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Linking corruption and religious extremism

Chayes, Sarah. Thieves of state: Why corruption threatens global security. (W.W. Norton & Company, 2015). 272 pp., \$26.95 cloth, Cloth ISBN: 978-0-393-23946-1, \$16.95 paper, Paper ISBN: 978-0-393-35228-3.

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Sarah Chayes' new book, *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security*, makes a case for government corruption being the overlooked and, in some instances, ignored, common

denominator of one of today's most pressing international issues: violent, religious extremism. While Chayes is careful to stress that she does not believe that corruption is the single explanatory factor behind religious extremism, the thread of her argument is a deftly analyzed connection between systematic abuses by government and the search by some disillusioned citizens for theocratic solutions. Chayes' book has a loose methodological approach but it marshals a coherent overall thesis. The package is also tied together with literary panache using journalistic anecdotes and snippets of text from medieval political thought. *Thieves of State* provides an original ground-level view of the workings of corruption in a range of geo-politically important countries, and is therefore helpful for academics and policymakers who seek to find frameworks for current international security policy.

The argument put forward by Chayes about the impact of corruption on religious, political ideology is an important one in which policymakers and scholars of public administration alike should engage. Public administration research currently has very little systematic work on political extremism and terrorism despite the fact that it is a discipline ideally placed to address such phenomena, particularly in the context of government corruption (Rose-Ackerman, 1997; Heineman and Heimann, 2006). Chayes' findings fit nicely with research on the causes of corruption such as low legitimacy of political and administrative processes (e.g., Bohara, Mitchell, and Mittendorff, 2004; Krasner and Risse, 2014; Werlin, 2003) and lack of transparency (e.g., Bastida and Bernardino, 2007; Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes, 2010; Kaufmann, 2005).

There have been few public administration studies that have so far looked at the effect of corruption on religious extremism, though previous work has reported on consequences of corruption such as illegal markets (e.g., Johnson, Kaufmann, and Zoido-Lobaton, 1999), human rights violations (e.g., Bohara, Mitchell, Nepal, and Raheem, 2008), low economic and social development (e.g., Bastida and Bernardino, 2007), and civic deviance (e.g., Agbibo, 2013). Another important strain of research is on the connection between low regard for government legitimacy and citizen distrust and dissatisfaction (e.g., Kim, 2010; Park and Blenkinsopp, 2011; Villoria, Van Ryzin, and Lavena, 2012). This relationship is widely supported in empirical research so it is plausible to surmise that, at the extreme end of the citizen dissatisfaction scale, violent or ideological political actions are another kind of outcome of corruption, as Chayes argues. Indeed, such a relationship carries theoretical salience not just in the context of Middle East or African political economy, but in studies of terrorism in many world regions including OECD countries.

The conclusions drawn by Chayes may have stronger application to Afghanistan and other so-called “failed states” where elite groups use political patronage to usurp public funds, co-opt services, and eviscerate the state of its institutions (Rotberg, 2002). Rightly, Chayes states that corruption is about systemic abuses rather than just individual criminal actions (Bertok, 1999). According to one of the most comprehensive definitions of corruption, by Johnston (1997), only occasionally does corruption lead to root-level political instability, and Chayes’ research provides four country case studies that are likely contenders for corruption leading to such root-level instability. In fact, Johnston’s four types of corruption (*interest group bidding*, *elite hegemony*, *fragmented patronage*, and *patronage machines*) have parallels with Chayes’ four

“variations of kleptocracy:” the *military-kleptocratic complex* (Egypt), the *bureaucratic kleptocracy* (Tunisia), the *post-Soviet kleptocratic autocracy* (Uzbekistan), and the *resource kleptocracy* (Nigeria).

Chayes’ book starts with an inside view of life for citizens in Afghanistan. She goes on to use political and social analysis, along with support from specific texts, to build her argument.

Chayes also introduces the conceptual framework of the book with a summary of the *Mirrors for Princes* literature which dates from around AD 700 to the 16th century and includes European and Arab scholars such as Bishop Jonas (831), Nizam al-Mulk (1090), John of Salisbury (1159), Machiavelli (1513), and Erasmus (1516). Including these sources is effective because it helps the reader to at once grasp the origins of corruption through early scholarly thought and use an historical lens for tackling and preventing present day corruption in its political, religious, and literary milieu.

Chayes’ historical background provides an overview of the Arab Spring and more words of wisdom from Nizam al-Mulk. She also intersperses accounts of her frustrating personal experience of trying to set up her own social enterprise in Afghanistan in the thick of an endless series of bribery requests from public officials. Chayes introduces readers to her experience of working with top US military officials. As a senior policy insider working with three generals (McKiernan, McChrystal, and Mullen), she witnessed several key points in anti-corruption efforts, firstly under McChrystal who was tasked with the “80%” strategy of pulling the majority of Afghans out of Taliban influence and into allegiance with the new government, and, secondly, with Mullen’s anti-corruption task force that alas subsequently suffered the revelation that one of

Kabul's most corrupt politicians had been on the payroll of the CIA. This turning point in US anti-terrorism policy was also marked by a shift in military tactics by President Obama using drones rather than addressing political or institutional capacity in the country. Chayes goes on to recount the negative effect of the flawed 2009 Afghan national elections on public attitudes towards the United States. She also gathers some richer insights into Afghan culture and politics and tells stories from Afghanistan of everyday corruption and violence. Such descriptions allow Chayes to put forward her theory of a vertical, multi-layered system of corruption fueled by funds coming from overseas development efforts in which bribery flows upwards, and in which ordinary people at the bottom increasingly lose contact with, and faith in, their leaders. Chayes argues that the events of the Arab Spring were a revolt against Western-fueled kleptocracy across the entire region.

To support her thesis, Chayes uses four country case studies of variations of kleptocracy. The case studies (Egypt, Tunisia, Uzbekistan, and Nigeria), which Chayes states are "emblematic" of the problem, provide illustrations for each of the variations on how corruption functions today. They are selected to support Chayes' contention that the hot spots of Islamic radicalism all are found within corrupt political systems in which powerful elites co-opt and cannibalize public institutions. In each of the four cases, Chayes claims that rebellion, which was expressed through Islamic extremism, sprang directly as a result of public frustration with the failure of established legal systems and political institutions to protect them from their unscrupulous rulers. The country-specific systems of corruption are depicted in the book's appendices with flow diagrams, which are a way of presenting the complex relationships between citizens, governments, and foreign nations and donors. However, Chayes' brief descriptions of the figures do little to unpack

the complicated organizational and political analysis that they contain, and no other framework is offered to explain rigorously how the figures link to the case study analysis or the anecdotal material. In fact, in seeking a universal explanation of religious extremism across so many country contexts of corruption, Chayes may have set the scope of her theory so broadly that it is difficult to see the causal logic that ties the cases together.

The analysis of corruption is not limited to the aforementioned countries, as Chayes also has strong criticisms of US foreign policy. She draws on the work of Robert Komer in *Democracy Does Its Thing* to explain how the US has walked into complicity with Middle East corruption. Chayes' analysis of the system of corruption also has a further, fascinating layer. While working with military commanders in the Middle East she saw the high-level political maneuvering that obfuscated US anti-corruption policies and the very corruption that it was trying to prevent. This component of turning the mirror towards our "Western" selves, reveals the far-reaching corruption that Chayes is trying to challenge. She offers a social-psychological explanation for the lack of political urgency around corruption in the US context, saying that corruption touches a nerve for both Democrats and Republicans by undermining their worldviews. Democrats who believe that government is essentially a good thing do not like the idea that government could become totally corrupt. On the contrary, Republicans who believe that government is essentially bad do not like the idea that privatization of government functions could provide openings for corrupt practices. Thus, says Chayes, news editors are afraid of asking tough questions about corruption worldwide. It is an intriguing idea, though an idea that Chayes does not spend time supporting with source material or other kinds of empirical evidence.

In her final chapters she provides an historical analysis of the Protestant Reformation, the English Civil War, and the Dutch rebellion against the Spanish Empire to explain that the connection between corruption and religious extremism has an historical pattern. But this theoretical development and its place in her overall theory is tenuous. Chayes relies on political theorists such as Milton and Locke because the Mirror writers do not clearly make a connection between corruption and violent extremism. To support her case, she also points out that many ex-Taliban US prison detainees had cited corruption as a reason for joining the Taliban. However, it would also be plausible to infer that the Mirror writers believed corrupt rulers would simply be deposed through other means. Chayes points out that the Mirrors literature is silent on the recourse that citizens may take to deal with despotic rulers so, in fact, the Mirror writers may not have supported the contention that systematic corruption necessarily lead to religious extremism. It would be interesting to establish more empirical evidence of the conditions that lead to religious extremism compared to more innocuous solutions such as turning to the ballot box or attempting, say, a non-religious political coup. Chayes also does not explore how the effects of corruption fit in politically and ideologically with the other goals that extremist religious movements may have in attempting to create systematic political change. As we have seen in the recent growth of Islamic State and their support for a new Caliphate, radical Islam has moral and religious goals that go far beyond addressing corruption.

Chayes finishes the book with a detailed proposal of practical steps that could be taken by the US and its allies to tackle corruption in fragile states. She puts forward a program for addressing political corruption in the Middle East, including methods such as encouraging citizens of the West to pressure their own governments on anti-corruption policy. She also recommends reforms

to intelligence agencies that will enable them to build a culture that is more accountable and less vulnerable to feeding the power of corrupt leaders.

There are other questions which Chayes leaves unanswered though. First, her conceptual scope is unclear as she uses corruption as a catch-all term for any kind of systematic political abuse and does not distinguish adequately from other systematic problems in government malpractice such as electoral fraud, civilian intimidation, tribal favoritism, or dictatorship. Second, there is also lack of clarity on Chayes' geographic and religious scope. She makes no comparison with countries or religious contexts that have rampant corruption but no problems with violent extremism. These gaps lead to a lack of clarity on the kinds of political mechanisms that she claims are at work in the link between corruption and extremism. One of the most comprehensive multicountry studies of corruption, by Treisman (2000), found that developed economies and those with histories of Protestant Christianity and British colonial rule are less likely to be corrupt. If these kinds of long-term historical and cultural contexts are important, the reader is left wondering how they fit in with her thesis. Finally, Chayes says nothing of religious extremism and terrorism in the late 20th century when the al-Qaeda movement was gathering momentum. Insightfully, she says that, "something seems to have gone off the rails around the late 1990s, as governing cliques turned economic liberalization policies – together with a newly indulgent public morality – to their private advantage" (p.77). Ruling families began to create networks of leading tribes or religious groups and then tapped public resources for their own enrichment. However, these broad brush statements are not backed up by any empirical research or detail on how exactly such a shift has happened. This omission is especially conspicuous because economic liberalization is the dominant economic development philosophy in all

emerging economies in the late 20th century and early 21st century. To suggest that it is connected to corruption requires more explanation.

These theoretical and empirical questions are topics for scholars and public intellectuals of Chayes' academic ilk to investigate in future work. While the questions point to gaps in Chayes' central argument, her work remains thought-provoking and she has an impressive range of data points and sources that she marshals with good organization and lucid prose. The examination of public administration topics such as corruption are vital to our understanding of international security policy, especially at a time when drone missions seems to have become the preferred approach of US efforts in countries like Afghanistan. Therefore, despite the tumultuous fortunes of anti-corruption policy initiatives, Chayes' richly researched book is a timely one that will add intellectual and public policy force to the debate around the roots of religious extremism. The book is useful to policymakers and academics. It has vast amounts of insight and practical wisdom about the current anti-terrorism policy towards the Middle East. However, the big empirical question for Middle East politics is how corruption fits in with the panoply of economic, political, and religious factors. Chayes points out the need for such a broad explanatory model, but that project is beyond the scope of this work. She has dedicated extensive time and energy to developing our understanding of corruption in her book. We hope that the theoretical integration of her thesis with other drivers of extremism will be taken up by scholars of public administration in the near future.

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