition of a falsehood appears tautological, the Education Minister clarified in parliament that how a statement is judged is “empirically-based”.⁵ In other words, a statement cannot be a falsehood, if it is supported by “real data and observations”.⁶ Additionally, this definition excludes interpretations, “theories and opinions”.⁷

From the parliamentary debates, the Law Minister has also highlighted that the term “misleading” reflects “existing jurisprudence that statements can also be false by reason of having misled through omission”.⁸ Nonetheless, he stressed that the focus of the Act is ultimately on false statements.⁹

Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA)

The Act criminalises the spread of falsehoods on online communication platforms with malicious intent. This means that a person would be convicted if s/he spreads falsehoods (i) intentionally to “prejudice public interest”¹⁰, and (ii) with the knowledge that the statements are false.¹¹

⁴ Singapore Statutes. 2019. “Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act 2019.” Singapore Statutes Online. (<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Acts-Supp/18-2019/Published/20190625?DocDate=20190625>), accessed July 5, 2020.

⁵ Parliamentary Debates. 2019. “Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill.” Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 105. (<https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-366>), accessed July 5, 2020.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Parliamentary Debates. 2019. “Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill.” Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 105. (<https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-367>), accessed July 5, 2020.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Parliamentary Debates. 2019. “Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill.” Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 104. (<https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-364>), accessed July 5, 2020.

¹¹ Singapore Statutes. 2019. “Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act 2019.” Singapore Statutes Online. (<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Acts-Supp/18-2019/Published/20190625?DocDate=20190625>), accessed July 5, 2020.

Under POFMA, the Executive (any Minister) may issue the following orders to publishers of falsehoods, if it is in the public interest to do so¹²:

1. A Correction Direction – putting up a corrective notice indicating that the earlier published information is false, without removing people’s access to the falsehood;
2. A Stop Communication Direction – a takedown order to prevent further access to the falsehood. Technology companies can also be ordered to block accounts that are spreading falsehoods.

Public interest refers to protecting Singapore’s security, public health, public finances, and international relations, as well as preventing the incitement of hatred towards specific groups, the diminution of public trust in government institutions, and the interference of elections.¹³ POFMA applies to all online communication platforms, including private messaging platforms such as WhatsApp.

If a person who was issued the aforementioned directions wishes to challenge the order, s/he has to appeal to the High Court for a judicial review.¹⁴ The decision of the court overrules the Minister if s/he is wrong.¹⁵

Public Trust

Public trust is defined as the belief that government institutions adopt policies that serve public interest and represent citizens.¹⁶ Public trust entails the citizenry’s expectation that government institutions and policies will operate in ways conducive to their well-being,¹⁷ such as by delivering public goods and services to them.¹⁸ It dovetails the notion of the social contract, where citizens forgo some individual freedom in return for the benefits derived from their cooperation with the state.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Parliamentary Debates. 2019. “Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill.” Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 105. (<https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-367>), accessed July 5, 2020.

¹⁶ Kozuch, Barbara, Slawomir J. Magala, and Joanna Paliszkievicz. 2018. *Managing Public Trust*. Cham: Springer Nature: 3.

¹⁷ Ibid.: 11.

¹⁸ Parliamentary Debates. 2019. “Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill.” Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 104. (<https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-364>), accessed July 5, 2020.

On top of this social exchange function, trust also includes “an assessment of the publicly shared values and attributes associated with public action” from the government.¹⁹ These values usually entail public confidence in the government’s accountability, integrity, and responsiveness to public opinion. In other words, public trust comprises the government’s alignment with the citizenry in two main respects: serving the latter’s interests and acting in ways consistent with their expectations of what constitutes a reliable government. It is important to analyse POFMA in the context of trust in politics, because trust can simultaneously be re-inforced and eroded in this controversial law intended to tackle falsehoods. Thus, this paper is primarily concerned with the following research questions: First, why do falsehoods undermine public trust? And second, how does POFMA affect Singapore’s public trust in the government?

This paper acknowledges that it is necessary to have legislation that combats online falsehoods, as falsehoods have the potential to undermine public trust in government institutions by deceitfully smearing the government’s capacity in policymaking and implementation. However, POFMA has also been alleged to protect the incumbent government’s political interests and to discredit opposition, raising questions on whether it genuinely benefits the general public. While recognising that the incumbent government’s political interests do not necessarily conflict with public interest, this paper argues that the use of POFMA requires a more balanced approach to preserve public trust. Correcting falsehoods may be necessary to maintain trust between the government and the citizenry, but its repeated application on opposition figures and statements might misrepresent an overly defensive government that is afraid of acknowledging criticisms. This impression risks losing public trust instead. Thus, this paper argues that maintaining public trust requires an intricate compromise between the government’s correction of falsehoods to protect public interest, and an assurance that the ruling party is simultaneously kept in check by accommodating socially and culturally diverse views to remain accountable to their citizens.

IMPORTANCE OF COMBATING FALSEHOODS

The debate of this paper is not about whether the policy agenda of POFMA is justified. Nonetheless, this section discusses why mitigating the spread of falsehoods is

¹⁹ Kozuch, Barbara, Slawomir J. Magala, and Joanna Paliszkiwicz. 2018. *Managing Public Trust*. Cham: Springer Nature: 32.

increasingly salient and necessary, to contextualise why POFMA has been legislated in Singapore.

Falsehoods Damage Public Trust

Falsehoods can threaten the social fabric of a society, which can undermine public trust within the citizenry. Singapore is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, where falsehoods can reinforce stereotypes and prejudices.²⁰ Online platforms may deliberately feature falsehoods about a particular ethnic, religious, or immigrant group to question their loyalty to the country and highlight undesirable characteristics to reinforce stereotypes.²¹ For example, Darren Osborne, who drove a van into a crowd outside a London mosque, was reading far-right fake news websites against Muslims.²² Therefore, the spread of such falsehoods can easily polarise and exacerbate divisions along ethnic and religious lines in Singapore, which threaten social cohesion and trust. Maintaining trust within the citizenry is essential to preserve stable and peaceful social relationships within society.²³

Falsehoods also deter citizen participation by eliminating their trust in public discourse. Falsehoods tend to appeal to emotions and amplify hate speech, which incites vehement responses that may overpower minority or rational voices, both online and offline.²⁴ For instance, a falsehood stating that German Chancellor Angela Merkel took a photograph with a Syrian refugee who was an ISIS terrorist was spread to invoke anti-refugee sentiments.²⁵ The instigation of such offensive

²⁰ Mathews, Mathew. 2018. "Protecting racial and religious harmony in the threat of deliberate online falsehoods." Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods Written Representation 100: 1-8: 2-3, (<https://www.parliament.gov.sg/docs/default-source/sconlinefalsehoods/written-representation-100.pdf>), accessed July 6, 2020.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Rawlinson, Kevin. 2018. "Finsbury Park-accused trawled far-right groups online, court told." *The Guardian*, January 23. (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jan/23/finsbury-park-accused-wanted-to-kill-all-muslims-court-told>), accessed May 17, 2020.

²³ Kozuch, Barbara, Slawomir J. Magala, and Joanna Paliszkiwicz. 2018. *Managing Public Trust*. Cham: Springer Nature: 11.

²⁴ Mathews, Mathew. 2018. "Protecting racial and religious harmony in the threat of deliberate online falsehoods." Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods Written Representation 100: 1-8: 7, (<https://www.parliament.gov.sg/docs/default-source/sconlinefalsehoods/written-representation-100.pdf>), accessed July 6, 2020.

²⁵ Ott, Stephanie. 2017. "How a selfie with Merkel changed Syrian refugee's life." *Al Jazeera*, February 21, (<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/02/selfie-merkel-changed-syrian-refugee-life-170218115515785.html>), accessed May 17, 2020.

speech in the public space instigates disorder and crowds out constructive public engagement between citizens and the government.

Additionally, falsehoods erode trust in public institutions. Hostile actors may spread falsehoods to manipulate public elections, undermine public trust in government institutions, and threaten the state's ability to respond to crises.²⁶ An erosion in public trust arises if citizens perceive that the government is not acting in ways that serve the public's interests. This reduces the state's capacity to govern as citizens may no longer comply with government directives and policies, resulting in social instability if order and cooperation are compromised.

Government Intervention is Necessary for Combating Falsehoods

Online falsehoods cannot be left unregulated because of the public's potential inability to recognise them. According to the Pew Research Centre, 88% of Americans indicated difficulties in distinguishing fake news.²⁷ Consumers' media literacy is insufficient to shield them from online falsehoods.²⁸ Even highly educated university undergraduates are susceptible to fake news.²⁹ The inability to distinguish fake news may be due to human cognitive biases, like confirmation bias, where people tend to believe in information that is consistent with their worldviews.³⁰

²⁶ Lewandowsky, Stephan, Ullrich Ecker, and John Cook. 2017. "Beyond misinformation: Understanding and coping with the 'post-truth' era." *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 6(4): 353-369.

²⁷ Shirsat, Abhijeet. 2018. "Understanding the allure and danger of fake news in social media environments." Bowling Green State University PhD Dissertation: 2, (https://etd.ohiolink.edu/letd.send_file?accession=bgsu1530280814598288&disposition=inline), accessed July 5, 2020.

²⁸ Bulger, Monica, and Patrick Davison. 2018. "The promises, challenges, and futures of media literacy." *Data & Society*, February: 3, (https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_Media_Literacy_2018.pdf), accessed May 17, 2020.

²⁹ Wineburg, Sam, and Sarah McGrew. 2017. "Later reading: Reading less and learning more when evaluating digital information." Standard History Education Group Working Paper 2017-A1, (<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5b26/9628f4dc29b514dfcb0b5e429e49fc0dae6d.pdf>), accessed July 6, 2020.

³⁰ Soon, Carol, and Shawn Goh. 2017. "What lies beneath the truth: A literature review on fake news, false information and more." *Institute of Policy Studies*, June 30:20, (https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/report_what-lies-beneath-the-truth_a-literature-review-on-fake-news-false-information-and-more_300617.pdf), accessed May 17, 2020.

Additionally, people commonly use heuristics when reading online, by superficially speed-reading instead of thoughtfully processing information.³¹

Granted that there is a need to intervene to manage the spread of online falsehoods, technology companies are, however, found to be inadequate to regulate online content. For instance, tagged warnings on Facebook do not significantly reduce the perceived accuracy of online falsehoods.³² Combating online falsehoods necessitates rapid responses, because the internet has bots and amplifiers that enable people to spread them speedily.³³ Therefore, the Singapore government identified a policy window³⁴ to address the limitations of existing measures in curbing the spread of online falsehoods.

Thus, the Parliament formed a Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods in 2018, to discuss issues like how the spread of online falsehoods can affect public interest.³⁵ Members of the public were invited to make submissions concerning this topic to the Select Committee. Some of them, mainly academics, religious leaders, civil society members, and technology representatives³⁶ were invited to the hearings to elaborate on their submissions.³⁷ After which, the Select Committee submitted a report summarising these procedures and suggested poli-

³¹ Ecker, Ullrich. 2017. "Why rebuttals may not work: The psychology of misinformation." *Media Asia* 44 (2): 79-87: 83-84, (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01296612.2017.1384145?needAccess=true>), accessed July 6, 2020.

³² Pennycook, Gordon, Adam Bear, Evan Collins, and David Rand. 2019. "The implied truth effect: Attaching warnings to a subset of fake news stories increases perceived accuracy of stories without warnings." *Management Science*: 3, (https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3035384), accessed May 17, 2020.

³³ Lucas, Edward, and Peter Pomeranzev. 2016. "Winning the information war." *Centre for European Policy Analysis*: 10, (https://cepa.ecms.pl/files/?id_plik=2706), accessed May 17, 2020.

³⁴ Kingdon, John. 1995. *Agendas, alternatives and public policies*. Boston: HarperCollins: 20-21.

³⁵ Parliament of Singapore. 2018. "Select Committees of Parliament." Parliament of Singapore, May 16. (<https://www.parliament.gov.sg/about-us/structure/select-committees>), accessed July 5, 2020.

³⁶ Parliament of Singapore. 2018. "Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods – Causes, Consequences and Countermeasures." Parliament of Singapore, September 20. (<https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/selectcommittee/searchPage?committee=Other%20Select%20Committee%20Reports&from=20-09-2018&to=20-09-2018>), accessed May 17, 2020.

³⁷ The Straits Times. 2018. "Recap of what Select Committee on fake news did and key issues that emerged during hearings." *The Straits Times*, September 20. (<https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/recap-of-what-select-committee-on-deliberate-online-falsehoods-did-and-key-issues-that>), accessed May 17, 2020.

cy proposals to parliament.³⁸ After two days of parliamentary debates, the POFMA bill was passed.

POFMA'S IMPACT ON PUBLIC TRUST

This section discusses the criticisms of POFMA, which include its alleged curtailment of free speech, the lack of sufficient checks on the incumbent government vested with legal powers to issue directions, and the insularity that it might bring to public discourse. These criticisms point to how POFMA risks developing a 'rogue' government³⁹ that might abuse it to suppress opposition. In this scenario, POFMA erodes rather than protects public trust, if it becomes an instrument to protect the political interests of an authoritarian government that has deviated from public interest and values. For each criticism of POFMA, this section first identifies the problem, explains the incumbent government's defence, and comments on the implications on public trust.

1: POFMA Curtails Free Speech

Even before POFMA was passed in parliament, it has constantly been challenged by the criticism that it might result in a chilling effect, referring to the suppression of free speech and the rise in self-censorship. These effects arise from fears of being convicted under POFMA for publishing or spreading unverified information, which might then result in self-censorship and the diminution of citizen participation in public discourse. In response, the Minister for Communications and Information has stated that:

"The merits of juxtaposing the facts with falsehoods...will allow readers to make informed judgements, draw their own conclusions about the arguments that are being made and promote a more vigorous online discourse" (S. Iswaran, Minister for Communications and Information).⁴⁰

³⁸ Kingdon, John. 2012. "How does an idea's time come? Agendas, alternatives, and public policies." In *Public administration: Classic readings*, eds. J. M. Shafritz and A. C. Hyde. Wadsworth: Cengage Learning: 406.

³⁹ Parliamentary Debates. 2019. "Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill." Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 105. (<https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-366>), accessed July 5, 2020.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Hence, the incumbent government suggested that POFMA should not be misconstrued as a censorship law that curtails the freedom of speech. Its function is to keep Singapore citizens informed rather than misinformed, by preventing falsehoods from crowding out “legitimate debate” underpinned by facts.⁴¹ The correction directions allow for the false statement or publication to remain accessible online, alongside the correction notice. This enables the general public to read both statements and judge for themselves, without necessarily censoring online content.

With respect to the policy instruments of POFMA in particular, this paper argues that it is unlikely for the correction directions alone to undermine the citizenry’s trust in government institutions. Given that the falsehoods remain publicly accessible, the nature of correction directions is less intrusive than other censorship laws. It is also unlikely that the correction notices run against public interest, as they are precisely intended to reinforce the integrity of government institutions, by clarifying what the facts concerning these institutions are. It is therefore improbable that the correction directions alone would undermine public trust, as they neither remove online content nor ban online discourse among citizens oppressively.

2: POFMA Favours the Incumbent Government

Another controversy surrounding POFMA is the issue of who is conferred with the legal powers to issue the directions – ministers of the incumbent government. There have been concerns about appointing ministers to issue directions, as Executive action feeds fears on power abuse and falsehoods spread by the government.⁴² During the parliamentary debates, the Workers’ Party’s (WP) Members of Parliament (MPs), who are opposition MPs, recommended that the Executive should file a request to the courts. The courts would then issue directions if they find falsehoods. This recommendation is based on the grounds that both the Executive and

⁴¹ Tham, Yuen-C. 2019. “Parliament: Law against online falsehoods will not stifle free speech, say ministers.” *The Straits Times*, April 1, (<https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/parliament-law-against-online-falsehoods-will-not-stifle-speech-ministers>), accessed July 5, 2020.

⁴² Parliament of Singapore. 2018. “Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods – Causes, Consequences and Countermeasures.” Parliament of Singapore, September 20, (<https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/selectcommittee/searchPage?committee=Other%20Select%20Committee%20Reports&from=20-09-2018&to=20-09-2018>), accessed May 17, 2020.

the statement-maker accused of spreading falsehoods should be subjected to the judicial process, to be fair and consistent with other laws.⁴³

However, the incumbent People's Action Party (PAP) MPs maintained that the Executive should be the entity issuing the directions under POFMA, due to the practical need for a speedy response against the rapid spread of online falsehoods:

"Mr Pritam Singh [Opposition MP] says philosophically, he has a disagreement...But I ask Mr Pritam Singh to look through and decide practically what Singaporeans need in times of crises"⁴⁴ (Christopher de Souza, PAP MP).

"this Bill gives us the capability we lacked then. To put out clarifications, corrections fast, accurately and widely. We may speak philosophically about it. But when lives depend on accurate information that needs to be out there urgently, we...would not want to be philosophical"⁴⁵ (Alex Yam, PAP MP).

From these excerpts, the PAP MPs constructed a dichotomy between "philosophical" and "practical" arguments. These "principles of classification" and "ordering"⁴⁶ – where the practical outweighs the philosophical – help the ruling party achieve discursive legitimacy. Philosophical arguments are deemed undesirable as they stray away from the practical urgency to clarify falsehoods. Philosophical reasons also are considered to not address falsehoods' potential damage on the society. Singapore is usually characterised as pragmatic and non-philosophical, which means that policy decisions are justified and publicly accepted on grounds of instrumental rationality.⁴⁷ In other words, such practical justifications frame the appointment of ministers to issue directions as the necessary means to curb the spread of falsehoods effectively. Granted that this justification – in doing "what

⁴³ Parliamentary Debates. 2019. "Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill." Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 104. (<https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-364>), accessed July 5, 2020.

⁴⁴ Parliamentary Debates. 2019. "Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill." Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 104. (<https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-365>), accessed May 17, 2020.

⁴⁵ Parliamentary Debates. 2019. "Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill." Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 105. (<https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-366>), accessed July 5, 2020.

⁴⁶ Foucault, Michel. 1972. "The discourse on language." In *The archaeology of knowledge*, trans. A.M.S. Smith. New York: Pantheon Books: 220.

⁴⁷ Chua, Beng Huat. 1995. "Pragmatism of the PAP government." In *Communitarian ideology and democracy in Singapore*. London: Routledge: 66, 69.

works” for protecting public interest – is perceived as natural and neutral⁴⁸, this practical reason appealed to rationality and is probably aligned with Singaporeans’ pragmatic values. This alignment would probably then reinforce public trust in the ruling PAP government’s decisions, by appealing to their objectivity instead of falling back on highfalutin philosophical ideas.⁴⁹

Indeed, POFMA has been implemented swiftly in most of the cases⁵⁰, and there has been no instance of public disorder arising *due to* a falsehood since its legislation. However, the absence of public disorder after POFMA’s legislation does not necessarily mean that it effectively prevents disorder, since there lacks a counterfactual for a valid comparison. Moreover, mass panic still occurred even in the absence of falsehoods, such as panic buying during the COVID-19 crisis when the Disease Outbreak Response System Condition level was raised from yellow to orange.⁵¹ Hence, a speedy implementation of correction directions is not the only condition needed for preserving public trust in the government. The next section discusses how POFMA alone cannot address deeper public issues and concerns, whose flaws might then undermine public trust in the government to respond to these concerns.

3: POFMA Insulates the Government from Engaging in Constructive Public Dialogue

Perhaps what lies at the heart of the controversy surrounding POFMA is neither about how it is implemented nor who is vested with the powers to issue directions. Instead, the issue is the *impression* POFMA constructs among citizens – that it protects political interests in the name of public interest, which might not always be synonymous in the eyes of the citizenry. This is also articulated in both parliamentary debates and public discourse:

⁴⁸ Tan, Kenneth Paul. 2017. *Governing Global-city Singapore*. Oxfordshire: Routledge: 44.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*: 43.

⁵⁰ Cheng, Kenneth. 2019. “News analysis: Fake-news laws — what do the first two cases tell us?” TODAY, December 5, (<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/news-analysis-fake-news-laws-what-do-first-two-cases-tell-us>), accessed May 20, 2020.

⁵¹ Tan, Audrey. 2020. “Coronavirus: Politicians, supermarkets urge calm amid panic-buying of groceries.” The Straits Times, February 7, (<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/coronavirus-fairprice-chief-urges-calm-amid-panic-buying-of-groceries-singapore>), accessed May 20, 2020.

“A rogue government...who abuses their POFMA powers will be held to account in elections – a number of PAP Members...have made a great deal of this point. But...this ignores the fact that a rogue government can precisely use POFMA powers to stop voters from learning negative information about their actions [and] insulate against electoral accountability”⁵² (Leon Perera, WP MP).

“POFMA risks stifling a frank and healthy exchange of opinion required for a functioning democracy. It also threatens engendering a cynical perspective about how the Government employs POFMA, something I opine has started to take root already”⁵³ (Pritam Singh, WP MP).

Therefore, POFMA might actually diminish public trust if the incumbent government is perceived as a defensive political entity that uses POFMA to protect its own interests, without producing constructive solutions. This will be illustrated using two examples.

First, a correction direction was issued to rectify a false claim that the government planned to increase Singapore’s population to 10 million by 2030.⁵⁴ Second, correction directions were also issued to an opposition party who falsely claimed that Singaporean Professionals, Managers, Executives, and Technicians (PMET) retrenchment had risen.⁵⁵ Notwithstanding the premise that ministers of the ruling party issue corrections to prevent the diminution of trust in their govern-

⁵² Parliamentary Debates. 2019. “Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill.” Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 105. (<https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-366>), accessed July 5, 2020.

⁵³ Tham, Yuen-C. 2020. “Falsehoods on coronavirus show why Pofma is necessary.” *The Straits Times*, February 4. (<https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/falsehoods-on-coronavirus-show-why-pofma-is-necessary>), accessed July 6, 2020.

⁵⁴ Goh, Yan Han. 2020. “Pofma correction direction issued to 4 Facebook pages, 1 website.” *The Straits Times*, July 4, (<https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/pofma-correction-directions-issued-to-4-facebook-pages-1-website>), accessed July 7, 2020.

⁵⁵ Tham, Yuen-C. 2020. “Court dismisses SDP’s appeal against Pofma order.” *The Straits Times*, February 6, (<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/court-dismisses-sdps-appeal-against-pofma-order>), accessed July 7, 2020.

ment⁵⁶, POFMA's "coincidental" application on opposing or alternative voices⁵⁷ may counter-productively undermine public trust, if the citizenry believes that POFMA has become a political tool to discredit opposition parties or critics. POFMA may "create a cognitive shortcut where people seeing an official correction presume that the original falsehood must be true precisely because it is being vehemently debunked".⁵⁸ In other words, repeated applications of POFMA on opposing voices might be misconstrued as an excessively defensive move on the part of the PAP government, which does not bode well for retaining public trust in a government that already has the clear mandate of the people.⁵⁹

Additionally, POFMA risks diverting public discourse from a critical discussion of policy problems and solutions to the politicisation of what constitutes facts and falsehoods pertaining the government. For example, issuing correction directions on the alleged 10 million population target shifts public discussion away from the citizenry's underlying concerns on competition from foreigners in the workforce to numbers and statistics. It is undeniable that the government makes population projections and conducts scenario planning⁶⁰, instead of setting explicit population targets. However, the issue that many citizens are concerned about is not what exactly these population figures will be, but how their livelihoods and opportunities would be affected by more immigration. Similarly, the falsehood on PMET employment figures shifts public discourse from job insecurity to statistical figures. Although the government has indeed implemented new policies, such as the

⁵⁶ George, Cherian. 2020. *Air-Conditioned Nation Revisited: Essays on Singapore Politics*. Singapore: Ethos Books: 179.

⁵⁷ Lim, Janice. 2020. "'Unfortunate coincidence' initial Pofma actions directed at opposition parties, affiliated figures: Iswaran." TODAY Online, January 6, (<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/unfortunate-coincidence-first-four-pofma-actions-directed-opposition-politicians>), accessed July 7, 2020.

⁵⁸ Parliamentary Debates. 2019. "Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill." Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 105. (<https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-366>), accessed July 5, 2020.

⁵⁹ George, Cherian and Donald Low. 2020. "GE2020: Why Singapore may lose, whatever the final score." Academia SG, July 7, (<https://www.academia.sg/academic-views/ge2020-why-singapore-may-lose/>), accessed July 12, 2020.

⁶⁰ National Population and Talent Division. 2013. "A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore: Population White Paper." Strategy Group, Prime Minister's Office. (<https://github.com/isomerpages/isomerpages-stratgroup/raw/master/images/PublicationImages/chart7.png.pdf>), accessed on July 7, 2020.

SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package⁶¹, to placate retrenchment and unemployment concerns among Singaporeans, issuing correction directions on these employment and population figures might wrongly signal that the government is not empathic of the citizens' anxieties and grievances.

Thus, public trust does not lie solely in the management of falsehoods, but also in the government's capacity, accountability, and willingness to engage in alternative views. Trust in political processes is not merely about clarifying falsehoods about the government, but also in the government's willingness to bring the public into policymaking. This fall in public trust despite POFMA's legislation is evident in the ruling PAP's relatively dismal performance in the 2020 General Elections, falling below their own hope⁶² that most citizens would choose a "flight to safety" by voting for the incumbent party in the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶³ The election results indicated that citizens demand the government to accommodate a greater diversity of voices in sensitive and potentially divisive public issues. This softer, consultative approach is preferred to a defensive, hard-fisted approach, where the government could be misperceived as insulating itself from engaging in such public issues or criticism by using legal powers like POFMA. Public trust will still be eroded if government institutions fail to respond to the citizenry's demands, or if the government's hard stance is misconstrued as incongruent with the citizenry's expectations of benevolence and accountability from them.

It is therefore crucial for the incumbent government to enact policies to address the citizenry's concerns, and not merely debunk falsehoods that undermine trust in government institutions. For example, the concessions for workers affected

⁶¹ SkillsFuture and Workforce Singapore. 2020. "SG Jobs & Skills." SkillsFuture SG and Workforce Singapore, June 29, (<https://www.ssg-wsg.gov.sg/sgunitedjobsandskills.html>), accessed July 12, 2020.

⁶² Sim, Royston. 2020. "GE2020: Election results a clear mandate for PAP but also reflects desire for more diversity of voices in Parliament, says PM." *The Straits Times*, July 11, (<https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/pm-lee-pap-will-designate-pritam-as-opposition-leader-urges-all-sporeans-to-put-aside>), accessed July 12, 2020.

⁶³ Fernandez, Warren. 2020. "GE2020: PAP returns to power with 83 seats, but loses Sengkang and Aljunied GRCs in hard-fought Covid-19 election." *The Straits Times*, July 11. (<https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/ge2020-pap-returns-to-power-with-83-seats-but-loses-sengkang-and-aljunied-grcs-in-hard>), accessed July 12, 2020.

by the ban on personal mobility devices⁶⁴ and policy changes that allow single parents to rent public houses⁶⁵ are among the public issues where the government implemented ground-up policies, to assure minority or disadvantaged groups that the government also accounts for their interests in policymaking.

Nonetheless, the way in which the government manoeuvres its position in public discourse could be more forthcoming, especially with a more vocal citizenry and active civil society that continues to question policies and introduce alternative ideas. These factors render the ruling party's maintenance of public trust and legitimacy even more challenging in this struggle and articulation of conflicting ideas and interests⁶⁶ – to debunk falsehoods without unintentionally smothering well-intended, constructive criticisms – for building a more inclusive and collaborative society with diverse perspectives.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the parliamentary debates, the correction direction is an unprecedented policy instrument for combating online falsehoods.⁶⁷ Existing fake news laws usually mandate social media platforms to forcefully censor hate speech and online falsehoods.⁶⁸ There is therefore a potential for policy diffusion to other countries whose governments plan to enact laws to combat the spread of online falsehoods.

⁶⁴ Lim, Min Zhang. 2019. "Impact of PMD ban on delivery riders taken seriously, Lam Pin Min says after dialogue." *The Straits Times*, November 13, (<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/transport/impact-of-pmd-ban-on-delivery-riders-taken-seriously-lam-pin-min-says-after>), accessed May 20, 2020.

⁶⁵ Au-Yong, Rachel. 2019. "Some single unwed parents under 35 allowed to apply for subsidised flats." *The Straits Times*, August 5, (<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/some-single-unwed-parents-under-35-allowed-to-apply-for-subsidised-flats-on-appeal>), accessed May 20, 2020.

⁶⁶ Tan, Kenneth Paul. 2017. *Governing Global-city Singapore*. Oxfordshire: Routledge: 23.

⁶⁷ Parliamentary Debates. 2019. "Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill." *Hansard*, Vol 94, Sitting 104. (<https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-364>), accessed July 5, 2020.

⁶⁸ Gesley, J. 2019. "Germany: Facebook found in violation of 'anti-fake news' law." *Global Legal Monitor*, August 20, (<http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/germany-facebook-found-in-violation-of-anti-fake-news-law/?loclr=fblaw>), accessed May 17, 2020.

Strengths

Lawmakers formulating policies to combat online falsehoods might wish to incorporate the following strengths of POFMA. Its main advantage lies in the correction directions, which are essentially official government statements to debunk falsehoods without involving censorship of online content. The correction direction is a relatively non-intrusive instrument, as elaborated earlier. There are also benefits in clarifying empirically verifiable statements in order to improve the quality of public discourse grounded in facts. As such, it is probably more convincing for the public to accept this legal instrument, which does not conflict directly with free speech, especially in the more liberal democratic countries.

Additionally, POFMA presents a speedy policy intervention to curb the rapid spread of online falsehoods. While the appointment of the Executive to issue these directions remains controversial, POFMA nonetheless recognises the need to formulate instruments that can rapidly correct damaging falsehoods, especially those that aim to promote enmity between various groups in society or to unfairly disrepute a person or institution. Its speedy feature can be emulated.

Weaknesses

However, POFMA's Stop Communication Direction and the appointment of ministers with the authority to issue these directions may be less acceptable in liberal democratic countries. It is less likely that citizens in these countries would accord the Executive with the power to determine what constitutes a falsehood. There is an obvious concern that a member of the Executive would not be a reliable and impartial person to clarify what constitutes falsehoods that concern the government.

Perhaps, France's election misinformation law is more appropriate for these countries, as it allows for both the ruling and opposition parties to apply for an emergency injunction to the court for removing falsehoods.⁶⁹ Having a politically independent entity such as the Judiciary would less likely evoke concerns of power abuse or suppression of free speech in politics, as compared to relegating ministers with these powers.⁷⁰ For Singapore, it might be prudent to limit POFMA's correction

⁶⁹ George, Cherian. 2020. *Air-Conditioned Nation Revisited: Essays on Singapore Politics*. Singapore: Ethos Books: 180.

⁷⁰ Tham, Yuen-C. 2019. "Singapore's fake news law to come into effect Oct 2." The Straits Times, October 1, (<https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/fake-news-law-to-come-into-effect-oct-2>), accessed May 17, 2020.

directions to socially and geopolitically divisive falsehoods concerning race, religion, immigration, international relations, and electoral misinformation, whose damages are more difficult to contain.

Conclusion

In sum, POFMA at best offers instruments that can correct unfounded online falsehoods rapidly and minimise any discord that such falsehoods might sow within society. However, it is probably insufficient to preserve the Singapore citizenry's trust in government, as it has been perceived as an instrument that favours the ruling party by protecting their reputation. While, POFMA is intended to preserve public trust, whether it has really done so remains questionable, despite assurances that it possesses mechanisms to mitigate power abuse.

The maintenance of public trust in politics requires more than just the preservation of a government's legitimacy by correcting falsehoods. It is crucial for the government to *build* this trust by actively reforming its governing approach, and to appear less self-justifying and intolerant of criticism. While POFMA was neither intended to target criticisms based on opinions nor promote self-censorship, it has been interpreted as a politicised, one-sided law. A government's effective management of falsehoods should be accompanied with an acceptance of public criticism to earn public trust.

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Significance of the Public Trust in State Institutions for the Post-Conflict Reconstruction, Stabilisation and Fighting Insurgencies – The Case of Afghanistan

Mushtaq Rahim

INTRODUCTION

The people of Afghanistan experienced coup d'états, invasions, insurgencies, civil war and tyranny since the middle of the 1970s. A country with a history of turmoil and political instability enjoyed relative peace and stability for nearly half a century between 1929 and 1973 before the quest for transformation and political advancement plunged Afghanistan into chaos and violence.¹ The protraction of the conflict not only destroyed the organisational structures of the country but also eroded public trust in the political leadership.²

The attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 caused a tremor among the world community and quickly focus was shifted to Afghanistan. The country was recognised as pivot of operation of the 9/11 attacks and centripetal to extremist outfits. The US-led military campaign against the Taliban regime and the al-Qaeda terrorist network it was sheltering began on 7 October 2001.³ The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), under the leadership of the United States of America, invaded the country, toppled the tyrant regime of the Taliban and established an interim administration in a conference in the German city of Bonn – famously known as Bonn Conference.⁴ The fall of the Taliban at the end of

¹ Rasanayagam, Angelo. 2003. *Afghanistan: A Modern History*. New York: I. B. Tauris.

² Rubin, Barnett R. 2002. *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*. USA: Yale University.

³ Tarzi, Amin. 2009. "The Neo-Taliban." In *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi (ed.), 274-310. London: Harvard University Press.

⁴ Johnson, Chris, and Jolyon Leslie. 2004. *Afghanistan: The mirage of peace*. New York: Zed Books.

2001 marked the end of a protracted civil war in Afghanistan and the beginning of a recovery and healing process, opening the way for Afghanistan to free itself from extremism and international isolation.⁵

The new democratic state system, re-establishment of the state institutions and generous financial, technical and moral support of the international community created a fervour among people. However, the new state system failed to live up to the expectations of the Afghans and the optimism started to recede within the public. The power sharing amongst notorious warlords, facilitated by the United States, was a first step towards creating unease in the society anticipating a change in leadership. Also, share in power was distributed based on ethno-centric allegiances that promoted nepotism, favouritism and widespread corruption. A culture of impunity and lack of quality service delivery also evaporated the public trust in the state governance system. Adding the political wrangling, quests for share in power at the cost of political ideology and contested election results inflicted serious blows to the public trust in the political system. The rule of law is in part what an effective national government promises.⁶ The failure of the state to promote rule of law and the lack of responsiveness of the security sector contributed towards the erosion of a sense of security.

Since 2001, barring the first few years when the country enjoyed relative stability, Afghanistan has backtracked into political, social and economic instability while the country has seen the re-emergence of insurgent groups resulting in an upsurge in armed conflict across the country. Looking at the current Afghan context, questions are asked whether the current detrimental political divide, social in-cohesion, economic recession and expansion of armed conflict can be associated with the lack of public trust. This paper seeks to answer this question based on the Afghan experience for the post-conflict and fragile states.

⁵ Jalali, Ali A. 2007. "Legacy of War and Challenge of Peace Building." In *Building a New Afghanistan*, Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), 22-55. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.

⁶ Rotberg, Robert I. 2007. "Renewing the Afghan State." In *Building a New Afghanistan*, Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), 1-21. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.

IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC TRUST IN POST-CONFLICT SETTINGS

Trust is a fundamental concept in the field of peace research.⁷ It is referred to as the foundation of social cooperation and positive peace.⁸ The conflict-ravaged countries are generally faced with the threat of sliding back into conflict and are qualified as fragile states. Based on the model of security dilemma, as per Wong, Walter⁹ showed that the possibility of opponents eventually exploiting trust forms a critical barrier to civil war settlement.¹⁰

The lack of public trust in the post-conflict arrangements and institutional processes can hinder the recovery and allow rogue outfits to pursue their wicked agendas. Absence of trust in the political processes, such as elections, could create a void for fraud in the elections which can be a potential threat to the peaceful transfer of power. The more people participate in the political activities, the more every process gains legitimacy. Similarly, alignment of social and political groups on conflict time allegiances can curtail the capacity of the state in implementing reform processes in the state institutions objectively.

On the other hand, the end of conflict and possibility of a peaceful, just society offers hope and optimism. Trust acts like a lubricant that facilitates both economic exchange and political participation.¹¹ The publics of the post-conflict societies start believing that they could be living in a country that gives them a chance to enjoy peace, stability, justice, equal opportunity and a possibility to prosper as individuals and as a society. Peter Blau, as part of his exchange theory, suggests that trust-building is a social exchange process where one side of the relation provides benefits to the other and to seek reciprocation.¹²

A state system existing between hope and despair is always in need of support and trust of its people. The state is always in need of backing in order to imple-

⁷ Wong, Pui-Hang. 2016. "How can political trust be built after civil wars? Evidence from post-conflict Sierra Leone." *Journal of Peace Research*: 772-785.

⁸ Galtung, Johan. 1969. "Violence, peace, and peace research." *Journal of Peace Research*: 167-191.

⁹ Walter, Barbara. 1997. "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement." *International Organisation*: 335-364.

¹⁰ Wong, op. cit.

¹¹ Fukuyama, Francis. 2018. *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

¹² Blau, Peter M. 1964. *Exchange and Power in Social Life*. New York: Wiley.

ment the agreements made as part of the peace deal ending the conflict, putting institutions in place, embarking on necessary reform processes in all sectors and constraining the spoiler efforts of groups and individuals trying to threaten the progress towards peace and stability. Public trust can give quintessential confidence to the state administration to make difficult decisions. Processes, such as establishing constitutional arrangements, elections for the public offices, security sector reforms for the establishment of the monopoly of the state on the use of violence and assigning the right people in the civil bureaucracy, will also require active participation of the public, oversight, and civil and political activism.

Public oversight of the state-building activities is of paramount importance. Lack of civil and political activism, public participation and social mobilisation can leave a huge space for the manipulators leaving the post conflict country vulnerable to clashes among the interest groups. However, trust can only be garnered with efforts rooted in public participation, integrity, transparency and demonstration of objectivity in the practices. The presentation of these ingredients in practice can further public trust in the state apparatus and leadership, enhance public support and subdue the monopoly of the interest groups. As a result, the state is able to progress towards durable peace, stability and prosperity.

LOSS OF TRUST THE AFGHAN ODYSSEY

Afghanistan has been going through phases of conflict and instability since 1978, where power has been changing hands quite frequently. However, in the wake of the upheavals of 11 September 2001, the establishment of an interim government in the Bonn Conference that offered a roadmap for democratisation of Afghanistan was a reason of hope for the people. The vision for the country was set at a time when the tyrant regime of Taliban had been toppled, and a new beginning for Afghan citizens was heralded. The beginning promised transition from conflict, instability, warlordism and tyranny to the rule of law, stability, prosperity and modern democracy.

The establishment of the new government, called the Interim Government, was welcomed by repatriation of three million Afghan refugees to the country.¹³ Educated cadres living in refuge in the region and beyond also made their way back to the country with a hope to lead the post-conflict reconstruction where they would have the opportunity to live with security of their rights and possibility of

¹³ UNHCR. 2004. *Afghanistan: Challenges to Return*. Situation Update, Geneva: UNHCR.

taking leadership roles in the different spheres of the society. Political and civil activism surfaced in the society.

While the enthusiasm for a new beginning among the public peaked, the state leadership did not live up to the expectations. Old warlords disarmed at least partially, but most – disarmed or not – retained political and economic muscle.¹⁴ The Bonn Conference distributed power among parties and warlords with a history of engagement in the bloody civil war. The transitional justice was thoroughly neglected by the facilitators of the political settlement led by the USA. In addition, groups like the Taliban and Hizb-e-Islami were not invited to the conference which was dominated by the Northern Alliance mainly comprised of the Tajik ethnic group leaving the Pashtuns, the dominant ethnic group, to feel excluded.¹⁵ Many ethnic Pashtuns perceived that they lacked meaningful representation in the central government, particularly in its security institutions which resulted in grievances among a strong segment of the society.¹⁶

While the Bonn Conference produced far from ideal decisions, Afghans continued to maintain their positive posture vis-à-vis their future. The effort towards developing a society, where rule of law thrived and democratic principles were practised, continued. Civil society organisations mushroomed across the country, political parties and groups engaged in social and political mobilisation of the communities. It was hoped that the emergency *Loya Jirga*¹⁷ would broaden the base of the government, assert civilian leadership, promote the democratic process, and take authority away from the regional leaders.¹⁸ However, the outcome of the process did not live up to public expectations. Strongly influenced and manipulated by the warlords, the meeting hardly addressed the main concerns and failed to establish a balanced and representative transitional administration.¹⁹

¹⁴ Newberg, Paula R. 2007. "Neither Stable nor Stationary: Politics of Transition and Recovery." In *Building a New Afghanistan*, Robert I. Rotberg, (ed.) 82-97. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

¹⁵ International Crisis Group. 2011. *Afghanistan's Elections Stalemate*. Update Briefing, Kabul/Brussels: International Crisis Group.

¹⁶ International Crisis Group. 2003. *Afghanistan: The Problem of Pashtoon Alienation*. Asia Situation Report Series, Kabul/Brussels: International Crisis Group.

¹⁷ Traditional grand assembly of elders with an authority to decide upon issues of higher national value.

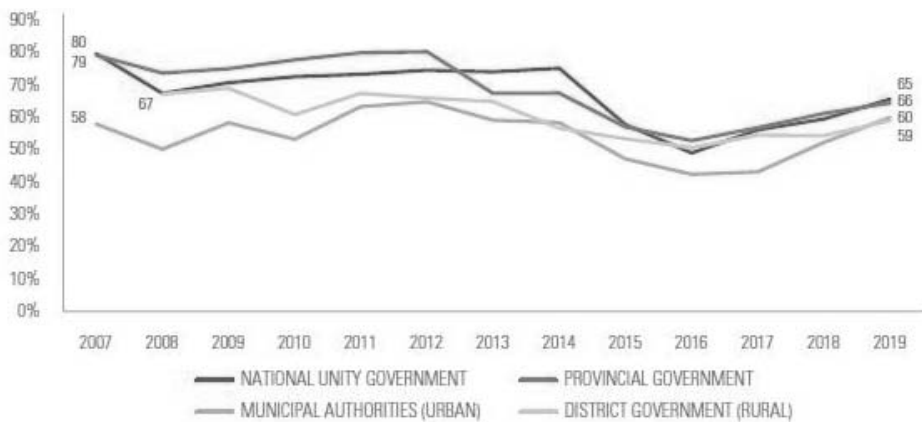
¹⁸ Jalali, Ali A. 2007. "Legacy of War and Challenge of Peace Building." In *Building a New Afghanistan*, Robert I. Rotberg, 22-55. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.

¹⁹ Jalali, op. cit.

The presidential election in 2004 was a watershed event in Afghanistan. People for the first time in the history of the country directly voted for electing their head of state. A very healthy electoral campaign was run by the candidates across the country which resulted in a strong election turnout. Similarly, election for *Wolesi Jirga* (Lower House of the Parliament) also took place during 2005 where again people voted in good numbers.

However, the elected government maintained the status quo of the pre-election period and included warlords and their protégés in the national cabinet and provincial Government offices. Throughout the international involvement in Afghanistan, the United States and the international community relied on warlords with a long record of serious human rights abuses for continuing military operations against the remnants of the Taliban, strengthening these powerbrokers and weakening Kabul's already tenuous writ.²⁰ This was the beginning of disappointment among the citizens and an initial hit to their trust and confidence in the new democratic state.

Satisfaction with Government Performance



Data and Chart Source: Asia Foundation, A Survey of the Afghan People²¹

As the government handed the reins of the administration to the warlords instead of qualified technocrats, it could not perform as per the basic principles of

²⁰ Felbab-Brown, Vanda. 2017. *Afghanistan Affections: How to Break Political-Criminal Alliances in Contexts of Transition*. Crime-Conflict Nexus Series, Tokyo: United Nations University.

²¹ Asia Foundation (<https://asiafoundation.org/publication/afghanistan-in-2019-a-survey-of-the-afghan-people/>), accessed on 2 November 2020.

good governance. In all societies – especially those emerging from violence – where administrative and social services are lacking or provided inequitably, the resulting void or imbalance is a common driver of conflict.²² In post-conflict settings services can be controlled and manipulated, creating or exacerbating horizontal inequalities and fuelling discontent rather than offering a means to foster trust and better relations between state and society.²³ Felbab-Brown observes that the anti-corruption and anti-criminality efforts were not underpinned by political heft and power, such as cutting off aid to or otherwise sanctioning particular powerbrokers. Hence, she says, pernicious individual powerbrokers and the political system quickly learned how to ride the anti-corruption and anti-crime efforts, further delegitimising the system and enabling a significant intensification of the Taliban's insurgency in Afghanistan.²⁴

Failure of the government to meet the expectations of the people, continued bad governance and ever-expanding corruption dampened the trust of the public. Failure of the rule of law sector, including police and judiciary, significantly damaged the public faith in the state. The public lost confidence in the formal justice sector amid an atmosphere of impunity, as reported by the International Crisis Group (ICG). The report adds, a growing majority of Afghans have been forced to accept the rough justice of Taliban and criminal powerbrokers in areas of the country that lie beyond government control.²⁵

As a result of the bad governance and continuation of the status quo, trust and support of the people in the state institutions evaporated. The lack of trust could be observed from the fact that peoples' participation in democratic processes declined. The public participation percentage got lowered in the second presidential elections in 2009 which was marred by political wrangling and rejection of the results by the losing candidates.²⁶ In addition, the post-election government did little to reform its practices and continued to generously reward the same group that derailed Afghanistan's journey on the path of development and prosperity. As a result, the public trust was further weakened, and people's enthusiasm continued to vanish.

²² McCandless, Erin. 2012. *Peace Dividends and Beyond: Contributions of Administrative and Social Services to Peacebuilding*. New York: United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office.

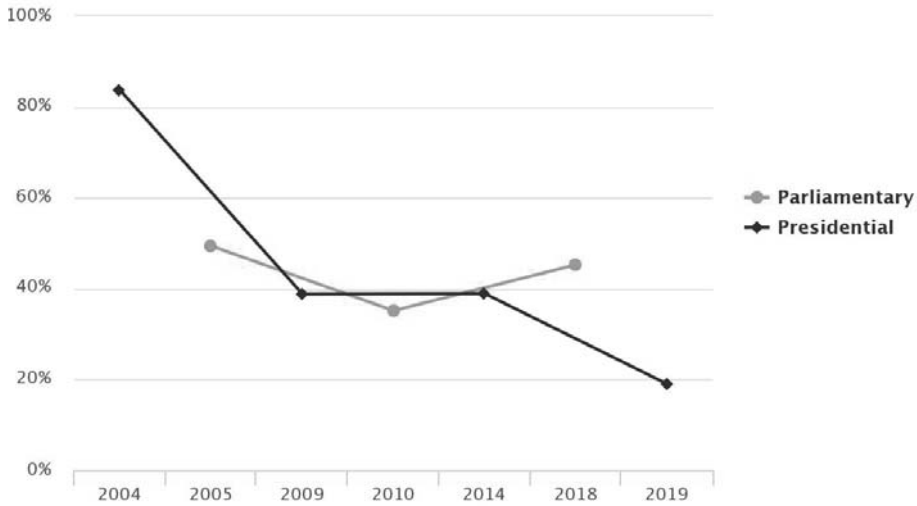
²³ McCandless, op. cit.

²⁴ Felbab-Brown, op. cit.

²⁵ International Crisis Group. 2010. *Reforming Afghanistan's Broken Judiciary*. Analytical Report-Asia Report Series, Brussels: International Crisis Group.

²⁶ Eide, Kai. 2012. *Power Struggle over Afghanistan*. New York: Skyhorse.

Voter Turnout by Election Type - Afghanistan



Data and Chart Source: International IDEA Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance²⁷.

The failure of the previous administrations significantly reduced public's trust in the political polity and processes. Corruption and a failed election process left serious doubt about the resulting legitimacy of each successive election.²⁸ It was evident in 2014, where election turnout significantly declined. The election result was once again contested and after a lot of political brinkmanship, an unconstitutional National Unity Government²⁹ (NUG) was established where the power was shared between the winner, Ashraf Ghani, and the runner up, Abdullah Abdullah.³⁰ This was the beginning of another round of political wrangling where the two leaders continued to clash on cabinet appointments.³¹ It was an absolutely pulverising blow to the national confidence and trust in the Afghan government, effects which

²⁷ <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/44/40>. Accessed on 2 November 2020.

²⁸ Cordesman, Anthony H. 2019. *Afghanistan: A War in Crisis!* Research Report, Center for Strategic and International Studies.

²⁹ <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/resources/afghan-government-documents/the-government-of-national-unity-deal-full-text/>. Full text of the NUG agreement, accessed on 2 November 2020.

³⁰ Kerry, John. 2018. *Every Day is Extra*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

³¹ van Bijlert, Martine. 2016. *Afghanistan's National Unity Government Rift (2): The problems that will not go away*. Political Landscape, Kabul: Afghan Analysts Network.

became visible during the presidential election of 2019, where a vast majority of the people stayed away from the elections.

As any other civil war, the Afghan conflict has also fractured the social fabric of the country on ethnic grounds. The post-Bonn era promised a lot to help the country build social cohesion, promote social integration and make the Afghan nation generate a national vision. However, the governments continuously failed to offer a nation-building agenda. The existing social cleavages that were furthered by the Bonn Conference as power was distributed on ethnic lines were expanded as a result of the political bickering.

The politicians used the ethno-political card in order to pursue their agenda for claiming their stake in power and as such tried to mobilise the masses around ethno-centric rhetoric. As a result, the Afghan society lost the chance of getting behind a national political agenda and as such, ethno-centric rhetoric superseded the issue-based politics. Consequently, the opportunity for nation-building was lost, which added to the vulnerabilities of the society. The ethnicity-focused political drives significantly hindered any effort towards reforms as action against individuals was recognised as one against an ethnic group. This resulted in promotion of a culture of impunity and emboldened individuals to exploit public sentiments for the personal gains.

The culture of impunity and deployments based on allegiance to certain groups and individuals encouraged the public office holders to engage in corruption, embezzlement, and bribery in the state institutions. Corruption and weak institutional capacity are key drivers of conflict in Afghanistan.³² Felbab-Brown believes that the Taliban, too, has become involved in the country's many illicit economies, such as drug trafficking, illegal mining and logging as well as extortion, its power abuses have been significantly more limited than those of the government-linked powerbrokers. She believes that while brutal and responsible for most deaths in Afghanistan's conflict, the Taliban can portray itself as less corrupt and as able to resolve disputes, act against crime, and deliver swift justice, rough as it may be.³³ Corruption in Afghanistan undermines the provision of basic services, enables the production and trafficking of narcotics and fuels instability.³⁴ Lack of public service delivery and bad governance at the central, but more particularly at the

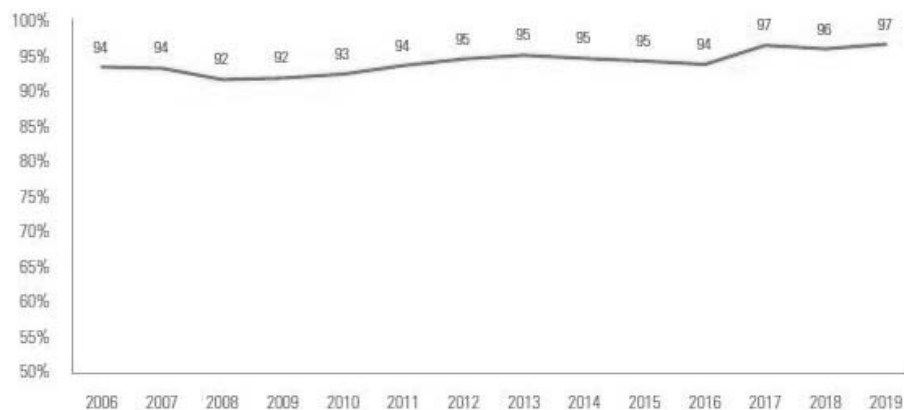
³² Wheatland, Ben. 2015. *Afghanistan: Corruption as a driver of conflict*. Expert Answer Report, Anti-Corruption Resource Center.

³³ Felbab-Brown, op. cit.

³⁴ Bak, Mathias. 2019. *Corruption in Afghanistan and the role of development assistance*. Analytical, Transparency International.

sub-national level, cost the state the loss of public support, which created space for the anti-government militant groups to operate.

Perception of Corruption as a Problem in Afghanistan



Data and Chart Source: Asia Foundation, A Survey of the Afghan People.³⁵

For any asymmetric warfare to succeed, among many pre-requisites, one is indifference of the public towards the mobility of insurgents in their neighborhoods. In the case of Afghanistan too, communities faced with bad governance and lack of public service delivery, withdrew their support of the government which allowed the militant groups to operate from within the communities. As has been the case in other similar contexts such as Nigeria, due to the lack of the communities' support to the government, local communities turned into home ground for the militant groups. Marshall writes about the Nigerian experience, one similar to Afghanistan, where much of the population in the Boko Haram dominated communities did not cooperate with national military, either for fear of reprisal or due to a shared resentment.³⁶

The hide and seek between the forces and militant groups was played out within the communities. As a result, huge civilian casualties were inflicted, while people were arrested and imprisoned for years based on the suspicion of supporting the militant groups. As a result, the armed opposition of the government found an opportunity to run propaganda campaigns against the government which not only

³⁵ Asia Foundation (<https://asiafoundation.org/publication/afghanistan-in-2019-a-survey-of-the-afghan-people/>), accessed on 2 November 2020.

³⁶ Marshall, Tim. 2015. *Prisoners of Geography*. New York: Scribner.

earned them public sympathies but also ground for recruitment of foot soldiers. Continued cycles of violence as part of the asymmetric warfare, lack of public support, bad governance and inability of the government to repair its relations with the people furthered the gap between the public and the state, allowing the militant groups to extend their influence across the country.

The exponential increase in the level of violence in the country over the course of years dented the confidence of the business community as well. The business interventions and economic development activities were stalled by the ever-increasing violence, which ultimately cost the impoverished people. This added to the desperation and derailed trust and confidence of the people in the state and government.

IMPACT OF TRUST DEFICIT

Amid an ongoing guerrilla insurgency, the Afghan governments, one after the other, failed to maintain and expand public support. The 2018 National Corruption Survey of the Integrity Watch Afghanistan reports that 43 percent of the respondents “Strongly Agree or Agree” with the statement that “because of corruption people in our area refer to the Taliban”, up from the 39 percent of 2016.³⁷ Consequently, the militant groups found space for establishing themselves which allowed garner sympathies of the local communities. The effort brought them more success in direct proportion with the governance practices. The more an area experienced bad governance, the more the communities receded towards the militants’ lap.

The evaporation of the public trust allowed the insurgent groups to re-surface and establish themselves as a potent threat to the modern Afghan state. The Integrity Watch Afghanistan report quotes a commentator suggesting: “Extensive predatory criminality, corruption, and power abuse – not effectively countered by the Afghan government – have facilitated the Taliban’s entrenchment”.³⁸ The strong re-emergence of the militant groups and their penetration into the Afghan society gave an opportunity to the local and regional spoilers to intervene in the country. Corruption significantly undermined the US mission³⁹ in Afghanistan by damaging the legitimacy of the Afghan government, strengthening popular support for the

³⁷ Integrity Watch Afghanistan. 2018. *National Corruption Survey*. Public Perception Survey, Kabul: Integrity Watch Afghanistan.

³⁸ Integrity Watch Afghanistan, op. cit.

³⁹ Counter terrorism mission.

insurgency, and channelling material resources to insurgent groups.⁴⁰ The opium economy boomed amidst ongoing violence and lack of state hold on poppy growing areas made the Afghan market lucrative for the local and regional drug dealers. The drug economy grew so big that it was able to fund militancy in the country and as such a vicious cycle was established. Besides, illegal mining, extortion, kidnapping and illegal taxation by non-state actors became a common phenomenon across the country. The more the illicit economy gained strength, the more the state economy declined. In addition, lack of licit economic opportunities and lucrateness of the illicit ones attracted the youth as well as the rural elite of the country which resulted in further decline in support for the state contributing significantly to the evaporation of public trust in the government.

The financial gains made out of the illicit economic activities and corruption gave a strong position to a very small segment of the society which started to engage in the state politics as well. The engagement of individuals with large sums of money restricted a more genuine leadership of the country to emerge and get established. Young cadre and genuine potential leaders of Afghanistan had their confidence battered, and trust in state and the government damaged.

The rise of violent extremism in the Islamic world has many causes, but it is clear that a close correlation exists between broad failures in governance, economics, and coping with population growth; and the emergence of large-scale violence, and a shift from terrorism to insurgency.⁴¹ In the Afghan context the insurgents have now been able to challenge the very survival of an Afghan democratic state system. The gains made vis-à-vis state security, economic growth, social development and political stability has been on a reversed path. The resurgence of the Taliban and their domination in both military and political spheres is a significant blow to the modern Afghan state.

The insurgent groups have been able to emerge as a dominant force dictating terms both in military as well as political spheres. Currently negotiating a peace deal with the Afghan government, they have been able to secure maximum concessions and have their demands endorsed by the US negotiating team.⁴² In the meantime,

⁴⁰ SIGAR. 2016. *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the US Experience in Afghanistan*. Analytical, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).

⁴¹ Cordesman, op. cit.

⁴² The Doha Agreement signed between the US and the Taliban (<https://www.state.gov/agreement-for-bringing-peace-to-afghanistan/>), accessed 2 November 2020.

they have been fighting fiercely challenging the state stability.⁴³ Afghanistan is faced with an uncertain future and the country is faced with prospects of a civil war and instability in the event the peace process fails to deliver a peace deal. Even if a peace deal is achieved, it could be at the cost of democratic liberties and people's rights, leaving the country on the brink of yet another collapse.

CONCLUSION

The public trust is of paramount importance in the post-conflict setting for conflict transformation and peace-building. Societies having faced civil war and prolonged instability are always in need of people's support to the state system. Particularly, a society like Afghanistan where multiple non-state actors remain active with the capacity to disrupt a country's progress on the path to recovery and stability, garnering public trust is crucial for the government.

The public joins the national streams with a positive frame of mind and an expectation that the days of misfortune are over. In such circumstances, the society is prepared to contribute to the national processes and enjoy engagement in state-building and nation-building processes. However, maintaining the trust always requires showing progress in practice and delivering results as duty bearer. Good governance, rule of law and commitment to reforms must be exercised in order to maintain and further public trust.

However, the Afghan political leadership failed to maintain public trust and as such their support. Reminders by experts about regaining public trust were given, yet not followed by real action. The ICG wrote that the survival of the Afghan government depended on the ability of all stakeholders to reduce the trust deficit between the Afghan people and their government by adopting genuine reforms.⁴⁴ However, no actions were taken because of which people's support continually declined and evaporated due to non-fulfilment of their expectations. This generated an opportunity for the militant actors to join the fray and exploit the trust deficit between the state institutions and citizens. Lack of public trust and indifference towards the mobility of insurgents created a vicious cycle which continuously

⁴³ Quilty, Andrew. 2020. *Taliban Opportunism and ANSF Frustration: How the Afghan conflict has changed since the Doha agreement*. Situation Update, Kabul: Afghan Analysts Network.

⁴⁴ International Crisis Group. 2011. *The Insurgency in Afghanistan's Heartland*. Asia Situation Report Series, Kabul/Brussels: International Crisis Group.

widened the gap between the state and its citizens leaving Afghanistan's nascent democracy and modern state system at the mercy of insurgents.

Public trust is important for any society to succeed on the road to prosperity. Nevertheless, it is a crucial factor in conflict transformation, stabilisation and economic development. On the other hand, withdrawal of the trust by the state citizens adds to fragility of the country and allows the spoilers to exploit the situation in pursuit of their agenda. Afghanistan had a great chance to smoothly sail through post-conflict stabilisation, conflict transformation, economic development, political maturity and institutional development after the years of civil war and instability. However, the state was not able to sustain the public trust vested in the post-Bonn governments as a result of which it is facing perils of relapse into state collapse, or, at minimum, loss of genuine democracy.

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Institutional Trust in Bangladesh and Nepal: Puzzling Trends from Survey Evidences

Hasan Muhammad Baniamin

INTRODUCTION

This paper tries to cast light on a puzzling trend emerging from different surveys in two South Asian countries: Bangladesh and Nepal. Surveys like the World Values Survey (WVS) and Governance and Trust Survey (GoT) indicate that there is higher institutional trust in these two countries compared to different better performing countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Germany. This inflated trust is not any survey-specific or survey-round specific trend. Different surveys on different respondents at different times show similar trends.¹ So, this inflated trust may not be related with the quality of survey data. There is another possibility to have such inflated trust; the fear factor may matter – people may fear to provide their real opinions about the authorities. If this assumption is correct, then people may also not talk about the corruption of their authorities. However, we can see that people are giving their opinions about the corruption of their authorities.² Now the question is why people are having higher institutional trust in these two countries. This paper tries to explore the answer of this inconsistent trend based on empirical data and previous studies.

¹ Baniamin, H. M. 2019a. "Linking socio-economic performance, quality of governance, and trust in the civil service: Does culture intercede in the perceived relationships? Evidence from and beyond Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka". *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, 41 (3): 127–141, (<https://doi.org/10.1080/23276665.2019.1658926>); Baniamin, H. M. 2019b. *Relationships among governance quality, institutional performance, and (dis)trust: Trends and tensions: A quest for critical ingredients of institutional trust*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Bergen, Norway.] Bergen Open Research Archive.

² Baniamin, H. M. 2019b. Op. cit.

INSTITUTIONAL TRUST IN BANGLADESH AND NEPAL: THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS AND SURVEY EVIDENCES

Trust in institutions usually reflects how public organisations are managed and how successful they are in addressing the need of the people.³ Van de Walle Miller and Listhaug⁴ define institutional trust as the “evaluation of whether or not political authorities and institutions are performing in accordance with normative expectations held by the public.” This definition is consistent with the rationalist understanding of institutional trust. From a rationalist perspective, performance and governance quality are two key variables which are used to explain the degree of institutional trust.⁵ For example, if the parliament or civil service of a country formulates policies by reflecting people’s expectations and people benefit from those policies, then they should have higher institutional trust. Usually, this reflection of people’s expectations is known as the ‘input’ side of a governance system. Similarly, if people do not face any unfair treatment or corruption from the state machinery, then they should also have higher institutional trust.⁶ These mechanisms are known as the ‘process’ or the ‘throughput’ of a governance system. Rothstein and Teorell⁷ labelled them as ‘quality of governance’. And when institutions can produce better results, like to generate better economic performance or provide better services in different sectors like health and education, then the respective institutions should enjoy higher institutional trust. This performance dimension is known as ‘output’ of

³ Askvik, S. 2007. “Political regime and popular trust in the civil service: South Africa and Norway compared”. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*, 9 (1): 69–85; Bouckaert, G., Lægneid, P., and Van de Walle, S. 2005. “Introduction”. *Public Performance and Management Review*, 28 (4): 460–464; Mishler, W. and Rose, R. 2001. “What Are the Origins of Political Trust? Testing Institutional and Cultural Theories in Post-communist Societies”. *Comparative Political Studies*, 34 (1): 30-62.

⁴ Miller, A. H., and Listhaug, O. 1990. “Political parties and confidence in government: A comparison of Norway, Sweden and the United States”. *British Journal of Political Science*, 20 (3):357-386.

⁵ Baniamin, H. M. 2019a. Op. cit.

⁶ Chang, E. C. and Chu, Y. H. 2006. “Corruption and trust: Exceptionalism in Asian democracies?”. *The Journal of Politics*, 68 (2): 259–271; Mishler, W. and Rose, R. 2001. Op. cit.; Wong, T. K. Y., Wan, P. S., and Hsiao, H. H. M. 2011. “The bases of political trust in six Asian societies: Institutional and cultural explanations compared”. *International Political Science Review*, 32 (3): 263-281.

⁷ Rothstein, B. O., and Teorell, J. A. 2008. “What is quality of government? A theory of impartial government institutions”. *Governance*, 21 (2): 165-190.

a governance system. From a rationalist approach, performance is one of the main determining factors for institutional trust.

Based on these elaborations, we would expect to find lower institutional trust in both Bangladesh and Nepal, as in terms of governance quality and policy performance, both countries show a lower performance than most developed countries. However, both countries show relatively higher institutional trust than those better performing countries. For example, trust in government and civil service are 83 and 77 respectively in Bangladesh (Table 1). The trust in those organisations is relatively lower in Nepal (67 for government and 72 for civil service) compared to Bangladesh, but still higher than other better performing countries like Australia, New Zealand, and Germany (see Table 2). The Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) indicates that both of these countries' policy outputs are poor. This index captures three key policy performances: per capita income, and performances in health and education respectively.⁸ These performance indicators are based on objective data of the respective countries. According to HDI, Bangladesh is in position 135 and Nepal is in position 147 out of 189 countries. On the other hand, for better performing countries which have a higher ranking in HDI, like Australia, New Zealand, and Germany, we find lower institutional trust in government. The trust level in government is 55 in Australia, 64 in New Zealand and 59 in Germany (Table 1). Not only do these three better performing countries have lower trust rates than Bangladesh and Nepal but also for other better performing countries like Japan, USA, and South Korea, we find lower institutional trust in government.

⁸ UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 2020. Human Development Index (HDI), (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>), accessed on August 29, 2020.

Table 1: Institutional Trust in Bangladesh and Nepal in 2020.

Institutions	Bangladesh		Nepal	
	Trust in Institutions (1-4)	Trust in Institutions (1-100)	Trust in Institutions (1-4)	Trust in Institutions (1-100)
Confidence in Government	3.32	83	2.69	67
Confidence in Parliament	3.37	84	2.69	67
Confidence in Civil Service	3.08	77	2.89	72
Confidence in Higher Judiciary	3.35	84	3.00	75
Confidence in Lower Courts	3.22	81	2.94	74
Confidence in Police	2.44	61	2.90	73
Confidence in Army	3.57	89	3.19	80
Confidence in NGOs	3.00	75	2.68	67

Source: Governance and Trust Survey (GoT⁹), 2020.

From Table 2, we can see that the magnitude of corruption is also very high in these two South Asian countries compared to many other countries, but still these two countries have higher institutional trust. However, corruption is a very important variable for defining the quality of the processes involved in providing public services. According to the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) by Transparency International¹⁰, the CPI value for Bangladesh and Nepal are 26 and 31 respectively¹¹ (Table 2). Again, Australia, New Zealand and Germany, which have higher CPI value, i.e., are corruption-wise 'clean' countries, rank lower than Nepal and Bangladesh with regard to institutional trust.

⁹ This is a survey conducted by researchers from four universities with the financial grant from the Norwegian government; the universities are: University of Bergen, Norway, North South University, Bangladesh, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, and Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

¹⁰ Transparency International (TI). 2020. Corruption Perceptions Index, (<https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi>), accessed August 30, 2020.

¹¹ Lower values indicate higher corruption.

Table 2: Trust in Government across the World.

Country	Trust in Government (1-4) *	Trust in Government (transformed to 1-100) *	CPI**	HDI***
China	3.44	86	41	0.7580
Tajikistan	3.43	86	25	0.6560
Bangladesh (GoT survey)*	3.32	83	26	0.6140
Vietnam	3.30	82	37	0.6930
Indonesia	3.15	79	40	0.7070
Philippines	3.12	78	34	0.7120
Bangladesh	3.11	78	26	0.6140
Myanmar	3.10	78	29	0.5840
Kazakhstan	2.89	72	34	0.8170
Turkey	2.86	72	39	0.8070
Ethiopia	2.81	70	37	0.4700
Pakistan	2.71	68	32	0.5600
Nepal (GoT survey)*	2.69	67	31	0.5790
Thailand	2.60	65	36	0.7650
New Zealand	2.55	64	87	0.9210
Russia	2.52	63	28	0.8240
Hong Kong SAR	2.50	62	76	0.9390
Malaysia	2.48	62	53	0.8040
Kyrgyzstan	2.48	62	30	0.6740
South Korea	2.48	62	59	0.9060
Zimbabwe	2.47	62	24	0.5630
Taiwan ROC	2.45	61	65	N/A
Iran	2.42	60	26	0.7970
Germany	2.38	59	80	0.9390
Japan	2.36	59	73	0.9150
Nigeria	2.31	58	26	0.5340
Cyprus	2.29	57	58	0.8730
Jordan	2.19	55	48	0.7230
Chile	2.18	55	67	0.8470
Australia	2.18	55	77	0.9380
Ecuador	2.09	52	38	0.7580
USA	2.08	52	69	0.9200
Argentina	2.06	52	45	0.8300
Nicaragua	2.06	52	22	0.6510
Bolivia	2.06	51	31	0.7030

Country	Trust in Government (1-4) *	Trust in Government (transformed to 1-100) *	CPI**	HDI***
Yugoslavia	1.95	49	39	0.7990
Lebanon	1.91	48	28	0.7300
Colombia	1.88	47	37	0.7610
Romania	1.84	46	44	0.8160
Iraq	1.73	43	20	0.6890
Brazil	1.71	43	35	0.7610
Guatemala	1.68	42	26	0.6510
Mexico	1.68	42	29	0.7670
Greece	1.65	41	48	0.8720
Tunisia	1.60	40	43	0.7390
Peru	1.55	39	36	0.7590

* Sources: Data is from WVS 7 (World Value Survey).¹²

** Source: The Human Development Index (HDI) by UNDP (2018). The HDI covers 189 countries that are categorised into 4 groups: very high human development 1.00-0.80; high human development 0.79-0.70; medium human development 0.69-0.55; low human development 0.54 and below.

*** Source: The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) by Transparency International (TI) (2018). Here, 0 means higher corruption and 100 means lower corruption.

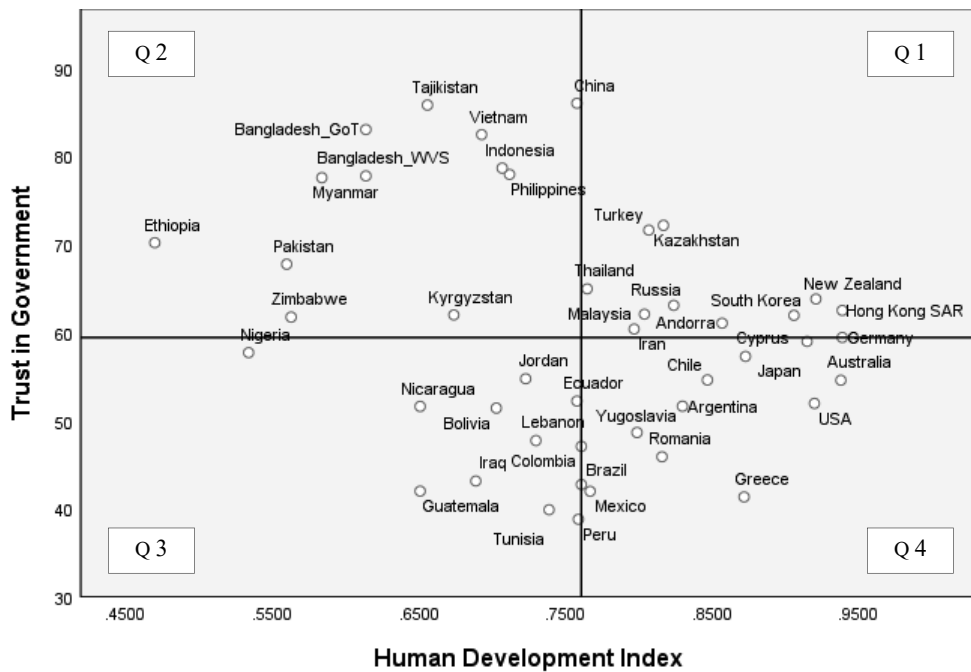
The inflated trust does not only exist in these two underperforming South Asian countries; it also exists in other countries as well. In Figure 1, we can see that a number of Asian and African underperforming countries have higher institutional trust (countries in Q2). The countries which are in Q1 and Q3 fit more with rationalist logic, i.e., higher performances have an association with higher institutional trust, and lower performances have an association with lower institutional trust. The countries which are in Q4 have better performance but lower institutional trust. Different scholars¹³ explain this lower trust by the rise of post-materialist views and

¹² Haerper, C., Inglehart, R., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano J., M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin and B. Puranen (eds.). 2020. World Values Survey: Round Seven – Country-Pooled Datafile. Madrid, Spain and Vienna, Austria: JD Systems Institute and WWSA Secretariat (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp>); Governance and Trust Survey. 2020. Op. cit.

¹³ Inglehart, R. and Baker, W. E. 2000. "Modernization, cultural change and the persistence of traditional values". *American Sociological Review*, 65 (1): 19–51; Norris, P. 2011. *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

critical citizens. In some of these lower trust countries, there is a rise of populist parties and trends of right-wing voting. Probably because of these inconsistent trends, Van de Walle and Bouckaert criticise rationalist approaches and argue that “this is a very rational and mechanistic reasoning, only part of which corresponds to reality”.¹⁴ There are improvements of socio-economic conditions in different countries greater than ever before, but there is no sign for continuous increase of institutional trust; rather, in some countries, that trust is reducing.¹⁵

Figure 1: Trust in Government and Human Development Index by UNDP.



¹⁴ Van de Walle, S., and Bouckaert, G. 2003. “Public service performance and trust in government: The problem of causality”. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 26 (8-9): 891.

¹⁵ Wong, T. K. Y., Wan, P. S., and Hsiao, H. H. M. 2011. Op. cit.; Zhao, D., and Hu, W. 2017. “Determinants of public trust in government: Empirical evidence from urban China”. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 83 (2): 358-377.

WHERE DOES TRUST INTO INSTITUTIONS COME FROM?

The existing studies¹⁶ on institutional trust in the sample of the two South Asian countries (Bangladesh and Nepal) indicate that higher authoritarian cultural orientation (ACO) may contribute to higher trust levels in those two countries. This ACO indicates unquestioning obedience and reliance on authorities who have higher social status or position than the individuals concerned like older people, government officials, politicians and teachers.¹⁷ Because of ACO, people have 'blind trust' rather than calculation-based judgements. The people who have this orientation do not apply their logical cost-benefit framework to assess institutional performance and governance quality. Alternatively, the people who do not have this orientation have higher assertiveness and they can easily apply calculative judgements to assess institutional performance. Thus, the degree and nature of actionability varies between these two types of people. A study based on African countries indicates that people with lower assertiveness have higher ratings on different institutional performance, such as management of the economy, crime controlling, providing health and education services.¹⁸ The same study also reports lower magnitude of governance-related problems such as the problems of corruption and unequal treatment with the lower assertive people. This lower assertiveness found in Africa can be related with higher ACO found in South Asia¹⁹ as people with higher ACO are less assertive due to their nature of obedience.

Along with this variation of the assessment of policy performances and governance quality, there may be another mechanism; due to ACO, people may not connect the assessment information to their measurement of institutional trust. They may focus on the 'logic of hierarchy' rather than the 'logic of reciprocity'. Thus, because of ACO, one's rational calculative logic can be different. It is more like one's trust in his or her father; one person's trust in his or her father may not be dependent on the father's level of earnings compared to others or even the nature of the father's character. A person may know that his or her father may have questionable attributes, like the involvement with different corrupt practices, but still

¹⁶ Baniamin, H. M. 2019a. Op. cit.; Baniamin, H. M., Jamil, I., and Askvik, S. 2020. "Mismatch between lower performance and higher trust in the civil service: Can culture provide an explanation?". *International Political Science Review*, 41 (2): 192–206.

¹⁷ Ma, D., and Yang, F. 2014. "Authoritarian orientations and political trust in East Asian societies". *East Asia*, 31 (4): 323-341.

¹⁸ Baniamin, H. M. 2020. Op. cit.

¹⁹ Baniamin, H. M. 2019b. Op. cit.

that person may not use that information to define the degree of trust to him. In many societies, like in China, the relationship between government and citizens is considered as the extension of the father-son relationship.²⁰ Ma and Yong find that authoritarian cultural orientation contributes to higher trust in 13 East Asian societies. Like China, in Bangladesh, civil servants, particularly those working in different districts, are known as guardian or parent (in Bangla: *ovibabok* or *bap-ma*) of the respective areas.²¹ Another study by Jamil and Baniamin²² indicates that the institutions in Bangladesh and Nepal which have higher visibility, and higher perceptions of having administrative power, tend to have higher institutional trust among the people who have higher ACO. For example, the civil service has higher administrative power than academic institutions, and accordingly, the civil service has higher institutional trust among the people who have higher ACO.

Further, we need to look at variations in the level of expectations, as expectations can significantly affect a person's level of trust or satisfaction. Röder and Mühlau²³ indicate that the frame of reference is important for perceived performance and institutional trust. If a person has lower expectations, then she or he may be satisfied with lower performance and accordingly can have higher trust in institutions with such lower performance. The studies that we discussed here do not capture the variations of this expectation dimension. People from better performing democracies may have higher expectations from their government; and in other places, people may not have such expectations as the state-citizen relations there differ. People may be happy with what they get from the state as in other types of regimes, people are not often part of the governance system. Still a king-subject type relation may exist, where people consider any kind of contribution by the government as an act of benevolence by the authority. As such, they may express their gratitude to the authority for the little they get. For example, Ali et al.²⁴ indicate that

²⁰ Ma and Yang, 2014. Op. cit.

²¹ Baniamin, H. M. 2019a. Op. cit.

²² Jamil, I., and Baniamin, H. M. 2020. "Representative and responsive bureaucracy in Nepal: A mismatch or a realistic assumption?". *Public Administration and Policy*, 3 (2): 141-156.

²³ Röder, A., and Mühlau, P. 2012. "Low expectations or different evaluations: What explains immigrants' high levels of trust in host-country institutions?". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38 (5): 777-792.

²⁴ Ali, T. O., Hassan, M., and Hossain, N. 2021 (online first version). "The moral and political economy of the pandemic in Bangladesh: Weak states and strong societies during Covid-19". *World Development*, 137: 1-10. (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105216>).

in Bangladesh the state is broadly considered as a benevolent patron, provider and protector, rather than as 'political representative' of the general people.

The definition that is usually used to define institutional trust comes from rationalist calculative perspective. To apply that calculative perspective, people need to be individualistic and assertive to question the authority. This means, people should have a higher perceived ability about their own actionability. In general, Western societies are rights-based and individualistic; and Dalton and Ong²⁵ claim that these qualities are necessary requirements for a competitive democracy. In such societies, people enjoy more freedom to disagree with leaders and can claim for more consultative leadership. On the other hand, societies like the ones at hand are considered collective; their relationship with others shape the nature of their calculation. Many Asian societies have this collective nature. By observing Asian culture, Fukuyama states "...people are born not with rights but with duties to a series of hierarchically-arranged authorities, beginning with the family and extending all the way up to the state".²⁶ However, in individualistic societies, personal rights are important, people are vocal for those rights and bargain with the authorities for those rights. For this bargaining, they also need to be assertive. In different Western countries, higher assertiveness may lead to cynical behaviours which may cause a reduction of trust in the established institutions and divert peoples' support towards populist parties who raise questions against the established authorities. On the other hand, the countries where there is higher ACO, people are more obedient or indifferent due to lower assertiveness; and in many cases they end up having authoritarian regimes. Thus, we can get two kinds of attributes causing deviations from a rational calculation-based approach of institutional trust: *higher assertiveness-based disobedience or cynical behaviours* (for example, some populist party supporters have tendency to disobey established institutions and directives) and *lower assertiveness-based obedience*. The first one is working as a 'push' factor to reduce institutional trust in some higher performing countries, and the second one is acting as a 'pull' factor to create inflated institutional trust in some underperforming countries. The two South Asian countries at hand may fall in the second category. Combining institutional performance and an individual's orientation, we can develop the following matrix:

²⁵ Dalton, R. J., and Ong, N. N. T. 2005. "Authority orientations and democratic attitudes: A test of the 'Asian values' hypothesis". *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 6 (2): 211-231.

²⁶ Fukuyama, F. 1998. "Asian values and civilization". In: ICAS Fall Symposium *Asia's Challenges Ahead*. University of Pennsylvania.

Figure 2: Possible explanatory variables for institutional trust and their relationships.

Institutional Performance	High	Higher trust due to higher performance and ACO	Higher trust due to higher performance	Lower/medium trust due to critical citizens, despite higher performance
	Low	Higher trust despite lower performance due to higher ACO,	Lower trust due to lower performance	Lower trust due to lower performance
		Authoritarian cultural orientation: higher obedience	Rationalist approach: objectivity	Assertive culture: higher self-expressive values
		Individual's Orientation		

Performance and Assertive Culture

In developed countries with relatively high institutional performance where citizens demonstrate a high degree of assertive culture (i.e., self-expressive values) lower or medium levels of trust can be explained by citizens being more critical as compared to less developed countries. Due to assertive culture, here, people's perceived ability for actionability can be higher. This may happen in Q4 of Figure 1. Thus, the rise of 'critical citizens' may act as a 'push' factor for lower trust despite higher institutional performance.

Performance and Authoritarian Cultural Orientation (ACO)

Authoritarian Cultural Orientation (ACO) makes people obedient to authority. People with this orientation usually respect authority and seldom question, let alone challenge the existing power structure. This authoritarian cultural orientation affects their perceived ability for actionability to raise questions, and as such it may be lower. This condition may influence citizens' assessment of institutions and contributes to higher levels of trust in the institutions. Thus, ACO can explain higher institutional trust in some of the countries positioned in Q2 of Figure 1.

Performance and a Rationalist Approach

People who do not have either higher ACO or cynical assertive nature may evaluate institutional performance more 'objectively'. If so, when an institution performs well, they may award it with a high level of trust, or, alternatively, consider it untrustworthy when it performs poorly. Though, there can be other orientations or values apart from the above-mentioned individual orientations which can affect citizens' objective evaluation of institutional performances. We need to explore them as well.

GOVERNANCE QUALITY AND AUTHORITARIAN CULTURAL ORIENTATION

The study by Welzel and Dalton²⁷ shows that while an allegiant (obedience-based) culture can be beneficial for effective governance as there is less resistance, it may not be suitable to establish accountable governance. For accountable governance, an assertive culture is important. In the sample of the two South Asian countries, there is allegiant culture (obedience-based culture) due to lower assertiveness or authoritarian cultural orientation (ACO). In allegiant culture, a country may prosper with proper leadership; Southeast Asian countries like Singapore and Malaysia serve as examples for this kind of development. However, in such allegiant cultures, it is difficult to make a government accountable if the leadership becomes corrupt. Probably, this is why Bouckaert and Van de Walle²⁸ claim that having lower trust is healthy for democratic attitudes. However, too low trust can also be problematic for the proper functioning of a government, as in that case, people may not cooperate with the government. Kim²⁹ claims that higher citizens' trust in public institutions is necessary for the proper implementation of policies. Van der Meer and Dekker³⁰ describe further mechanisms of the role of trust in a governance system — like a

²⁷ Welzel, C., and Dalton, R. 2017. "Cultural change in Asia and beyond: From allegiant to assertive citizens". *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 2 (2): 112-132.

²⁸ Bouckaert and Van de Walle. 2003. Op. cit.

²⁹ Kim, S. 2005. "The role of trust in the modern administrative state: an integrative model". *Administration and Society*, 37 (5): 611-635.

³⁰ Van der Meer, T., and Dekker, P. 2011. "Trustworthy states, trusting citizens? A multilevel study into objective and subjective determinants of political trust". In: Zmerli, S. and Hooghe, M. (ed.). *Political trust - Why context matters: Causes and Consequences of a Relational Concept*. Colchester: ECPR Press: 95-116.

glue, it keeps the governance system together, and like oil, helps to lubricate the policy machine. If citizens do not have trust, they may not follow rules, or respond properly in times of necessity.³¹

Those countries which enjoy blind trust due to ACO or lower assertive people, may not be able to enjoy that in the long term. People gradually may become critical towards authority, and authoritarian cultural orientation may slowly disappear. The enhancement of education level and gradual development in a country may contribute to such changes. Hakhverdian and Mayne³² mention two possible mechanisms associated with role of education: the norm-inducing function and the accuracy-inducing function. In the norm-inducing function, people with higher education are more likely to face moral troubles facing any corruption; and in the accuracy-inducing function, educated people develop more sophisticated skills for assessing institutional performance and processes.

Empirical evidences indicate that even in China which has this kind of obedience, the number of critical citizens is gradually increasing.³³ Welzel³⁴ explains this kind of change with the 'Emancipation theory' and connects it to the 'human ladder of freedom'. Some countries are slower than others to move upwards in the ladder. Inglehart and Welzel³⁵ connect such empowerment framework with the 'need hierarchy' of motivation theory, where after fulfilling the basic or materialistic needs, people look for freedom and self-esteem. In that case, just traditional development may not be enough; people may demand more. The demand for freedom remains dormant when people face 'existential constraints'.³⁶ Accordingly, citizens who develop post-materialist values increasingly challenge elitist rule and reject authority.³⁷

³¹ Van Ryzin, Gregg G. 2011. "Outcomes, process and trust of civil servants". *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 21 (4): 745-760.

³² Hakhverdian, A., and Mayne, Q. 2012. "Institutional trust, education, and corruption: A micro-macro interactive approach". *The Journal of Politics*, 74 (3): 739-750.

³³ Wang, Z., and You, Y. 2016. "The arrival of critical citizens: decline of political trust and shifting public priorities in China". *International Review of Sociology*, 26 (1): 1-20.

³⁴ Welzel, C. 2013. *Freedom rising*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

³⁵ Inglehart, R., and Welzel, C. 2005. *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy: The human development sequence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³⁶ Welzel, C. 2013. Op. cit.

³⁷ Wang, Z. and You, Y. 2016. Op. cit.

CONCLUSION

This paper analysed the puzzling institutional trust levels in two South Asian countries. Both countries have inflated institutional trust, i.e., have higher institutional trust despite lower performance and poor governance compared to other better performing countries. Authoritarian cultural orientation or lower assertiveness are possible explanations for such inflated trust in those two countries. Due to this hierarchical cultural orientation, people's calculative logic differs from those holding other cultural orientation. Due to authoritarian cultural orientation, they are less likely to use information about performance to evaluate the authorities. Ruscio³⁸ claims that one person's social obligations can influence his or her calculations as social norms and values influence individual's behaviour in combination with self-interest. Thus, their evaluation is more affected by the logic of appropriateness rather than the logic of consequence³⁹ and their nature of actionability is different compared to higher assertive people. Sztompka⁴⁰ defines this kind of inflated trust as blind or naive trust as people disregard negative evidences and take a 'pure leap of faith'.

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³⁸ Ruscio, K. P. 1996. "Trust, democracy, and public management: A theoretical argument". *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 6 (3): 461-477.

³⁹ Baniamin, H. M. 2019b. Op. cit.

⁴⁰ Sztompka, P. 1999. *Trust: A sociological theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Toward an EU-Asian Partnership on Deforestation: Restoring Sustainability in the Age of Pandemics

Vicente Lopez Ibor Mayor

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 virus has created an unprecedented crisis for the world's society, economy and markets. In the process, it has exposed a lack of trust in governments and political institutions across the world and raised questions as to whether they are capable of delivering public goods and services.

One of the most critical geopolitical and economic fractures exacerbated by the crisis has emerged between Europe and Southeast Asia. Not only has COVID-19 demonstrated the vulnerability of global supply chains and the need for more resilient infrastructures, it has also demonstrated the ever-increasing ecological dangers of industrial expansion, which has amplified the risks of diseases migrating from animals to humans.

This has fed into a running debate in Europe over the past few years around the ecological and health risks amplified by deforestation. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the most critical flashpoint between Europe and Asia has occurred in relation to efforts to establish a new EU-ASEAN trade agreement. But progress in such an important initiative in international trade has been stalled due to tensions between the EU and two prominent ASEAN countries, Malaysia and Indonesia, over the ecological impact of palm oil due its role in deforestation. New EU legislation introduced in 2019 mounted in a de facto ban on imports of palm oil for biodiesel, prompting retaliatory threats of trade boycotts of their own from Malaysia and Indonesia.¹

¹ Pandey, A. 2019. "Malaysia threatens to raise stakes in EU palm oil spat", Deutsche Welle, DW, (<https://p.dw.com/p/3FiZi>). See also <https://www.nst.com.my/world/world/2019/12/550113/indonesia-eu-trade-row-over-palm-oil-escalates>), accessed 06 May 2020.

In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, this emerging trust deficit between Europe and Asia has been amplified due to palm oil's role as a driver of deforestation. The European Union's new Farm to Fork strategy published in May 2020 flagged up the prospect of further legislation to tackle deforestation, implicitly nodding at the possibility of broader restrictions on imports such as palm oil.²

Even amidst such intensifying distrust, COVID-19 has highlighted the urgency of new measures to stop deforestation. Scientific studies have shown that deforestation is one of the major drivers of the heightened risk of disease outbreaks. As forests are cleared for expanding industrial activities, animals are forced to move out into human settlements, increasing the risk of exotic zoonotic diseases jumping to humans. In particular, deforestation in Southeast Asia has increased the risk of coronaviruses spreading from bats to humans. The region has suffered the greatest rate of deforestation in the world with a loss of 30% of forest surface over the last 40 years, linked to increased farming, logging, hunting and poorly-managed urban growth.³

It is argued in the paper that the problem is that the current approach to stopping deforestation has been ineffective, creating a situation of mutual distrust between producer countries in Southeast Asia and decision-makers in Europe. It will be shown that as a result of this mutual distrust, as the COVID-19 crisis has escalated, both regions have missed opportunities for joint trade and development partnerships at a time when it could not be of greater need.

Against this background, the key contribution of this article will be to show that even while COVID-19 has heightened the trust deficit in politics issues between Europe and Asia, by engaging in new cooperative strategies, the EU can work more closely with developing countries in Asia to develop joint, tangible mechanisms by which to facilitate environmentally sustainable production, while repairing trust in politics and boosting economic trade.

Without such a change of course, COVID-19 is a foretelling of a far more vulnerable and volatile future, one that would undermine the integrity of political

² European Commission. May 2020. "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee on the Regions: A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system", (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:ea0f9f73-9ab2-11ea-9d2d-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1andformat=PDF), accessed 06 May 2020.

³ Afelt, A., Frutos, R., and Devaux, C. 2018. "Bats, Coronaviruses, and Deforestation: Toward the Emergence of Novel Infectious Diseases?" *Frontiers in Microbiology*, 9. (<https://doi.org/10.3389/fmicb.2018.00702>).

institutions and accelerate widespread levels of distrust, potentially preventing Europe and Asia from forging ahead with urgently needed economic and political partnerships.

BALANCING GLOBAL AND NATIONAL ECONOMIC PRIORITIES

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that the current structure of the global economic system is no longer working and lacks resilience to complex global crises. With financial markets crashing down with accelerated speed, we must redesign markets so that they build upon sustainability and longevity in comparison to our current economic model which relies on continuing economic growth and dependence on fossil fuels.

An immediate reaction that should be resisted is a tendency toward extreme protectionism. Whether in food production or production of critical items for healthcare, we have seen how efforts to hoard essential items by nations can undermine global supply-chains and lead to widespread disruption which endangers lives. The danger is that the COVID-19 pandemic might lead to radicalised protectionist solutions, exacerbating emerging policies which were already threatening to undermine international trade.

In this context, Europe's relations with Asia were already souring in the context of a dispute over palm oil, among other issues. This dispute has disrupted trade relations, amidst calls for large-scale boycotts. The environmental concerns are valid, but unfortunately there remain important scientific questions⁴ over whether the EU's current approach is truly sufficient to provide a long-lasting viable solution. Instead, this paper argues, there is a risk that the conventional EU approach reinforces protectionist market dynamics in the context of a volatile financial system, while undermining environmental efforts to tackle deforestation.

The age of COVID-19 highlights the opportunity for a new strategy adhering strongly to the EU's environmental goals, while fostering renewed commitments to work with producers in building more ethical markets, pioneering new sustainable production techniques, and fostering positive free-trade relationships designed explicitly for the public good.

At this time of escalating economic crisis, it is imperative for Europe and Asia to find new ways to work together. This requires rebuilding trade connections without

⁴ See below.

compromising on sustainability goals. It also means ensuring coherence across the EU's economic goals, international development priorities, and sustainability commitments. This could involve joint cooperation to facilitate a transition to regional sustainable production, which would in turn open the way for new trade relations between the EU and Asia. That would reduce the risk of the next pandemic while building a more resilient financial system. It is clear that both sides need each other more than ever to help keep the strained global trading system alive. Such approaches could also provide a template for tackling deforestation outside of Asia in Africa and Latin America.

DEFORESTATION DEBATE

The important task of developing effective approaches to tackling deforestation cannot be underestimated. The COVID-19 pandemic has proven how devastating the risks to public health are. But so far, efforts to tackle deforestation have been inconsistent and insufficient.

Forests absorb roughly a quarter of the carbon dioxide emitted by human activity each year. Destroying all of the world's forests would release the same amount of stored carbon as burning all the planet's readily extractable fossil fuel deposits.

Stopping climate change is an incredible complex mission and the dynamics of deforestation are increasingly inseparable from the growing demand for food from consumers in the most developed countries.

Standing forests pull moisture out of the ground and release water vapour to the atmosphere, regulating local, regional and global precipitation patterns and acting as a natural air conditioner.⁵ In contrast, cutting down tropical forests can increase local surface temperatures by as much as up to 3°C. These "climate regulation" effects of tropical forests make their conservation essential to protect food and water security.

If we continue on our current course, the risks are grave. However, in the light of recent scientific findings it is also crystal clear that putting an end to the rampant destruction of the forests on which planetary ecosystems depend is completely avoidable.

⁵ Gustin, Georgina. 2019. "Alarming Rate of Forest Loss Threatens a Crucial Climate Solution". Inside Climate News, (<https://insideclimatenews.org/news/25042019/deforestation-annual-global-tree-loss-tropics-climate-solution-carbon-storage-wri>), accessed 21 April 2020.

Recent research suggests that, in order to have a chance of limiting warming to 1.5°C, we cannot emit more than about 750 billion tons of CO₂ in the coming century.⁶ The carbon in readily exploitable fossil reserves could release 2.7 trillion tons of CO₂ up to 2100. By comparison, forests store enough carbon to release over 3 trillion tons of CO₂ if destroyed. And climate change itself makes forests more vulnerable, including to uncontrollable wildfires.

In 2018, the earth saw its fourth-highest level of tropical tree loss since the early 2000s – about 30 million acres. The world’s forests contain more carbon than exploitable oil, gas, and coal deposits, hence avoiding forest carbon emissions is just as urgent as halting fossil fuel use.⁷

A major study in *Global Environmental Change* found that deforestation emissions constitute 15% of the total carbon footprint of food consumption in EU countries.⁸ The authors suggest that this is indeed a substantial share which highlights the urgent need for consumption-based accounts to include emissions from deforestation. But they also call for implementation of policy measures that cross these international supply-chains in order to effectively reduce deforestation emissions.

Concerns over deforestation eventually led the European Commission to take action by banning palm oil for biodiesel in 2019, declaring that its cultivation, mostly undertaken in Indonesia and Malaysia, results in excessive deforestation. The legislation directed that palm oil should not be eligible to count toward EU renewable transport targets for national governments.⁹

However, the scientific literature raises some questions as to whether solely limiting imports in tackling deforestation can be truly effective. In the following, research findings are presented to show that the combination of these findings has contributed to undermine trust across the Asian region in the EU approach.

⁶ Gustin. 2019. Op. cit.

⁷ Baccini, A., Walker, W., Carvalho, L., Farina, M., Sulla-Menashe, D., and Houghton, A. 2017. “The appropriate policy mix needs to be adjusted to the local context. Tropical forests are a net carbon source based on aboveground measurements of gain and loss”. *Science* 358(6360), (<https://science.sciencemag.org/content/358/6360/230>), accessed 05 May 2020.

⁸ Pendrill, F., Persson, U. M., Godar, J., Kastner, T., Moran, D., Schmidt, S., and Wood, R. 2019. “Agricultural and forestry trade drives large share of tropical deforestation emissions”. *Global Environmental Change*, 56, 1–10, (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378018314365>), accessed 23 April 2020.

⁹ Khidhir, S. 2019. “Banning palm oil is dangerous”, *The Asean Post*, (<https://theaseanpost.com/article/banning-palm-oil-dangerous>), accessed 05 May 2020.

A landmark report by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) found that banning palm oil would likely cause more harm to the environment only displacing the global biodiversity losses instead of stopping them.¹⁰ This is because a palm oil ban would increase the production of other oil crops, such as rapeseed, soy or sunflower, which require up to nine times as much land to produce than palm oil, in order to meet the global demand.¹¹ These crops store less CO₂ than palm oil, require more fertilizer and pesticides and have lower productivity and shorter lifespan compared to oil palms.¹²

Director General of the IUCN, Inger Andersen, has therefore called for urgent and “concerted action to make palm oil production more sustainable, ensuring that all parties – governments, producers and the supply chain – honour their sustainability commitments.”¹³

A major study in *Annual Review of Resource Economics* has provided a definitive analysis of the challenges, corroborating these findings. The *Annual Reviews* study is worth noting as it is one of the most authoritative analyses of the best scientific literature to date. It confirms that the key challenge is related to the efficiency of palm oil, relative to land, water, energy and fertiliser inputs: “The global demand for vegetable oil will continue to grow. Against this background, banning or curbing oil palm cultivation is not a realistic option. Given oil palm’s high land productivity, meeting the rising demand only through other oil crops would entail even more land-use change and natural habitat loss.” This analysis confirms the IUCN’s analy-

¹⁰ Meijaard, Erik et al. 2018. “Oil palm and Biodiversity: a situation analysis by the IUCN Oil Palm Task Force”. International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), (<https://doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.CH.2018.11.en>), <https://www.iucn.org/news/secretariat/201806/saying-no-palm-oil-would-likely-displace-not-halt-biodiversity-loss---iucn-report>), accessed 05 May 2020.

¹¹ Pendrilla, F., Persson, M. et al. 2019. “Agricultural and forestry trade drives large share of tropical deforestation emissions”. *Global Environmental Change*, 56:1-10. (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378018314365>), accessed 05 May 2020.

¹² Fassler, J. 2016. “Giving Up Palm Oil Might Actually Be Bad for the Environment”, *Smithsonian Magazine*, March. (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/giving-up-palm-oil-might-actually-be-bad-environment-180958092/>), accessed 05 May 2020.

¹³ Cited in IUCN Press Release, 26 June 2018, (<https://www.iucn.org/news/secretariat/201806/saying-no-palm-oil-would-likely-displace-not-halt-biodiversity-loss---iucn-report>), accessed 05 May 2020.

sis that an approach focused only on limiting palm oil imports could actually drive greater rates of deforestation overall.¹⁴

A similar conclusion was reached by a team of University of Bath scientists, who specifically examined the potential impact of a palm oil ban, and whether alternatives could offer an environmentally-viable replacement to meet demand. They found that this would increase the production of other oil crops, such as rapeseed, soy or sunflower, which require up to nine times as much land to produce than palm oil, in order to meet the global demand. These crops store less CO₂ than palm oil, require more fertilizer and pesticides and have lower productivity and shorter lifespan compared to oil palms. The team, publishing their findings in *Nature*, conclude that in the near to mid-term, policy should be directed at ensuring the sustainability of production because import restrictions would be ineffective in stopping deforestation or protecting the environment.¹⁵

There is another important side-effect of the EU's current approach which has played the biggest role in fostering distrust. The *Annual Reviews* paper finds that some 50% of the worldwide oil palm land is managed by smallholders, and that focusing purely on import restrictions can end up penalizing some of the most vulnerable households in developing countries. The palm oil industry, the study notes, has played a key role in increasing incomes, generating employment, and reducing poverty among local communities across these countries: "Especially in Southeast Asia, oil palm has contributed considerably to rural income growth and reduced poverty among farmers and workers." Therefore, there is a risk that an approach premised simply on reducing imports of palm oil could have a detrimental impact on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), endangering the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of smallholder farmers and the local communities they are embedded in.¹⁶

The combination of these findings – the emerging scientific evidence that the narrow policy approach may not actually achieve its desired effect of tackling deforestation along with the detrimental impacts on smallholder farmers and rural

¹⁴ Qaim, Matin; Kibrom T. Sibhatu, Siregar, Ingo and Grass, Ingo. 2020. "Environmental, Economic, and Social Consequences of the Oil Palm Boom". *Annual Reviews*, (<https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-resource-110119-024922>).

¹⁵ Parsons, S., Raikova, S., and Chuck, C. J. 2020. "The viability and desirability of replacing palm oil". *Nature Sustainability*, 1–7. (<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-020-0487-8>).

¹⁶ Qaim, Matin; Kibrom T. Sibhatu, Siregar, Ingo and Grass, Ingo. 2020. "Environmental, Economic, and Social Consequences of the Oil Palm Boom". *Annual Reviews*, (<https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-resource-110119-024922>).

communities in Southeast Asia – has undermined trust across the region in the EU approach. Rather than seeing it as an environmental strategy to combat deforestation, ASEAN countries widely view the EU’s approach as a protectionist measure designed to favour domestic EU production of alternative vegetable oils such as soy, sunflower and rapeseed, that would unfairly penalise developing nation efforts to continue to lift themselves out of poverty. That in itself has undermined the possibility of the EU working more closely with these ASEAN countries in facilitating sustainability, instead increasing mistrust between the two regions.¹⁷

The unfortunate way in which this mistrust has developed demonstrates the need for both sides to reflect on the limitations of the previous approach, and consider new more cooperative strategies.

TOWARD A MORE ROBUST EU POLICY FRAMEWORK ON DEFORESTATION AND INDUSTRY

An extensive modelling study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* underscores the need for much more joined-up thinking. Finding that “simply limiting palm oil production or consumption is unlikely to halt deforestation” in Malaysia and Indonesia, the study concluded that “in the absence of active forest conservation incentives... Targeting just a single driver of deforestation... opens room for other drivers of deforestation to operate more actively in the absence of a forest protection plan.”¹⁸ Its core implication is that the most powerful approach to stopping deforestation is not in targeting any particular commodity, but in *incentivising forest conservation efforts*.

This crucial scientific finding fits well with the recommendations of the *Annual Reviews* study, which calls on policymakers to develop “efficient legal and institutional frameworks in oil palm-producing countries.”¹⁹ Their analysis demonstrates

¹⁷ Lima, M., M. Skutsch, and G. de Medeiros Costa. 2011. “Deforestation and the social impacts of soy for biodiesel: perspectives of farmers in the south Brazilian Amazon”. *Ecology and Society* 16(4): 4. (<https://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss4/art4/>), accessed 06 May 2020. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-04366-160404>.

¹⁸ Taheripour, F., Hertel, T. W., and Ramankutty, N. 2019. “Market-mediated responses confound policies to limit deforestation from oil palm expansion in Malaysia and Indonesia”. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116 (38): 19193–19199. (<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1903476116>).

¹⁹ Op. Cit.

that the EU's approach suffers from a major gap from an environmental risk perspective: that of ensuring sustainability at source.

In this context, the European Union should consider reviewing its current approach and adapting it toward one focused more on working with producer countries to develop regulatory frameworks and incentives that would both limit imports of unsustainable palm oil, while simultaneously supporting and encouraging sustainable production.

These frameworks should encompass a number of areas: improving yield productivity using new sustainable production techniques; doing so within the clear delineation of protected forest lands combined with strong rules on use rights, prohibitions, and effective sanction mechanisms; recognition of customary land rights of local communities; robust sustainability certification along with verifiable monitoring mechanisms; and successful inclusion of smallholder farmers. The most important condition for these frameworks to be effective is that they cannot simply be imposed from outside with a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. The *Annual Reviews* authors urge that: "The appropriate policy mix needs to be adjusted to the local context."²⁰

With the right approach, successful policy mixes developed in Southeast Asia could also provide important learnings for production of commodities outside the region, whether it be palm oil, other vegetable oils or beef: "This is relevant for Southeast Asia, but also for Africa and Latin America, where much of the future oil palm expansion is expected to occur."²¹

THE POTENTIAL FOR A NEW REGIONAL MODEL

Malaysia has been cultivating palm oil for more than a century. Originating from West Africa, oil palms were introduced into Indonesia in 1848 and Malaysia in 1875 under Dutch and British colonial rule. A French plantation owner, Henri Fauconnier, established the first commercial oil palm estate in Selangor in 1917.²² Although oil palm plantations slowly expanded following independence, it was only during the 1960s that oil palm plantations really accelerated. By then palm oil was actively promoted by the agricultural diversification programme of the Malaysian government.

²⁰ Op. Cit.: 337.

²¹ Op. Cit.: 335.

²² Tang, K. H. D., Al Qahtani, H. M. S. 2019. "Sustainability of oil palm plantations in Malaysia". *Environ Dev Sustain*, (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-019-00458-6>), accessed 04 May 2020.

The income from palm oil enabled Malaysia to develop its infrastructure, pave roads, improve telecommunications, and build schools and hospitals. Rural employment increased and poverty declined.

Today, the majority of the world's palm oil – 85 per cent – originates from Malaysia and Indonesia.²³ With oil palm expansion, debates on the sustainability of oil palm have intensified. While oil palm cultivation in Malaysia continued to expand from 1973 to 2010, it is important to recognise that deforestation did begin to slow down from the mid-1980s. Scientists are unsure as to why this happened, with some speculation that it was because oil palm planting shifted away from newly cleared forests, to land that had been previously used for other agricultural commodities (e.g., rubber, coconut, cocoa) when they became less profitable than palm oil. Others note that economic diversification and poverty reduction also allowed other industries to flourish.²⁴

In January 2015, Malaysia established its own certification body to tackle the issue of sustainability, Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO), established for the management of palm oil plantations, smallholdings and palm oil processing facilities in Malaysia. The programme aims at ensuring the sustainability of palm oil estates which are 100 acres or more in size. When first established, it was a voluntary scheme, similar to more well-known international schemes such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), which is also voluntary and targeted largely at major corporate producers. The MSPO certification approach was more explicitly designed to be accessible to smallholder farmers, who are often excluded from the RSPO due to cost and bureaucratic problems.²⁵

In September 2018, with the arrival of a new administration, MSPO was for the first time declared a mandatory, government-backed national scheme aimed at providing the new government the power to enforce sustainable palm oil production, conserve forests and preserve key wildlife habitats. However, there has been a clear diplomatic and communications gap between Malaysia and Europe. The

²³ Rosner, H. 2018. "Palm oil is unavoidable. Can it be sustainable?", National Geographic Magazine, (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/12/palm-oil-products-borneo-africa-environment-impact/>), accessed 04 May 2020.

²⁴ Miyamoto. 2014. Op. cit.

²⁵ Morgans, C. L., Meijaard, E., Santika, T., Law, E., Budiharta, S., Ancrenaz, M., et al. 2018. "Evaluating the effectiveness of palm oil certification in delivering multiple sustainability objectives". Environmental Research Letters, 13(6), (<https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/aac6f4/meta>), accessed 04 May 2020.

European Union continued to speed ahead with its legislation on biofuels which, six months later, culminated in a de facto ban on palm oil for biodiesel.

Since then, Malaysia has scaled up the MSPO scheme, managing to certify about 42 percent of the country's palm oil areas by August 2019, and aiming to achieve 70% certification by earlier this year (2020). So far, there has been little international interest in assessing or evaluating MSPO. However, independent conservationists who have visited "best of category" cases of the MSPO scheme have confirmed their positive initial impressions of success in terms of sustainability, forest conservation and labour rights for migrant workers.²⁶

It is easy to see how this sequence of events has contributed to further mistrust. From the European perspective, there is an understandable reluctance to recognise a national certification scheme in a developing country with a historic problem on deforestation – especially when such a scheme remains nascent, and the EU lacks an independent scientific and verification mechanism to determine the scheme's effectiveness objectively. From the Malaysian perspective, there is an understandable frustration that despite progress being made in the development of a novel, government-backed approach to sustainability and conservation, ongoing international scepticism has meant that the scheme is provided no or little support or recognition, despite sincere efforts.

The communications and diplomatic deficit has in turn widened the rift between Europe and Asia, and led to a seeming impasse on progress on sustainability. This in turn has scuppered wider trade negotiations between the EU and ASEAN.

THE WAY FORWARD: JOINT COOPERATION

This analysis suggests an alternative way forward to break the current impasse. It must be recognised by all sides that the current impasse is unsustainable and counter-productive on multiple counts. The EU's insistence on a narrowly designed de facto ban on palm oil lacks robust scientific basis and is likely to contribute to increasing rates of deforestation. It also disincentivises regional producers from adopting sustainable production practices by sending the message that doing so will never result in access to closed markets. But regional producers should recognise that international scepticism toward sustainable transition efforts is also

²⁶ Hii, R. 2017. "A Close-Up Of The Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil Scheme". *HuffPost*. (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-close-up-of-the-malaysian-sustainable-palm-oil-scheme_b_5a285c75e4b053b5525db6f1), accessed 04 May 2020.

understandable given the historic problems, and continued reluctance within parts of the palm oil industry – and the slowness of ongoing progress.

How do we, then, break this impasse? Going forward, the case of Malaysia suggests new pathways by which the EU and Asian producers can find ways to work together. We require an urgent shift in paradigm – the current approach is premised on each block working separately, with the different sides playing diplomatic and communications catch-up after internal policies are developed. Instead, we need an inherently joint approach in which the EU can work directly with regional producers, such as Malaysia.

Both sides will need to reconsider how they can open up unprecedented cooperative channels of communication on scientific research and policy development. The EU must remember its responsibility as an industrialised, developed bloc, which entails that it should provide both scientific expertise and financial support to regional producers, and be particularly attentive to the needs of smallholder farmers. Doing so can support local government efforts to develop applied policy mixes that make sense in the regional and local context, while also having international support. Rather than a producer like Malaysia ‘going it alone’, its national mandatory standards should be supported and developed with EU support and expertise. Such an approach could be applied across the region and beyond. For this to work, local producers will need to let their guard down and explore new opportunities to open up transparency. Only in this way can they ensure that they work closely with international partners to institutionalise scientific verification and monitoring mechanisms which can provide EU importers a meaningful guarantee of sustainability.

This approach could open up a wide range of dividends. Not only would it help to reduce the trust deficit that has prevented the EU and ASEAN from making progress on wider trade negotiations, if successful it could provide a new international model of joint cooperation in sustainable production that could be applied across and beyond the region.

The EU could develop similar joint schemes with palm oil and other producers across Africa and Latin America to address deforestation through verifiable local sustainability transitions, backed by national governments through mandatory legislation, and supported through international recognition, finance and monitoring mechanisms. This would facilitate international trade and the emergence of a global ecosystem based on the sharing of environmental goods, services and practices.

In the age of COVID-19, directing an element of emerging EU economic recovery packages toward this issue can help speed the transition to a more resilient economic future. This offers a win-win scenario: reducing the risks of deforestation at

source; generating more sustainable production practices; and creating new foundations for EU-Asian cooperation to rebuild a more cooperative economic order from which both sides can come out better equipped to tackle future environmental, health and economic crises.

To overcome the trust deficit, a core mechanism by which this process could begin could be the creation jointly by the EU and Malaysia of an independent group of scientific experts to advise on the implementation of the palm oil sector's transition to sustainability, and to assist in the development of joint research and monitoring standards to ensure the highest standards in the MSPO certification. The EU should be willing to help finance such an initiative – but ultimately, for any such initiative to work, it is local producers, such as Malaysia, who must demonstrate their commitment to sustainability goals by meeting their targets and doing so transparently under international scrutiny.

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Building “Trust” in Sri Lanka’s Reconciliation Process in the Post-War Era

Hiruni Nathasha Fernando

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka is an island nation in the Indian Ocean Region which was ravaged by a three decade long separatist war between Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan state which ended in May 2009. Over 30 countries have proscribed the LTTE organisation including the European Union following UNSC Resolution 1373/2001.¹ The resolute decision of the Rajapaksa government in 2005 to militarily annihilate the LTTE is often cited as a result of failed peace-talks in 1990, 1995, and 2002.² The LTTE self-identified as “freedom fighters” or a “self-liberation movement” but lost credibility for their cause due to brutal tactics, such as forcible conscription of child soldiers, assassinations and various other atrocities. In the course of the war, the LTTE expelled Sinhalese and Muslims from their controlled areas. It has now been over a decade since the end of the war which is considered a transitional period during which reconciliation, peace, social cohesion and nation-

¹ Crisisgroup.org (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/sri-lanka-failure-peace-process>), accessed 25 June 2020. International Crisis Group reports the peace talks were limited to negotiations by two parties, mainly the LTTE and the UNP led by Ranil Wikremasinghe; a non-inclusive process without involvement of President Kumaratunga, key southern politicians, non-LTTE Tamil parties and Muslims.

² The Diplomat (<https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/how-sri-lanka-won-the-war/>), accessed 25 June 2020. With the election of Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2005, Sri Lanka embarked on a grand strategy to combat the LTTE by leveraging diplomatic channels to cut off LTTE's foreign financing sources, its funding networks, and by orchestrating a split in the LTTE. In 2004, Colonel Karuna Amman alias Vinayagamorthy Muralitharan defected from the LTTE with 6000 carders and provided the government with vital information which helped the government's victory. Sri Lanka's Tamil population amounted to 12 percent and active LTTE supporters were only around 300,000 soldiers.

building should have been national priorities. Unfortunately, the reconciliation process was slow and unfulfilling for those who were affected by the war, particularly the Tamil and Muslim minorities.

The 2015 government change provided some relief to war-affected parties as the *Yahapalanaya* government took several positive steps towards reconciliation by establishing independent commissions and undertaking steps to implement United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolutions.³ However, it soon became unpopular and support dwindled as the government changed once more to a Rajapaksa-led rule in 2020, just five years later. The Easter Sunday Attacks of 2019 claimed by the ISIS revealed a new, yet harsh reality of Islamic radicalisation in Sri Lanka which was largely overlooked. Against such a context, new questions emerge regarding Sri Lanka's reconciliation agenda.

In this essay I conduct a critical inquiry on why Sri Lanka's reconciliation process was an unfulfilling journey by establishing a link between educational policies and how they impact building inter-communal trust, which is an integral element to achieving reconciliation. Firstly, I examine how "reconciliation" and "trust" are conceptualised and what the existing literature has demonstrated regarding the impact of educational policies on building inter-communal trust. Secondly, I will provide a brief overview of Sri Lanka's reconciliation process. Thirdly, I will use examples from events between 2009 to 2020, to demonstrate how communal trust was eroded due to ethno-religious violence and other factors. Finally, I will demonstrate how reforms in educational policies, specifically how adopting a secular education policy could help build communal trust and accelerate the reconciliation process with reference to Singapore's Moral Education as a benchmark.

CONCEPTUALIZING TRUST IN RECONCILIATION

Trust is an ambiguous concept with changing moral value and meaning. Given its conceptual vagueness, the Catholic University of Leuven in its report *"Identity vs Performance: An Overview of theories explaining trust in government"* has defined trust within a government-citizen interaction framework in which citizens' attitudes toward a government are mainly based on subjective evaluations, such as its ef-

³ Perera, Jehan. 2019. "Constitutional Council And Independent Commissions Part Of Transition To Rule Of Law". Sri Lanka Brief (<https://srilankabrief.org/2019/02/constitutional-council-and-independent-commissions-part-of-transition-to-rule-of-law/>).

efficiency and quality service.⁴ Trust is considered a social construct and tolerance of uncertainty.⁵ According to Sztompka, trust is composed of seven factors: regularity, efficiency, reliability, representativeness, fairness, accountability and benevolence.⁶ For a functioning and vibrant democracy, it is important to build trust in governance, state institutions and agencies and between different ethnicities. Govier and Verwoerd argue building trust between parties is essential for reconciliation and even relevant for cooperation without which people feel bitter, resentful, and vindictive towards others.⁷

“People are unable to cooperate with each other and work together unless their relationships are characterized by trust”.⁸

Although Johan Galtung and Louis Kriesberg’s definitions recognise reconciliation as a process, they have been unable to define reconciliation without defining peace and justice where peace is an end goal and justice is a means of achieving it.⁹ For the purpose of this essay, national reconciliation is recognised as a process set in the context of a transition towards a stable constitutional democracy after prolonged periods of human rights violations. In the Sri Lankan context, reconciliation is envisioned as a continuing process. However only a few studies had attempted

⁴ Bouckaert, Geert, Steven Van de Walle, Bart Maddens, and Kampen, Jarl K. 2002. *Identity vs Performance: An overview of theories explaining trust in government*. Leuven: Public Management Institute, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

⁵ Lewis, J. David, and Weigert, Andrew. 1985. “Trust as a Social Reality”. *Social Forces*, 63 (4): 967-985.

⁶ Sztompka, Piotr. 1996. “Trust and Emerging Democracy: Lessons from Poland”. *International Sociology*, 11 (1): 37-62, (doi:10.1177/026858096011001004).

⁷ Govier, Trudy, and Verwoerd, Wilhelm. 2002. “Trust and the Problem of National Reconciliation”. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 32 (2): 178-205, (doi:10.1177/004931032002003).

⁸ Govier, Trudy, and Verwoerd, Wilhelm. 2002. Op. cit.: 200.

⁹ Galtung, Johan. 2001. “After Violence, Reconstruction, Reconciliation, and Resolution Coping With Visible and Invisible Effects of War and Violence”. In: *Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence: Theory And Practice*. Oxford: Lexington Books.

Johan Galtung describes reconciliation as a process with twelve approaches. He presents the equation Reconciliation = Closure + Healing in which closure refers to not reopening hostilities and healing as rehabilitation (Galtung 2001, 3-4).

Kriesberg, Louis. 2001. “Changing forms of Coexistence”. In: *Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence: Theory And Practice*. Oxford: Lexington Books. Kriesberg refers to reconciliation as a process by which the respective parties whom were in destructive conflict restore a minimally acceptable relationship and as a process to advance both peace and justice (Kriesberg 2001, 47-48).

to quantify or categorise its progress.¹⁰ I argue that since trust is central to reconciliation, trust-building within the reconciliation process is only possible, where a secular education policy nurtures the younger generations to resist racism and resist condoning or engaging in ethno-religious violence, while enabling critical thinking skills and the ability to embrace living in a plural society with mutual respect and dignity.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SRI LANKA'S RECONCILIATION PROCESS

The year 2009 was eventful for Sri Lanka with the war officially declared over, and the Secretary General of the United Nations (UN), Ban Ki Moon, arrival in the country to discuss post-war development issues with then President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Discussions ensued on the establishment of development programmes for the North (former LTTE-held areas), re-establishment of democratic institutions and electoral politics. A key promise was made on implementing the 13th Amendment, which called for a decentralised form of government with more autonomy at the local government level. Several notable resolutions were adopted in the United Nations Human Rights Council including at the 11th Special Session.¹¹ President Rajapaksa appointed the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) in 2010, which submitted its report to parliament in 2011. The findings of the LLRC-report were criticised and rejected by the UN panel of Experts, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and International Crisis Group. Subsequent UN resolutions (19/2, 22/1, A/HRC/25/1 and A/HRC/25/23) continuously called upon the government to address reconciliation and accountability in the country. The United States Department of State Country Report (2010) on Human Rights Practices in Sri Lanka was highly critical of the government's human rights progress, especially on

¹⁰ Veriteresearch.org (<https://www.veriteresearch.org/publication/unhrc-resolution-30-1-implementation-monitor-statistical-analytical-review-no-3-2/>), accessed 30 July 2020.

¹¹ Ohchr.org (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/SpecialSessions/Session11/Pages/11thSpecialSession.aspx>), accessed 30 July 2020.

Channel4.com (<https://www.channel4.com/news/sri-lanka-execution-video-new-war-crimes-claims>), accessed 30 July 2020. In the subsequent year, the Tamil diaspora worldwide were promoting the Tamil genocide narrative after Channel 4 News broadcasted footage from inside the final stages of the war with brutally shocking images of extra-judicial killing which further pressurised the international community to intervene in Sri Lanka's human rights discourse.

general human rights violations after the war.¹² In 2013, a second commission was appointed, headed by retired High Court Judge Maxwell Paranagama.

At the 34th UNHRC session in March 2017, the Sri Lankan government co-sponsored resolution 34/1, which contains certain commitments of Sri Lanka towards transitional justice and post-conflict peace-building. This included: Transitional Justice and Reconciliation, Rights and Rule of Law, Security and De-Militarisation, Power Sharing and International Engagement. A report by Verite Research, on the implementation status of these commitments has revealed, there is only partial progress in consultations for transitional justice, establishment of truth, justice and reconciliation commission, establishing an office for missing persons and reparations.¹³ There is very poor progress on the accountability and justice mechanisms regarding alleged human rights abuses during the conflict perpetrated by both the state and the LTTE. Power sharing matters, which were largely to be addressed by constitutional reforms, have only seen partial progress.

EROSION OF COMMUNAL TRUST DUE TO ETHNO-RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

Sri Lanka, whose population is a multi-ethnic and a multi-religious one – with a current religious composition as follows: 70.1% Buddhists, 12.6% Hindus, 9.7% Islamists, 6.2% Christians, 1.4% Roman Catholics and other denominations¹⁴ – and had historically experienced religious and political violence. Between the years 2009 to 2020, however, there were numerous events which could be interpreted as dangerous to Sri Lanka's social fabric in the post-war period. Among such events were the issues of ethno-religious violence and cultural imposition examined by Gunatilleke which extend to land grab, militarisation, desecration and defilement

¹² Refworld.org (<https://www.refworld.org/docid/517e6dd3f.html>), accessed 30 July 2020. The 2012 United States Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - Sri Lanka provides a detailed overview of Sri Lanka's bleak human rights situation. For example: it cited extra-judicial killings, Welikada prison riots, and enforced disappearances of LTTE suspects. This included harassments extended to journalists who were reporting on corruption, nepotism and human rights violations.

¹³ Veriteresearch.org (<https://www.veriteresearch.org/publication/unhrc-resolution-30-1-implementation-monitor-statistical-analytical-review-no-3-2/>), accessed 30 July 2020.

¹⁴ Minorityrights.org (<https://minorityrights.org/country/sri-lanka/>), accessed 1 October 2020. The 2020 census report presents the figures as Sinhalese (74.9 percent), Sri Lankan Tamils (11.2 percent), Indian Tamils (4.2 percent), Sri Lankan Moors (9.3 percent), and Malays (0.2 percent).

of Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim places of worship, and simultaneously attempts by government actors to build Buddhist places of worship and symbols in areas where the ethnic and religious minorities were majorities.¹⁵ Activities as such potentially threatened the reconciliation process.¹⁶

Communal violence and ethno-religious tensions have also been a serious impediment to reconciliation. Some of the major events included the Grandpass Mosque Incident in 2013, Aluthgama Riots in 2014, attacks against Christians in Galle and Hambantota in 2014, etc., with involvement of hardline groups which were engaged in a dangerous discourse playing on the apprehensions regarding certain Muslim cultural practices.¹⁷ Buddhist radical groups had also used social media extensively against peace movements in the country. For example: a Buddhist monk

¹⁵ Gunatillake, Gehan. 2018. *The Chronic and the Entrenched: Ethno-Religious Violence in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies. According to Gunatilleke, religious violence occur in several forms including: physical violence, destruction of property, intimidation, threat or coercion, hate campaigns or propaganda and discriminatory practice. Although a solid legal framework exists to provide constitutional guarantees to religious freedom and to tackle particular issues like hate speech, enforcement of these laws are terribly lacking. Hrw.org (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/10/09/why-cant-we-go-home/military-occupation-land-sri-lanka>), accessed 3 August 2020. Military Occupation of land in areas such as Pallimunai and Mullikulam leading to protests are reported in this article as a stumbling block to reconciliation; Thecitizen.in (<https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/6/17293/Sinhalization-of-Tamil-Areas-by-Building-Buddhist-Shrines-over-Hindu-Temples>), accessed 3 August 2020. This article reports the row between Buddhists and Tamils regarding erection of Buddhist Stupas near Hindu Temple site in Kanniya, destruction of Temple ruins in Muttur and disregard for Tamil archaeology etc.; Asianews.it (<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Sri-Lanka,-Buddhist-destruction-of-a-mosque-halted-24598.html>), accessed 5 August 2020. Protests in Dambulla over construction of a Muslim Mosque and Hindu Temple near the Golden Temple of Dambulla.

¹⁶ Srilankamirror.com (<https://srilankamirror.com/news/410-chinese-donation-for-buddhist-temples-in-north-east>), accessed 21 August 2020. Government building Buddhist stupas in Northern and Eastern province with Chinese funds supported and defended by government minister Daya Gamage.

¹⁷ Gunatilleke, Gehan. 2015. *The Chronic and the Acute: Post-War Religious Violence in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies and Equitas. Hardline groups such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Sinhala Ravaya and Ravana Balaya (see Gunatilleke, 2015: 27-29). Gunaratna, Rohan. 2018. "Sinhala-Muslim Riots in Sri Lanka: The Need for Restoring Communal History". *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 10 (4): 1-4. In public rally speeches of BBS in 2013, they made demands to eliminate halal certifications, to ban Sri Lankan women working in the Middle East and to prevent building of mosques financed by Middle Eastern countries. Gunaratna writes Sinhala ultra-nationalist group Bodu Balan Sena's "public position was that Sri Lanka is a Sinhala Buddhist country" as opposed to a multiethnic and multi-religious country (Gunaratna 2018: 2).

who spoke with Muslims to settle the halal problem was also harassed online.¹⁸ This demonstrates that inter-religious coexistence efforts that are catalyst towards reconciliation were also hampered.

The 2018 riots in Digana and Ampara and the desecration of Buddhist statues in Mawanella were high intensity events during which violence among Sinhalese and Muslims ensued in both online and offline spheres.¹⁹ It is, however, difficult to establish whether these attacks were a prelude to the Easter Sunday Attacks in 2019 as the targets for suicide bombers were luxury hotels and churches opening new ethno-religious fault-lines among Muslims and Christians.²⁰ Still, the dangers of Islamic radicalisation were flagged by different studies, organisations and individuals.²¹ It is also opined that trust among communities and also into the government eroded because of the government's inability to prevent the attack despite receiving actionable threat intelligence.

HOW DOES SECULAR EDUCATION POLICY HELP BUILD COMMUNAL TRUST AND RECONCILIATION?

Davis argues education should encourage students to think about and act towards the security of others and draws attention to how being educated in a singular

¹⁸ Orjuela, Camilla. 2019. "Countering Buddhist Radicalization: Emerging Peace Movements in Myanmar and Sri Lanka". *Third World Quarterly* 41 (1): 133-150, (doi:10.1080/01436597.2019.1660631). Religious radicalisation turns individuals against their own and moderate adherents within the same religious groups.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The suicide bomb attacks on churches and luxury hotels killing 264 innocent people were perpetrated by two Muslim hardline groups: National Thawheed Jamaath (NTJ) and Jamathe Millathu Ibrahim (JMI). The mastermind of the Easter Sunday attacks, Zahran Hashim, hails from the troubled village of Kattankudy; Army.lk (<https://www.army.lk/news/kattankudy-mosque-massacre-remembered>), accessed 30 August 2020. In 1990, the LTTE massacred 147 Muslims in a mosque. The town of Kattankudy had also experienced Wahhabi proselytization and Islamic sectarian conflicts. These were identity-based divisions caused due to marginalisation and exclusion from post-war peace processes.

²¹ Bodubalasesa.org (<http://www.bodubalasesa.org/bodu-bala-sena-public-rally-balangoda-2019-8-10/>), accessed 30 September 2020. In this public rally speech Gnanasara Thero states that he warned the government in 2014 that Zaharan Hashim and his followers should have been taken into custody. See also the International Crisis Group Report, 2007. Crisisgroup.org (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/sri-lanka-s-muslims-caught-crossfire>), accessed 30 September 2020. This report warns that a Muslim armed struggle was among the fears in 1990, so was Islamic radicalisation among frustrated youth and Muslim sectarian conflict.

religion limits critical thinking; that a secular value proposition, a school culture based on human rights education could help nurture a generation to resist determinism and absolutism.²² Singapore offers a benchmark study of how moral education could nurture the future generations in shared values that could forge bonds between racially and culturally divisive communities to co-exist.²³ Moral education is considered a means for nation building. Singapore, like Sri Lanka, was also colonised by the British who divided the Singaporean population into four communities. The Chinese comprised 70% of the population, 20% were Malays, 10% were Indians and the rest were Eurasians. In 1978, Dr. Goh Keng Swee's reforms encouraged moral education to be taught in the second language and Singaporeans were encouraged to learn English for commercial purposes and as a link language.²⁴

In Sri Lanka, education throughout primary, secondary and tertiary levels remains free for the populace wherein 97% are administered by provincial councils, while only 3% of the national schools are administered centrally, which results in huge disparities in resource allocation.²⁵ Education financing has also remained just below 2% of the GDP. Apart from that, the lack of sound educational policies, and religiously segregated schools resulted in communities growing apart and alien from developing inter-cultural understanding.²⁶

Also in the case of Zahran Hashim, considered as the mastermind behind the Islamist attacks in 2019, education had played a central role.²⁷

The suicide bombers of the Easter Sunday Attacks were sons of a wealthy spice trader and were highly educated.²⁸ Davis draws attention to Robert Pape's

²² Davis, Lynn. 2008. "Gender, Education, Extremism and Security". *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 38 (5): 611-625: 620-622, (doi:10.1080/03057920802351432).

²³ TerroWei, Tan Tai. 2006. "Moral Education in Singapore: A Critical Appraisal". *The Journal of Moral Education*, 23 (1): 61-73. Written and Reported by Jane Corbin. United Kingdom: BBC, 2020.

²⁴ Wei 2006. Op. cit.:67-68.

²⁵ lk.undp.org (<https://www.lk.undp.org/content/srilanka/en/home/Blog/2015/unlocked-blog-1-4-lesser-known-stats-about-sri-lanka-s-system-of-education.html>), accessed 5 September 2020.

²⁶ Ft.lk (<http://www.ft.lk/Opinion-and-Issues/free-education-system-the-unexplored-flaws/14-567774>), accessed 5 September 2020.

²⁷ Youtube.com (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zl7M9i6NmQ>), accessed 28 September 2020.

²⁸ Thedispatch.in (<https://www.thedispatch.in/who-and-why-of-the-perpetrators/>), accessed 6 September 2020.

book "Dying to win" which debunks the traditional suicide bomber as coming from marginalised and economically deprived background to that of highly educated and socially integrated men, who commit suicide out of a sense of perceived duty.²⁹ Taking the recent example, it calls for a thorough reform of religious education within Sri Lanka and for the Muslim community to revamp the education system by providing accredited degrees in Islam for religious teachers and for educational backgrounds of religious preachers to be vetted. This form of monitoring of religious education should be done by the Sri Lanka Muslim community leadership in conjunction with the relevant line ministries at both centre and provincial levels. The International Crisis Group also recommends *Madrassa* and Muslim Family Law reforms, which is already under discussion by the *All Ceylon Jamiyyah Ulama* (ACJU).³⁰ However, singular religious education will not work for Sri Lanka in the long-run without thorough reform across all religious institutes and also the introduction of moral education to the school system.

Apart from reform in religious education, language training and promotion of inter-cultural understanding is also important. One interesting example of possibilities for co-existence are the Tamil and Muslim communities in the Northern and Eastern Provinces where there are schools with Tamil as medium of instruction.³¹ Muslims and Tamils in Sri Lanka share certain commonalities as predominantly Tamil speaking minorities. Irrespective of the 1990 ethnic cleansing of Muslims by the LTTE, Muslim-Tamil relationships were not embedded on deep seated animosity. Thiranagama writes "*Tamil-Muslim relations are precisely neighborly relationships formed by mutual intelligibility and everyday proximity*".³² Schools should also localise

²⁹ Davis, Lynn. 2008. Op. cit.: 616. See also on suicide, Waha, La Toya. 2018. *Religion And State-Formation In Transitional Societies: Sri Lanka In A Comparative Perspective*. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft.

³⁰ Crisisgroup.org (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/302-after-sri-lankas-easter-bombings-reducing-risks-future-violence>), accessed 7 September 2020.

³¹ See also the example of how religious rituals in villages such as Panama (with Tamil and Sinhalese mixed families) engage in rituals and the worship of goddess Pattini and God Kovalan during the ceremonies of PādaYātra and Ankeliya ("horn pulling"). This is indicative of rival ethno-religious groups engaging in religious ceremonies together setting aside their differences. Piyarathne, Anton. 2015. "The Contribution Of Religious Rituals To Link Sinhala And Tamil Communities: The Case Of Panama In The Eastern Province Of Sri Lanka". In 71 Annual Session Of The Sri Lanka Association For The Advancement Of Science. Jayawardenapura: University of Sri Jayawardenapura, (<http://dr.lib.sjp.ac.lk/handle/123456789/1952>).

³² Thiranagama, Sharika. 2013. "Claiming The State: Postwar Reconciliation In Sri Lanka". *Humanity: An International Journal Of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, And Development* 4 (1): 93-116.

and implement the UN General Assembly resolutions A/74/476 on the Culture of Peace on importance of fostering interreligious and inter-cultural dialogue.³³ The Ministry for Youth Affairs and sports council recently conducted discussions on improving school infrastructure to develop a sports culture through which inter-communal interactions and healthy competition could be promoted to forge better relationships which is a commendable initiative.³⁴

A study on rituals and ceremonies in an Israeli-Palestine school has shown that the *Hanukkah-Idel Filter* Christmas ceremony which addresses cultural issues could promote reconciliation work.³⁵ In Sri Lanka, the Sinhala-Tamil-Muslim New Year celebrations have also been an opportunity to bridge the cultural divide through communal interactions in schools and in village ceremonies. However, the recent decision of the government to stop singing/playing the national anthem in the Tamil language in public functions has dealt a blow towards promoting reconciliation.³⁶ Bekerman writes “the dimensions of reconciliation include a recognition of injuries inflicted on the other side, acknowledgement of the humanity of the other side in spite of the horrors they have perpetrated, and a willingness to integrate”.³⁷ The Office for National Unity and Reconciliation in conjunction with civil society and non-governmental organisations conducted a wide range of cultural programmes to promote reconciliation including drama, musical and art exhibitions, movie

³³ Ipsnews.net (<http://www.ipsnews.net/2020/09/culture-peace-change-world-better-age-covid-19/>), accessed 7 September 2020.

³⁴ Colombogazette (<https://colombogazette.com/2020/09/17/need-to-establish-a-sports-culture-in-sri-lanka-discussed/>), accessed 28 September 2020. MP Namal Rajapaksa was recently sworn in as cabinet minister for sports and youth affairs to improve school infrastructure and to promote a healthier sports culture in Sri Lanka.

³⁵ Bekerman 2002. Op. cit.: 271-274.

“The dimensions of reconciliation include a recognition of injuries inflicted on the other side, acknowledgement of the humanity of the other side in spite of the horrors they have perpetrated, and a willingness to integrate” (Bekerman 2002, 274).

Bekerman, Zvi. 2002. “Can Education Contribute To Coexistence And Reconciliation? Religious And National Ceremonies In Bilingual Palestinian-Jewish Schools In Israel”. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 8 (3): 259-276, (doi:10.1207/s15327949pac0803_10).

³⁶ Trtworld (<https://www.trtworld.com/asia/sri-lanka-scraps-tamil-national-anthem-at-independence-day-33479>), accessed 28 September 2020. At the 2020 Independence Day celebrations, the newly sworn in President, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, denied the National Anthem being sung in Tamil.

³⁷ Bekerman 2002: 274.

screenings and film-making projects.³⁸ There was also a discussion to promote the right to peace and develop peace education in Sri Lanka in a human rights lens spearheaded by the ONUR and Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms, but these liberal peacebuilding agendas have largely not been implemented without cooperation from the line ministries.³⁹

CONCLUSION

A thirty year long civil war constitutes a bad memory. A decade after the civil war, there is no positive peace with absence of violence as ethno-religious violence has continued to plague Sri Lankan society. Several steps were taken by the government to promote a discourse on reconciliation, but arguably rather than a national initiative, it was undertaken as a response to international pressures. The Verite Research UNHRC resolution 30/1 Implementation Monitor demonstrates the poor progress of government commitment towards addressing reconciliation. Although recommendations of the LLRC report included developing inter communal understanding to be undertaken by the government, various incidents and events that have pervaded Sri Lanka's post-war landscape ranging from communal violence to the Easter Sunday Attacks have shown a massive disconnect. Countries such as Singapore have adopted secular education policies and moral education to build social cohesion, and to nurture generations to accept diversity and multiculturalism, to foster an environment of mutual respect and shared values. Sri Lanka must also follow suit through increasing education financing, re-vamping its religious education and school system to enable inter-religious and inter-faith dialogue, diversity and a human rights based civic education to resist religious determinism, exclusivism and divisiveness.

³⁸ Ft.lk (<http://www.ft.lk/Opinion-and-Issues/Reconciliation-through-Economic-Development-Budget-2019-s-hollow-prescription-for-north-and-east/14-675364>), accessed 28 September 2020. ONUR with Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms conducted various arts and cultural programmes to promote reconciliation.

³⁹ Dailynews (<https://www.dailynews.lk/2018/10/02/features/164177/right-peace>), accessed 27 September 2020. The article highlights that peace is a dynamic process and not an absolute end goal. There were several positive steps taken by the Yahapalanaya government (2015-2019) towards addressing reconciliation. This includes: The Right to Information Act, establishment of the office for reparations, awareness raising campaign on reconciliation titled "Ahanna", street theatre performances and the need to coordinate these activities under the theme of "non-recurrence".

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Opinion Pieces

Building Trust and Strengthening Regionalism in South Asia during the Pandemic

Asanga Abeyagoonasekera

South Asia is characterised by fragile democracies, traits of semi-authoritarianism, lagging civil political space, violent terrorism and border disputes. Growing ultra-nationalist and populist policies in South Asian countries for long created a bottleneck for intra-regional trade and as such prevented the building of trust between peoples and nations across borders. The lack of trust into one another at various levels has for long prevented the integration of the South Asian region. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), once the hope for regional integration and multilateral cooperation in South Asia, has been doomed to disfunctionality due to intraregional conflicts and lack of trust.

While other regions have succeeded to integrate and furthered multilateral cooperation, as is the case in Southeast Asia, South Asia has failed to build trust, neither through trade nor through political cooperation.

A recent Brookings report stressed the lack of economic integration as follows: “Despite geographical proximity and the existence of bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements (FTAs), South Asia is one of the least economically integrated regions in the world. Owing to protectionist policies, high logistics cost, lack of political will and a broader trust deficit, intra-regional trade in South Asia remains well below its potential at 5% of the region’s global trade”.¹

The region lacks connectivity in goods, people, services, knowledge and foreign investment (FDI) to ensure economic growth. Trade liberalisation initiatives have been long delayed. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has been under negotiation for more than

¹ Sinha, Riya, and Niara Sareen. 2020. *India's limited trade connectivity in South Asia*, 26 May, (<https://www.brookings.edu/research/indias-limited-trade-connectivity-with-south-asia/>), accessed 26 May 2020.

15 years, SAFTA and South Asian Economic Union no longer feature in New Delhi's regional focus.

To name just one example, the Indo-Lanka Free Trade Agreement (FTA) dates back two decades, with negotiations on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) delayed due to ultra-nationalist political forces which have voiced against it in Sri Lanka and protectionist measures in place.

In addition, national political climates of rising ultra-nationalism play their part in preventing the emergence of trust beyond borders and peoples.

The ultra-nationalist forces are a key obstacle that has stalled multilateral trade liberalisation in the region and broken trust in intraregional trade. To pursue higher intraregional trade and to build the desperately needed trust among nations, a clear political leadership is needed which keeps away domestic protectionist measures and promotes trade interdependence in the region rather than out of it.

Border-conflict, the rise of ultra-nationalist forces, little intraregional trade and low people-to-people interactions have prevented the regional integration in South Asia for many years. For national gains, fragile trust between nations has been broken. While these political advantages at the national level can relate to several causes, be they elections, political mobilisation, or actual international conflicts over borders and dominance, it recently have been terrorist attacks, which came into the focus. They have even more furthered political leaders' focus on national issues, and those political leaders who prioritise national security over multilateralism have gained in elections, as has been the case in India and Sri Lanka, following the Balakot attack and the Islamist Easter Sunday Attacks respectively.

The current pandemic, which has challenged the national governments worldwide and likewise in South Asia, as well as the consequences arising from the global attempts to limit the spread of the disease, however, may bring a change to South Asia.

On 23 May 2020, a phone conversation between the Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi took place, in which the Sri Lankan President sought financial support from India to deal with the country's significant foreign exchange issue, which has emerged from the pandemic's consequences. Despite several tensions between the two states, the Indian Premier assured: "We are ready to help under terms that are favourable to

Sri Lanka”.² Even more, SAARC was reawakened out of its dormancy since 2014, to fight the ongoing pandemic collectively. India and Sri Lanka pledged to provide high amounts of money for the regional health hazard, the largest humanitarian health crisis the region has faced in decades. Total contributions towards the fund amounted to US\$21.6m. India provided crisis assistance to its regional neighbours, including supplies of medical equipment to Bangladesh, food to Afghanistan and a team of 14 medical experts sent to the Maldives.³

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), long hindered by intraregional conflicts, thus, may now be provided with a new opportunity of becoming a viable tool of multilateral cooperation.

This situation of crisis, which provoked leadership exchange and regional cooperation, may pose an opportunity to building trust between the nations of South Asia. Reciprocated help and support in times of crisis may change the mutual perceptions of one another and thus allow for trust to grow. Accordingly, the joint responses to the pandemic might further the regional integration in South Asia.

Even more, while pandemics are a threat to the entire human race, there is an opportunity we could discover by working towards a common regional agenda, strengthening global and regional integration.

India, South Asia’s regional power, and its ability in the absence of strong regional cooperation to undertake a meaningful regional leadership role is essential. To increase and strengthen its collaboration with the South Asian countries and to extend to key Indo-Pacific partners will have an important impact in overcoming this humanitarian crisis, improving its trade and the economic challenges caused by COVID-19 across South Asia.

Despite the hopes, this might however not be enough.

The growing nationalist sentiments in politics in the pre-pandemic era were an unblemished factor in South Asia and many regions. South Asia will face a daunting challenge in the post-pandemic period. Ultra-nationalism might not just go away after the crisis. The already toxic ultra-nationalist and populist political environment in many countries might further the tendency to ‘deglobalisation’.

² Srinivasan, Meera. 2020. *Gotabaya seeks additional \$1.1 billion SWAP facility from Modi*. 24 May, (<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/gotabaya-seeks-additional-11-billion-swap-facility-from-modi/article31662546.ece>), accessed 27 May 2020.

³ Solanki, Viraj. 2020. *Why India’s response to COVID-19 matters to us all*. 29 April, (<https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2020/04/sasia-why-indias-response-to-covid-19-matters-to-us-all>), accessed 01 June 2020.

It is on South Asians and their leaders to take the next step and continue cooperation. If this is made possible, South Asia might take the subsequent step towards multilateralism and regional integration.

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The Decline of Political Trust in Nepal

Mahesh Bhatta

Public trust in politicians of Nepal ranks 121 out of 137 countries for 2017 (down by three in rank from 2007 to 2017) and lags far behind other South Asian countries as per *TCdata360* of World Bank Group.¹ The lacking trust in the political leadership reflects in a popular Nepalese saying: “*Jun jogi Aaye pani kanai chirekaa*” which translates to “All saints come with ear slit”. It implies the notion that regardless of who comes to power, the person is always a demagogue. This notion, which represents the strong sense of repugnance of ordinary Nepalese over politicians and the ruling class, remained in the Nepali society despite the transformation of the political system, and the initial hopes which came with it. I argue that this lack of trust in the political leadership has negatively impacted the trust in the political system as a whole, and the resulting diminishing of political performance has in turn furthered the public’s distrust in political institutions – a vicious circle in Nepali politics.

Trust in politics and political institutions has become low in Nepal especially in the post-conflict era and one of the primary reasons is political cynicism in the country. A larger section of the population considers politics as a game, often a dirty game, being played to achieve might and position. Even though political trust is one of the key components for a stable democracy, the decade long civil war, the tumultuous peace process, the years-long constitution drafting journey and seasonal governments have left a trail of political distrust which might last for years to come. In any case, when trust is low and the government cannot operate efficiently or vice-versa, it creates further distrust, creating a vicious circle. The distrust in political institutions slows down the growth of democracy and declines citizen participation in politics.

¹ The World Bank. 2017. *TCData360* (<https://tcdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/h45ea0a18>), accessed 23 October 2020.

The economic status of the state and overall well-being of the citizens might additionally play a crucial role in measuring the trust level in politics. The contemporary Nepalese society categorised the citizens into two groups: materialists and post-materialists. Materialist values for a successful democracy depend more or less solely on the economic performance of the state; if citizens are happy with the economic situation in the country, they are likely to trust the rulers and the political institutions. Post-materialists, on the other hand, focus on personal freedom and individuality, and therefore might have issues of trusting political authority.

A rise in corruption, slow-paced economy, poor accountability and transparency, the culture of nepotism and favouritism, false promises by the politicians, absence of rule of law, abuse of power, and lack of development in this fast-moving world are some of the key reasons why people, especially the younger generation, have started losing trust in politicians and maintain a distance from politics in Nepal.

In Sanskrit, the literal definition of “leader” is “Nayati iti neta”. *“It is rather the leader, not the politician, who develops the society and the nation forward.”* Unfortunately, Nepal has too many politicians but the nation lacks a leader. It is said that politics is the king of policies. Even if the word “king” is limited to the main meaning, the one who rules in the heart is the “king”. In many ways, that is not the case. Even in Nepal, in the last two decades, despite the drastic changes in all sections of society, there have been no changes in politics itself. The paradox is, even at a time when the country has finally seen the strongest government in the last three decades with a two-thirds majority, the citizens, especially the youths, are disillusioned with politicians and politics. People are frustrated with the current breed of leaders, who have been in the league for a couple of decades and are looking for new faces.

The irony, however, is that there are limited possibilities. People always were in search of a collective power to influence social change, perhaps in the form of new political parties and leaders who could deliver services to the public, practise what they preach, and eventually transform the nation. For instance, in the general election for the first Constituent Assembly election in 2008, following the peace process, voters tilted towards the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and made it the largest party in the Constituent Assembly with a remarkable victory – despite knowing that thousands and millions of people were killed and displaced in the Maoist armed conflict and that the same party was largely responsible for it. One of the primary reasons for the victory was that the Maoist party was new and claimed to be revolutionary – and people were tired of trying the same conventional politi-

cal parties. Nonetheless, the result after the victory was largely different from what the public had expected.

Even after the end of civil war and the restoration of the peace process, the country for long remained in a transition phase, followed by years of protracted negotiation over a new constitution. Political leaders failed to hold the elections on time and the state witnessed a number of unstable governments for a long time. International players, diplomatic missions and INGOs overtly interfered in domestic politics – targeting national sovereignty. Even more, the rise of small armed groups, unstable and violent political movements in Madesh, the absence of rule of law, scandals on massive corruption and abuse of power for political gains furthered the people losing hopes and confidence in the political system and the leaders representing it.

At present, the nation is considered to have overcome transition and witnessed the election of a powerful government with a two-thirds majority. Yet, people still cannot be considered contented with the government and political leaders. Even after the five years of formulation of transitional justice mechanisms – the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons (CIEDP) – the war-era victims have not yet received justice. Five years down the line, thousands of victims of the 2015 devastating earthquake are still homeless. The tall electoral promises once made to get votes have not been fulfilled. Rather, in the name of a parliamentary majority, leaders have misused their power and got involved in corruption, resulting in more chaos, more political turmoil, and even more civic frustration. Therefore today, as Voltaire once stated, people are willing to be ruled by one lion rather than a hundred rats – referring in the Nepali case to the notion that monarchy was better than the current corrupted political system.

The current communist government has been criticised by the civil society and by the intellectual communities for squandering its two-thirds mandate and wielding its de facto power over the legislature, executive, the judiciary and the security agencies. Furthermore, the constitutional organs are seen to be heavily influenced by the Prime Minister's office. In 2019, the current government additionally took some controversial moves to challenge the fundamental democratic principles by introducing various contentious bills to shrink the civic space. The government suggested a series of bills in parliament with provisions to criminalise acts of free speech, going against the right to freedom of speech and expression. The bills include the Media Council Bill, Information Technology (IT) Management Bill, the Guthi Bill – to nationalise community trusts, the Commission on Human Rights Bill – to undermine the independence and effectiveness of the NHRC, and the National

Security Agency Bill – and give authorities unwarranted powers to enforce harsh punishments. All these bills limit the freedom of expression of the general public, media personnel, human rights activists and civil society as a whole.

Next to the curtailment of basic freedoms, the government and the leaders have been widely criticised for failing to establish good governance. They were rather found being involved in massive corruption and fraud cases. For instance, the Baluwatar Land Scam – involving high-profiles including the former Deputy Prime Minister, former land reforms ministers, former government secretaries to businessmen – or the passive diplomatic talk with India over the boundary dispute, especially after India released its new political map laying claim to a region, known as Kalapani, as part of its territory; or the corruption charge against the minister for communication and information technology, Gokul Prasad Baskota, forcing Shiva Maya Tumbahamphe to stand down as parliament speaker and electing Agni Sapkota as a Speaker of the House – a Maoist leader who faces a kidnapping and murder charge for an insurgency-era killing – completely failing in addressing COVID-19 rapid outbreak in the country. Likewise, even after the country has adopted a federal structure instead of a centralised state, provincial and local governing bodies have not been able to function properly, let alone to deliver needed services. Instead, again, cases of corruption and abuse of power by the local authorities have increased. At the same time, with a greater number of governing bodies and controlling units in the federal structure, the clash of power and authority seems inevitable. As the federated states clash for power, claiming to serve their people better, the exerted effect has made Nepal less democratised than ever. Thus, people at the grassroots have lost faith in their local representatives as well.

The Federal Republic Nepal was marked as the harbinger of a new era, giving an incremental rise in people's urge for prosperity and furtherance of democratic ideals, filling the vicious gap between the rulers and the ruled. However, the aspirations of every section of the society – women, youth, Dalits, Madhesis, indigenous and ordinary citizens – for an inclusive, equitable, progressive and participatory democracy, which was promised by the new political system entrusted by the new constitution, were disappointed. As such, the public trust into the elected officials as well as the opposition declined.

The perpetual political instability, even after the advent of every other new political heyday, is one of the major cause of declining political trust in Nepal. The present government or ruling party alone cannot be incarcerated for this. A fortiori, politics or political leadership is a must to run a democracy, yet pertinent concern arises over the inefficacies of leaders in times of crises. Our politicians, incumbents in government and political cadres should care more about the political trust and

confidence which the political rationalism furthers, rather than focus only on electoral votes to gain majority.

There are some cross-cutting issues which always surface regardless of the political party in power or the ideology of the respective ruling class. Corruption, rule of law, institutional autonomy, meritocracy, independent judiciary, democratic culture, etc. are those matters which the political leadership have often disappointed public from their mediocrities. The concern is why the political leadership has failed to become crusader in curbing corruption and the strengthening of needed democratic institutions, like the judiciary. Why remain the integrity, credibility and accountability of leaders or those in power questionable and unsettled? Do we lack the kind of leadership that promotes Herculean reformations in our political culture and that is able to win the hearts of ordinary Nepalese or does our electoral system owe liability for these political aberrations. Those who climb the ladders of political power have overlooked these pressing problems and thus they culminated in political distrust and low confidence. Political trust is all about the scale to which the political class delivers or acts in congruence with public interests.

But what lessons can we draw? To put it with another Nepali saying: *"I have been wiping a mirror for years, but there was a stain on my face"*. We preach but do not practise, we make speeches ourselves, but we ask others to do things for improvement first. Yes, the mistake was made here. The stain is on our face, but we constantly wipe the mirror. "Behavior change" is what many educators call "learning". Therefore, the time has come that able and agile youth should become conscious and take a lead for a difficult present and better future.

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