

Building Trust in Government by Improving Governance¹
By Larry Diamond²

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Trust between citizens and their government officials and elected representatives is a vital element of a well governed society. In the absence of trust, citizens become cynical about their political system and disaffected with the existing order. Distrust may produce alienation and withdrawal from the political process, leaving behind a shallow, fragile state that cannot mobilize national resources or shape a collective vision for national development. If it festers for very long, widespread and intense distrust may eventually generate a backlash against the political order and a search for more radical, anti-system alternatives. Failed states, revolutions, civil wars, and other related traumatic failures of governance all share in common the absence or collapse of trust: between citizens and the state, between different political factions or parties, and between ethnic, social or class groups at the mass level.

Trust does not need to be, and indeed should not be, blind and total. Pure deference to authority does not provide a sound foundation for effective governance; rather it invites abuse of power. A certain questioning skepticism can be healthy for good governance and indeed vital for democracy, leading citizens and civil society organizations to scrutinize what government does and to check abuses of power. As the political philosopher Sidney Hook once wrote, “A positive requirement of a working democracy is an intelligent distrust of its leadership, a skepticism stubborn but not blind, of all demands for the enlargement of power, and an emphasis upon critical method in every phase of social life.”³

What we see in many of the new and unconsolidated democracies of the world, however, is not skepticism but cynicism. In much of the world, trust in parties and elected politicians is very low. For example, in Latin America, barely a quarter of Latin Americans trust the congress, and only a fifth of citizens trust political parties.⁴ Overall, trust in government stands at 36 percent. This is not because Latin Americans distrust all social and political institutions (though they do generally have low levels of interpersonal trust). Some Latin American institutions do enjoy reasonably high levels of trust—for example the Church (71%) and radio (55%). The military, the president, and television all have the trust of slightly over 40% of citizens on average. But Latin Americans generally view politicians with contempt. Of 18 public institutions included in the 2005 Latinobarometer survey, only trade unions enjoy about as little public trust as parties and parliaments. And no institution is so distrusted and reviled as the party. A major reason why is that people believe politicians as a class are deeply corrupt—only interested in themselves and their families and cronies. There is a striking relationship between trust in political institutions and the perception of progress in reducing corruption in Latin America. Of those with the lowest level of trust in democratic institutions (parties, government, the judiciary, and the congress), half think there has been no progress in reducing corruption. Of those with the highest level of trust, only 13% see no progress and a third sees a great deal of progress in fighting corruption. In general, the more progress Latin Americans see in the battle against corruption, the greater their levels of trust in democratic institutions.

Nowhere are levels of trust in parties and representative institutions lower than in the postcommunist states, where citizens had their fill of “the party” by the time the Berlin Wall came crashing down. Parties are trusted on average by just 10 percent in the new democracies of the region, and are actively distrusted by three-quarters of the population.⁵ Parliament fares not

much better (16% trust, 63% distrust). As in Latin America, no two political institutions are so widely distrusted. The courts have the confidence of a quarter of the population, and the distrust of half of it. Only the president is trusted by a majority of the population (barely, 51%). These figures stand in sharp contrast to Africa, where, in the typical country, majorities of the public trust not only the president, the courts, and the military (and by large margins), but also members of parliament.⁶ The postcommunist malaise is also apparent in the comparison between the average level of satisfaction with the way democracy works in the original 15 (West European) EU members—66% in 2006—and satisfaction in the typical postcommunist state—38% (across the eight new East European members, plus Romania and Bulgaria. In the latter two countries, only about a quarter of the public is satisfied).

If there is this much cynicism about government, why don't East Europeans reject their democratic system in greater numbers? Democracy must give the people something. It is not, in their perception, honest government. As in Latin America, distrust and perceptions of government corruption go hand in hand. Nearly three-quarters of citizens (72%) in these ten democracies believe that half or "almost all" officials are corrupt, and roughly the same proportion think government treats them "definitely" or "somewhat" unfairly. Neither is it economic prosperity, yet. More East Europeans in these ten countries approve of the old economic system (69%) than the new one (57%), and in every single country, majorities say they do not (quite, or definitely) get enough from their main source of income to buy what they need. What people do perceive consistently in large majorities, however, is greater freedom. When asked if they felt freer than before the fall of communism to say what they think, to join any organization, to take an interest in politics or not, and to choose in religious matters, 63% answered yes to all four questions; 79% saw greater freedom of speech and 81% greater freedom

of association. More than half (52%) thought the government has some or a lot of respect for human rights.

By comparison, East Asians exhibit middling levels of trust, higher than the fairly alienated Latin American and postcommunist European publics, but lower than the more trusting African populations. In particular, there is considerably greater trust in the courts in East Asia's democracies than in Latin America and postcommunist Europe. There is also somewhat greater trust in parties and parliament, but still at quite low levels. Within East Asia, national levels of trust in institutions are strikingly related to the level of economic development. The three most economically (and democratically) developed countries, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, all have extremely low levels of trust; for example, only 14% of Japanese, 15% of Koreans, and 23% of Taiwanese trust their parliament ("a great deal" or "quite a lot"), but the comparable figures for Mongolia, Thailand, and the Philippines are, respectively, 61%, 59%, and 44%.⁷ Trust in the national government is higher in all countries but shows virtually the same step pattern, with only a quarter of Koreans and Japanese trusting it, nearly half of those in Taiwan and the Philippines, 60% in Mongolia, and 69% in Thailand. One reason why the Thais may be more trusting is that they perceive lower levels of corruption. Only about a third of Thais in 2001 (and just a quarter in 2006) judged that all or most officials of the national government were corrupt, compared with half of Taiwan's public and two-thirds of the Philippines.

Trends in public opinion in the Philippines and Nigeria show how trust in democratic institutions moves in tandem with support for democracy. Between 2001 and 2005, the percentage of Filipinos saying "democracy is always preferable" declined from 64 to 51 percent.⁸ Those saying "democracy is suitable for our country" declined from 80 to 57 percent. Satisfaction with the way democracy works plunged from 54 to 39 percent. In this same period,

trust in democratic institutions also diminished: in the elected national government (from 48 to 39 percent), in the parliament (from 44 to 39 percent), and in parties (from 35 to 31 percent), but hardly at all in the military, which remained at over 50 percent. Behind the rising levels of political disaffection and distrust in the Philippines were mounting rumors and reports of corruption in the government of Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, and then the surfacing in June 2005 of an audiotape capturing a conversation between the president and the election commissioner during the vote counting process for the 2004 presidential election. The tape suggested the possibility of presidential interference in the vote count to ensure her victory.

In Nigeria as well, declining trust is part of a broader syndrome of disillusionment. Satisfaction with the working of democracy plunged from 81 percent in 2000 to 25 percent in 2005, support for democracy declined (from 84 to 65 percent) and trust in the president plummeted, from 78 to 26 percent.⁹ In this same period, approval of the performance of the National Assembly plunged from 58 to 23 percent and trust in the institution declined from 66 to 55 percent. The principal reason for these various declines is growing (or more precisely, resurging) citizen disappointment with corruption, electoral fraud, and abuse of power. From 2000 to 2005, there was a sharp drop (from 64 to 36 percent) in the percentage of Nigerians who believe that the government is doing a good job in controlling corruption. During this period, no dimension of government performance saw such a steep decline. At the same time, citizens were deeply disaffected by the widespread fraud, malpractices, corruption, and intimidation during the 2003 national elections. Belief that the immediately preceding national elections had been relatively honest declined from 76 percent in 2000 (following the 1999 founding elections of Nigeria's Fourth Republic) to 44 percent in 2003, after widely discredited elections. No doubt the figure would be even lower today in the wake of the travesty of the 2007 national elections.

What Needs to Be Done: A Revolution in Governance

While much analysis remains to be done across countries and over time, the survey data from different regions point in a common direction. As Daniel Kaufman and his colleagues in the World Bank Institute stress, “governance matters;” that is why they attempt to measure it so regularly, comprehensively and innovatively.¹⁰ It matters for development but it also matters for political trust and confidence, consequently for legitimacy, and ultimately for political stability. To build public trust in government, government must govern better: more transparently, responsibly, accountably, and responsively, with more active engagement with the public and in particular more rigorous respect for the law and the public interest. Nothing is more toxic to public trust in government than extensive (not to mention endemic) corruption. Increasingly in the contemporary world, people believe governance should entail a democratic relationship: those who hold the power to rule (and hence to allocate resources) should exercise it temporarily not permanently, and for the public good, not their own private interests and those of their kin, cronies, and parties. Moreover, while exercising power, incumbents should be held accountable—answerable for their conduct and subject to sanctions for the abuse of office.¹¹

Corruption and abuse of power represent a betrayal of the public trust. That breach of faith cannot be repaired with mere technical institutional fixes to make government more efficient and accessible. Such reforms are necessary and promising, and I will address them shortly. But if political systems (and civil society reformers, and international donors) are really going to build trust in government, something more fundamental is needed. We must go to the heart of the matter—the way that government works in many countries around the world. Where

the first purpose of government is to generate private goods for its office-holders rather than public goods for its citizens, no reform will build trust unless this logic of governance is changed. Change of that magnitude is revolutionary. It will require, in many countries, transformation in the nature of governance, so that public officials are truly required to serve the public good, and so that corruption becomes too risky and costly to be any longer commonplace and egregious in scale. This must entail a sweeping program of construction, reform, and empowerment of the institutions of vertical and horizontal accountability.

Vertical Accountability

In the vertical sense, citizens and their organizations need more access to information and decision-making. One crucial instrument is a freedom of information law. Malfeasance thrives in secrecy and obscurity. The more that government transactions and operations are transparent and visible, open to scrutiny, the more feasible it is to expose, deter, and contain corruption. For this reason, citizens must have the legal right to request and receive information on all functions and decisions of government that are not a matter of national security or that do not infringe on individual rights of privacy. In the fight against corruption, the public availability of information on government finance, procurement, and contracting is particularly important. Ideally, such information should be posted on the Internet. In particular, all government procurement above a certain (modest) level should be done through competitive bidding that is advertised on government websites.

Most countries do not sufficiently guarantee citizens adequate rights of access to information about government functioning. But progress is being made. More than seventy countries have some form of Freedom of Information or Access to Information law, most of

them adopted within the past decade. Some of these are vague, if not vacuous. But a growing number of them entail serious and specific provisions requiring that a wide range of government information be made available to the public upon request, with the burden of proof resting with the government agency to show why such a request cannot or should not be met.¹²

Citizens must also have the freedom to monitor and criticize what government does, and to voice concerns. In an era of rising public expectations of government, this political and civil freedom to speak, assemble, protest, and be heard. Ultimately, it also means democracy—the right of citizens to choose their government leaders and if they wish, to replace them, in regular free, fair, and competitive elections. Fair and open political competition represents an important instrument for checking and correcting corruption and the abuse of power. If citizens cannot replace leaders in whom they have broadly lost faith, then no other institutional “fix” for waning public trust in government may be meaningful. However, when citizens do exercise this instrument of vertical accountability—by tossing the incumbent party and government out of power—this has an energizing effect on public faith in and support for the system of government. Michael Bratton’s analysis of public opinion data from the Afrobarometer shows a stunning “alternation effect” on positive attitudes toward democracy. Specifically he found:

the passage of time since the last electoral alternation... was negatively related to *every* positive trend in democratic attitudes—on both the demand supply sides. In other words, the farther back in the past an electoral alternation (or, failing that, a transition to competitive elections) had occurred, the more disillusioned people were with democracy. By contrast, the more recent these defining political events, the more optimistic citizens tended to be.¹³

One reason trust in government has declined so precipitously in countries like the Philippines and Nigeria is precisely because aspirations for alternation in government have been frustrated in a context where growing numbers of citizens appear to feel that government is not governing fairly and responsibly.

Of course, free and fair elections are not enough. Another key element of vertical accountability is a vigorous and pluralistic civil society that is monitoring what government does, scrutinizing government budgets, expenditures, and legislation, raising questions, and demanding reforms. There is a large and important role here for good governance research, training, and advocacy groups like the South African NGO and think tank, Idasa (the Institute for Democracy in South Africa).¹⁴

Horizontal Accountability

If vertical accountability is going to function effectively—if there is to be adequate protection for freedoms of speech, press, and assembly, and reasonably free and fair elections—then the instruments of vertical accountability must be complemented, protected, and reinforced by vigorous mechanisms of horizontal accountability. Horizontal accountability is the means by which some agencies or actors within the state hold other state actors accountable. There is a strong affinity between the concept of “horizontal accountability” and “checks and balances.” Agencies of restraint and oversight—or horizontal accountability—must be independent of the government office they are holding accountable if they are to be effective. From this obvious necessity comes the concept of an independent judiciary and (at least in a presidential system) an independent legislature—independent from executive branch control.

The judiciary and the parliament are two important instruments of horizontal accountability, but only two. Control of corruption and abuse of power, and defense of the interests of the public (and of individual ordinary citizens), requires a dense interconnected web of powerful agencies of horizontal accountability. Let me mention here a few key agencies:

The Judicial System: Like the other agencies of horizontal accountability, the judiciary must have significant capacity and independence if it is to be effective in controlling corruption. There is much more to judicial capacity than modern court buildings with adequate means for communication, recording, and research. An effective judicial system requires well-trained, competent judges, clerks, prosecutors, investigators, and defense attorneys, and enough of them to keep case loads to a level that is consistent with vigorous justice and due process. The courts need to streamline their administrative management and their capacity to track and process cases, both criminal and civil. All legal practitioners need the support of law libraries, computerized information systems, law schools, judicial training institutes, and professional bar associations. When they are independent and elicit broad participation from the legal community, bar associations can become powerful advocates for rule-of-law reforms, while working among legal practitioners to elevate professional norms and monitor the conduct of the legal community. A genuine rule of law also requires an extended network of legal assistance that can provide advice and counsel free of charge to those who need legal representation and cannot afford to pay for it. Broad and comprehensible access to justice—and to reasonably expeditious justice—is vital to restoring public faith in government.

Parliamentary Oversight Committees: Particularly in a separation-of-powers, presidential system, the national parliament or congress constitutes a general check upon executive power, and thus represents a diffuse source of horizontal accountability. In the effort to combat corruption and secure good governance, however, oversight is more effectively performed by parliamentary committees that monitor and legislate on particular areas of government policy, such as health, public works, or defense. In many democracies, any parliamentary committee can investigate suspicions of waste, fraud, and abuse within the executive agencies under its jurisdiction. Some national legislatures go further; they have standing committees to monitor the overall efficiency and integrity of government and to investigate allegations of wrongdoing. The Philippine Senate has a standing Blue Ribbon Committee with broad authority to investigate corruption and other criminal behavior by government officials. During its 50 years of operation, the committee has probed into many scandals, including the vast web of corrupt practices and ties that ultimately forced President Joseph Estrada out of office in January 2001. However, the committee can do no more than recommend prosecution, and it suffers from a common deficiency among anti-corruption bodies. “The lack of staff prevents the committee from following through and keeping track of cases once they have been reported out.”¹⁵

Anti-Corruption Bodies: Control of corruption requires a specific body to scrutinize the conduct of public officials and look for signs of malfeasance. This body must have the authority not only to receive but also to monitor and verify the assets declarations of all high-level elected and appointed public officials (including all cabinet ministers, provincial governors, and members of parliament). The commission must then have the staff to investigate annually on a

random basis some significant percentage of these assets declarations, and systematically, the declarations of the country's highest officials.

Scrutiny must be comprehensive if it is to be effective, and if the threat of detection is to be credible. This requires a lot of resources: accountants, investigators, and lawyers trained in the ways that wealth is moved, accumulated, and hidden, along with computer specialists and other support staff to back them up. Not only does a counter-corruption commission need a lot of well-trained staff, it needs to pay them enough to deter temptation and establish a high esprit de corps. There is no way to control corruption without spending money to build institutions. One of the most common reasons for the lack of effectiveness of such bodies is a severe (and it appears deliberate) shortage of resources.¹⁶

Scrutiny, however, is not enough. If credible evidence of wrongdoing emerges, there must be the institutional means to try the suspected offender and impose punishment on the guilty. The single most crippling flaw in systems of corruption control is an inability to enforce this function free from interference by the highest levels of government. The counter-corruption commission should have the ability, free of political restraints, to bring charges against officials who have allegedly violated ethics laws. Since its creation in 2003, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission has enjoyed and utilized this power for certain types of offenses in Nigeria, but because the body is appointed by the President a strong suspicion has emerged that it has been used a political weapon against political opponents. There is also a case to be made for Critics may argue that trying public officials outside the normal judicial process undermines the rule of law. And, of course, in a democracy the power to deny someone his freedom, through imprisonment, should only be exercised through a judicial process. But it makes sense to enable a counter-corruption institution to impose punishing civil penalties, including forfeiture of office

and assets, through due process, even if the judicial system would be able to do this as well, and more.

Ombudsman's Office: The Ombudsman's office (which may go under many names, including, in South Africa, the office of public protector) receives and investigates public complaints of abuse of office. Members of the public or the press should have a right to—indeed be encouraged to—bring evidence to the counter-corruption commission if they believe a public official has misrepresented his or her assets or abused their office. But there needs to be a supplementary channel of public access to remedial government authority if power is being abused and the counter-corruption commission does not seem to be doing its job or judges some abuse of power to lie outside its scope of authority. Members of the counter-corruption commission should know that they themselves could be exposed to public outcry if they fail to move aggressively on evidence of corruption.

Toward Effective—Autonomous—Horizontal Accountability

The challenge is not simply to structure a system of horizontal accountability on paper but to give it the authority, autonomy, and resources to do its job. Most countries have some kind of counter-corruption or code of conduct commission, and some kind of ombudsman. The problem is that they are typically woefully under-resourced, or politically subservient, or both. The problems begin with the power to appoint. If a country cannot get high quality, nonpartisan professionals in these positions, all is lost from the start. This seemingly modest problem—who will appoint, if not guard, the guardians—is fundamental. Often, institutional arrangements that

look promising in scope and design are vitiated because the head of government appoints their leaders. An executive who has fought his way to the top in even a corrupt system is not going to want serious mechanisms of accountability. The 1991 Thai constitution sought to get around this problem by giving the power to appoint members of accountability agencies—such as the Constitutional Court, and the counter-corruption, election, audit, and human rights commissions—to a nonpartisan Senate, whose members were elected for six-year terms (forbidding immediate succession) and were expressly forbidden to have any party membership or political appointment (including in a state enterprise). The model foundered in 2001, when the Constitutional Court, in a controversial and tortuous 8-7 ruling, cleared Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, of a finding by the NCCC that he had falsely declared his assets, which could have led to his dismissal from office and his being barred from holding public office for five years.¹⁷ Thailand's constitutional system of horizontal accountability went downhill from there. The Thai experience is worthy of study. Ways must be found of appointing, funding, and supervising the officials of accountability agencies so that they cannot be subverted, suborned, or intimidated from doing their jobs. Once independent appointments are made, officials must have significant tenure, removable only for established cause, and then by complex and difficult means. In the U.S., the GAO's independence is supported by the relatively lengthy tenure of its head, the Comptroller General of the United States, who serves a fixed 15-year term.¹⁸ But the model of political appointment of judges in the United States (or even their popular election in some U.S. states) is not one I would recommend to emerging democracies. Rather, judges should be appointed on a professional basis by the higher judiciary. Only at the level of the highest—supreme and constitutional court judges—should elected political leaders play a role, and then only a limited and consultative role with the judiciary itself.

Unless countries build effective systems of accountability they are not going to solve (or even much relieve) the problem of public distrust of government. And unless they have truly independent, insulated, and resourceful agencies of horizontal accountability, they are not going to have effective accountability.

Improving Electoral and Parliamentary Processes

How can improvements in electoral and parliamentary processes contribute to the needed revolution in governance?

First, we need to recall that the most important instrument of vertical accountability—the ultimate means by which citizens hold their government responsible and obtain redress of their grievances—is the electoral process. If elections are not free and fair, they cannot serve this vital purpose, and so they will likely do little to restore public faith in government when it wanes. To be free and fair and credible, elections must be neutrally, professionally, and transparently administered.

Electoral administration consists of a daunting range of tasks, many of which may be compromised by fraud or ineptitude. These include registering voters; publishing and distributing voter lists; registering and qualifying parties and candidates; establishing and enforcing rules on campaigning and campaign finance; ensuring the security of campaigners, voters, and the polling stations; administering the polls during voting; counting the ballots; reporting, collating, and “announcing the results; investigating and adjudicating complaints; and certifying the results.”¹⁹ The range of tasks, many of them ongoing, requires a significant,

professional, and permanent administration that is able to administer competently and regulate impartially all of these aspects of political competition and electoral participation.

The overriding imperative is that electoral administration not be subject to direction or manipulation by the incumbent officials or ruling party. Typically, this is where electoral administration fails to meet basic standards of democraticness and professionalism. As with other agencies of horizontal accountability, the key is who appoints and controls these sensitive bodies. How can an electoral commission be expected to administer and umpire a free and fair election if it is appointed by the president or prime minister, can be removed by him, and must obtain its funding from a parliament controlled by the ruling party? Such political dependence is a formula for political subservience to the incumbent government.

In political systems with a tradition of corruption and abuse of power, where democratic norms are not deeply rooted, the electoral administration needs constitutional autonomy. There are a number of possible models for this. In Costa Rica, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal is virtually a fourth branch of government, whose members are elected to staggered six-year terms by a two-thirds vote of the Supreme Court. In India, the electoral commission's independence is protected by explicit constitutional mandate, and by a powerful chairman, who is appointed by the non-partisan president. In some other countries, independence is attained through supervision by a judicial body or by being made accountable to the parliament rather than the executive branch.²⁰ One way or another, the neutrality and independence of electoral administration must be constitutionally and legally secured if the electoral process is to gain the fairness and credibility necessary to build trust in government.

Another dimension of the electoral process relates to the electoral system that is used to choose members of parliament and lower-level representative bodies. Here the challenge is to

combine two principles that are often at odds: Fairness, which requires representativeness and inclusiveness, and thus often naturally inclines toward proportional representation; and accountability of elected representatives to specific grassroots constituencies. While in principle bonds of accountability could be forged through social or non-territorial means of identification, it rarely works very well in practice. Unless some significant portion of representatives are clearly designated as representing specific geographical constituencies—and of manageable size—there is the danger that parliament could grow distant from real voters and their concerns, and geographic constituencies could be left feeling unheard and unrepresented. South Africa, which elects all of its MPs from national lists and large provincial lists, has faced this problem acutely, and the attempt of the ruling African National Congress to ameliorate the problem by assigning its party-list MPs to particular districts has largely fallen flat (in part because of the high degree of centralism of the ruling party).²¹ If citizens are going to trust parliament, they must be effectively linked to it through their representatives. This requires that a substantial proportion of MPs (in my view, at least half) be elected either through single-member districts or multi-member districts of very modest size, and that the parliament be large enough so that districts can be small enough to establish meaningful ties. Here, civil society advocates of good governance have to speak up for the sometimes counter-intuitive case that a prerequisite for good government is an adequate amount of government. Disaffected voters and opinion leaders are sometimes led to want to “punish” parliament by slashing its resources and size. In Taiwan recently, in the wake of a rising tide of sentiment against irresponsible parliamentary behavior, this sentiment of alienation and distrust led to a good reform (change in the electoral reform from the fragmentation-inducing Single Non-Transferable Vote to the Japanese-style mixed electoral system of PR and single-member districts) but also to a bad reform—cutting the overall size of

parliament in half. This leaves (in the parliament to be elected this December) only 113 members total, and only 73 elected from the single-member districts—a number too small to generate and maintain adequate constituency ties when there are more than 20 million people to be represented. In a huge country like the United States, not to mention India, there is no way around very large parliamentary districts (unless one wants a parliament of unwieldy size). But a smaller system can afford to have a more reasonable balance, and the original size of Taiwan's parliament (225 seats) was much closer to the ideal than the reformed size will be.

Parliamentary Processes

Much can be done to bring parliamentary democracy closer to the people, but to reiterate, the first imperative is to empower parliament as an agency of horizontal accountability that can monitor and hold accountable the executive branch.

One obvious imperative is to ensure some significant links between elected representatives and defined (usually, territorial) constituencies. This is not just a matter of the electoral system. Once people are elected from districts, they must have offices and staffs in the districts that connect with communities and hear and represent their needs. This requires sufficient resources so that they can be present and accessible in the district.

If legislatures are to become meaningful forums for injecting the interests and concerns of their constituencies into the policy process, they must have sufficiently elaborated and resourceful organizational structures so that they can engage, challenge, and check executive officials and state bureaucracies. This requires legal and technical skill in writing legislation and reviewing budgets; a system of functional committees with professional staffs who have

specialized expertise in various policy areas, from macroeconomics and the environment to national security; a library and information service (hopefully, these days, computerized); a research support function; and means for promoting citizen access to the legislative process, as through public hearings in local constituencies, public dissemination of legislative proceedings, public opinion polling on issues before the legislature, and effective media coverage of the legislature. In most new and unconsolidated democracies, these functions are all very weak, and national legislatures lack the organization, financial resources, equipment, and staff to serve as a mature and autonomous point of deliberation in the policy process. This does not always mean they are powerless; particularly in a presidential system, where a congress is constitutionally powerful but institutionally weak, it is tempted to exercise its authority in destabilizing ways, through obstruction, extortion, and corruption. This raises a related dimension of professionalization which Moisés Naím has emphasized with respect to executive-branch bureaucrats.²² States (and peoples) get what they pay for. If they want civil servants and legislative staff with professional skill and dedication, and legislators more interested in representing interests than collecting bribes, they need to pay these officials reasonably well.

Conclusion: Repairing the Breach

There is a tendency among political assistance and state building efforts to assume that the gulf between government and the people is a technical and resource problem. People don't trust government because government is too distant from the people and does not sufficiently solicit and engage their concerns. This emerges in significant measure, so it is thought, from deficits in training, techniques, and resources. When these are transferred, trust in government

and government's capacity to mobilize public support for the essential tasks of development will be substantially restored.

There is some truth to this perspective, but only some. In much of the world, the core reason for public distrust in government is that government does not deserve to be trusted. Too often, the principal purpose of government is to serve private interests rather than public needs, and to corruptly accumulate wealth for the office-holder, his family, cronies, and party. This is a very deep problem. It drives to the most fundamental motives and assumptions of political life. It is not going to be altered by opening parliamentary hearings to the public, because an endemically corrupt system will then find a way to render those hearings meaningless. It is not going to be solved by giving members of parliament more staff to communicate with the public when that communication is going to be in a corrupt, clientelistic fashion—offering the crumbs of state patronage in exchange for support.

Deep-seated problems require thorough-going and radical solutions. In significant parts of the world, the lack of trust in government is chronic and deep-seated, bred of decades or centuries of exploitation of the powerless by the powerful—those who have managed to corner power and declare themselves the state. Until state power is subjected to effective limits under law, and incumbents of state office are made accountable to the law and to resourceful agents of vertical and horizontal accountability, not much is going to change. The most important role for parliament in a campaign to rebuild trust in government is to become an advocate for and legislative implementer of the institutional changes necessary for truly serious government accountability.

Incremental improvements are better than none at all. But we have to face facts. Corruption is a problem almost everywhere in the world, and in much of the world there are few

if any effective checks against it. Unless we tackle this problem vigorously and forthrightly, nothing else we do to “reinvent” government is going to build public trust in government. And nothing else we do is going to deliver chronically poor nations out of poverty.

Notes

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- ¹ This paper draws material from my forthcoming book, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World* (New York: Times Books, forthcoming).
- ² The author is senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, director of the Democracy Program of Stanford's Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, and co-editor of the *Journal of Democracy*.
- ³ Sidney Hook, *Reason, Social Myth, and Democracy* (New York: Humanities, 1950), cited in Alex Inkeles, "National Character and Modern Political Systems," in Francis L. K. Hsu, ed., *Psychological Anthropology: Approaches to Culture and Personality* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey, 1961), p. 196. See also Richard Rose, "Postcommunism and the Problem of Trust," *Journal of Democracy* 5 (July 1994): 19.
- ⁴ See *Latinobarometro Report 2005: 1995-2005, A Decade of Public Opinion*, Corporacion Latinobarometro, pp. 60-61. http://www.latinobarometro.org/uploads/media/2005_02.pdf.
- ⁵ The methodology for this survey was different than the others, in that it provided respondents with a seven-point scale from distrust to distrust, and thus allowed a neutral, mid-point answer. The data in this paragraph come from Richard Rose, "Insiders and Outsiders: New Europe Barometer 2004," *Studies in Public Policy* 404, Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, 2005, pp. 64-65.
- ⁶ "The Status of Democracy 2005-2006: Findings from Afrobarometer Round 3 for 18 Countries," Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 40, June 2006. http://www.afrobarometer.org/papers/AfrobriefNo40_revised16nov06.pdf.
- ⁷ All of the Asia data in this section comes from two waves of the Asian Barometer survey, with which this author is associated. For further details see www.asianbarometer.org.
- ⁸ The data in this paragraph comes from two waves of the Asian Barometer survey, with which this author is associated. For further details see www.asianbarometer.org.
- ⁹ All of the data in this paragraph comes from *Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 46*, "Performance and Legitimacy in Nigeria's New Democracy," July 2006, <http://www.afrobarometer.org/papers/AfrobriefNo46.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ See Daniel Kaufman, A. Kraay, and M. Mastruzzi, "Governance Matters V: Governance Indicators for 1996-2005," September 15, 2006, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/WBI/EXTWBI/GOVANTCOR/0,,contentMDK:21045419~menuPK:1976990~pagePK:64168445~piPK:64168309~theSitePK:1740530,00.html>.
- ¹¹ Andreas Schedler, "Conceptualizing Accountability," in Andreas Schedler, Larry Diamond, and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *The Self-Restraining State: Power and Accountability in New Democracies* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999), pp. 13-28.
- ¹² www.wikipedia.org, "Freedom of information legislation," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_information_laws.
- ¹³ Michael Bratton, "The 'Alternation Effect' in Africa," *Journal of Democracy* 15 (October 2004): 155. <http://www.idasa.org.za/>.
- ¹⁴ Coronel and Kalaw-Tirol, *Investigating Corruption*, p. 279.
- ¹⁵ Larry Diamond, "Political Corruption: Nigeria's Perennial Struggle," *Journal of Democracy* 2 (October 1991): 73-85.
- ¹⁶ Duncan McCargo, "Democracy under Stress in Thaksin's Thailand," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (October 2002): 112-126.
- ¹⁷ One indication of the stability and autonomy of the office, and of its separation from partisan politics, is that since the agency was created in 1921, there have only been seven Comptrollers Generals.
- ¹⁸ Robert A. Pastor, "A Brief History of Electoral Commissions," in Schedler, et al. eds., *The Self-Restraining State*, pp. 77-78.
- ¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 78-79.
- ²⁰ Robert Mattes, "South Africa: Democracy without the People?" *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002): 24-25. 22. Moisés Naím, "Latin America: The Second Stage of Reform," pp. 28-44, and also his "Latin America's Journey to the Market: From Macroeconomic Shocks to Institutional Therapy," Occasional Papers Number 62, International Center for Economic Growth (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1995).