

Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security. By Sarah Chayes. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015.

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Acknowledgments. Notes. Index. Pp. 1-262.

Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security exposes an understudied contributor to extremism—corruption—examining several countries where institutional corruption has fed popular dissatisfaction with Western-backed governments, providing Islamic extremists fertile ground for recruitment and support.

A former NPR reporter and special adviser to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Sarah Chayes is a senior associate in the Democracy and Rule of Law Program and the South Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment. She has produced a valuable work informed by her own decade of South Asia experience, revealing specific ways government structures in the surveyed countries permit and encourage corruption, at the expense the governed.

Ms. Chayes approaches the issue in both a personal and historical way, using her own discovery of corruption in Afghanistan to introduce the theme. To put corruption and poor governance into context, she quotes medieval European and Islamic “mirrors for princes,” in which past thinkers wrote advice to rulers – or rulers to their successors—on how best to rule. These sources reveal a long tradition of corruption and avariciousness in Europe and the Middle East, assuming the best rulers should rein them in, ensuring fairness to their subjects. Noting the existence of hundreds of these works, she cites English, French, Scottish, Irish, Arab, and Persian writers, and the more famous Machiavelli, Erasmus, and Luther, to argue such problems have long troubled observers of governance. She continuously refers to these earlier perceptions when surveying the contemporary societies she analyzes.

Chayes describes in detail the unique structure of corruption in many countries. She adds an appendix with diagrams showing the flow of money, protection, and punishments across various entities or groups, to show how corruption and power flows in select countries, both in public and behind the scenes. She provides such diagrams for Afghanistan, Egypt/Pakistan, Tunisia, Uzbekistan, and Nigeria, and, for comparison purposes, the Catholic Church around 1500 and a “Happy” government today. While Westerners working in developing countries quickly understand corruption can be pervasive, they often do not grasp way in which a given society operates. Chayes performs this service, suggesting each has its own riff on kleptocracy.

Focusing on Afghanistan, she notes she was often hoodwinked in her early years there, not understanding how hidden relationships influenced specific officials' behaviors. Noting that corrupt intermediaries often block leaders' access to the people, Chayes cites an example of American leadership seeking to preserve relationships with corrupt Afghan officials; she is scathing in her criticism of General Stanley McChrystal and his staff for blocking a meeting with knowledgeable tribal elders because the Karzai-linked Kandahar governor learned of it in advance and raised such a fuss that it was cancelled to avoid conflict with the U.S. government's "partners." She criticizes the government-to-government focus U.S. military and diplomats often prefer, with the West perceiving governments as a bastion of stability, with corruption a secondary concern. She convincingly argues this drives the common people from supporting governments that do not treat them fairly, forging a breeding ground for extremism and hostility to the West. The West is seen as propping up its oppressors, by active financial support or ignoring misdeeds. She maintains seeking security before good governance is the wrong approach and security instead emerges from the citizenry perceiving government as just and working in their interest. Chayes concludes that, in Afghanistan, the government was a vertically-integrated criminal organization, where corruption flows up, with low-level officials paying off their superiors, who then owe them protection, and the highest leaders moving money out of the country.

She covers the countries of the Arab Spring, with whole chapters on Egypt and Tunisia, touching on Morocco and Algeria. In the former, even educated people cannot get jobs unless they have contacts among the ruling elite, with military and other government staff often performing work to benefit superiors. Algerians are too exhausted by the 1990s' violence to protest. She terms Egypt a "Military Kleptocratic Complex" where the military, which the public esteems because of its role in Egypt's nationalist rebirth, runs whole industries for the benefit of its officers, with a parallel system of crony corruption for civilian government. She sees Tunisia as an example of "Bureaucratic Kleptocracy," where the party and family of Ben Ali used the private sector, especially banks, to steal brazenly enough to spark the Arab Spring,

Uzbekistan is her example of the Post-Soviet space, where she identifies three parallel kleptocratic networks. President Karimov's daughter's network squeezes money out of international investors, such as telecommunications, in exchange for permission to operate, while impeding those unwilling to pay.

The two other networks are the cotton sector and the National Security Service that controls cross-border activities.

Chayes concludes her country analyses with Nigeria, a “Resource Kleptocracy,” where corruption flows downward; the top receives vast oil profits, and payments flow down in a patronage system. Corrupt civil servants access public funds through widespread contract fraud, gaining positions through education.

She reviews how the anti-corruption fight emerged in Europe, focusing on the Dutch revolt against their Hapsburg overlords and the English Civil War, a response to Charles I’s autocratic rule. She traces the concept of popular sovereignty and ways to prevent abuse of power from Milton to Locke, Montesquieu, and Madison. She attributes this movement’s development in Protestant societies to an awareness, articulated by Martin Luther, of the corrupt nature of the official Catholic Church. The Reformation and the Wars of Religion were a revolution against kleptocracy. In the Netherlands, for example, mobs destroyed churches and religious symbols of a church seen as fully corrupt, and Chayes terms the perpetrators religious extremists.

The most valuable discussion, though too brief, was Chayes’ prescriptions for tackling corruption using specific categories and summing up the points made throughout. Chief of State and Diplomatic Tools should enunciate an anticorruption policy, avoid high-profile meetings with corrupt leaders, better engage with the populace, support institutions and programs that fight corruption, and avoid encouraging short-term economic wins that profit kleptocrats. Intelligence Tools should analyze how corrupt networks function. Financial System Tools and Legal Tools could track and prosecute or sanction corrupt officials, with increased efforts to seize assets. Aid Tools could reduce opportunities for theft, choosing implementing partners unconnected to the corrupt networks, conditioning funding to avoid benefiting kleptocrats, and supporting honest players. Security Sector Tools could tailor military assistance to avoid alliances of convenience and better analyze corrupt networks. Multilateral Tools echo the above in the international context. Business Tools emphasize business’ role – and interest – in eliminating corruption. Citizen Tools allow average citizens to identify corruption and corrupt players.

Her short Epilogue entitled “Self-Reflection” expresses her belief that misuse of state assets is not limited to the developing world. She sees the financial meltdowns in Ireland and Iceland in the wake of the 2007-2008 global crash

as due to the political elite favoring the financial industry. More controversial is her final point that the Great Recession was itself caused by similar avarice after the ruling class accepted that Wall Street deregulation was the moral goal. The great failure might have been not holding government and business leaders in the U.S. criminally responsible for actions causing the recession.

While I have no genuine criticism of the book, it could have noted to how legal immunity can inhibit prosecution of corruption. Many countries grant elected and appointed officials full immunity from civil suit and criminal prosecution for corrupt acts and even violence. In contrast, in the United States, immunity is limited, with legislators protected while traveling to legislative sessions and for statements made in the legislature, with no immunity for criminal acts.

Ms. Chayes has produced an insightful work that policy-makers and development and national security experts should consider when designing approaches to corrupt regimes. The positive reception to her book suggests she has made a long-term contribution to more fine-tuned discussion of what threatens international security.

Benjamin Dille, Foreign Service Officer (see disclaimer)