

Corruption, Protest and Militancy

A St George's House Consultation

Thursday 25 to Saturday 27 June 2015

Context

The Consultation will explore the various ways in which governmental corruption sparks political protest and militancy, including religious extremism. It will do this through a combination of thematic discussion, focused on current research into emerging analyses of corruption as a socio-political phenomenon, and case studies drawn from around the world. A particular concern is the nexus between corrupt regimes (sustained in part by international aid and military cooperation) and the emergence of extremist political organizations (such as the Taliban and the Islamic State) and manifestations of localised populist mobilisation (such as community groups that hunt witches in Uganda). To put these in context, the Consultation will also examine cases in which corruption has contributed to non-violent political protest, and in which it has led to armed conflict but no organised social movement.

Popular outrage at governmental corruption is a common theme in a number of recent political crises, including uprisings and protests in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Ukraine; the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the dramatic advance of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria, the overthrow of dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt, and the eruption of civil wars in Central African Republic and South Sudan. It has also contributed to an upsurge in local "moral populism"—vigilante mobilisation and local ethnic or sectarian chauvinism—in countries that are otherwise generally stable, such as Uganda. In a number of cases, international actors have found themselves in a situation of guilt by association—decried by local populations for supporting kleptocratic regimes.

Meanwhile, current research into corruption is transforming the understanding of the phenomenon. Rather than seeing corruption as the work of individual "bad apples," guilty of such crimes as bribery, fraud or extortion, analysts are beginning to define it as a functioning system, achieving its core objective with real effectiveness. Such systems are made up of multi-dimensional political-economic relationships associated with different forms of predatory elite governance—which may differ in form and function in different countries. Thus trading of political influence in mature democracies, although often legal, might be considered part of this continuum, which, at the other end of the scale may feature governments



that are in reality little more than criminal organisations bestowed with the label of sovereign legitimacy.

The importance of transnational facilitators and conduits of corruption is also increasingly recognised. Spotlighted practices include profit shifting and facilitating illicit financial flows to secrecy jurisdictions, by transnational corporations and banks. There is also the business model of the international arms manufacturers who rely on government-to-government trade with financial incentives for the individuals and political parties involved at both ends.

These developments demand cogent analysis and effective policy responses. The main question for the Consultation is: how does pervasive corruption in government relate to militancy and radicalism in society? Secondary questions include: what forms of corruption tend to be most politically radicalizing? What other risk factors, in conjunction with corruption, help drive extreme responses? What is the role of international assistance and security cooperation in enabling corruption? What is the best combination of policies that can be adopted to mitigate corruption and its adverse political impacts? Should certain countries be prioritised for concerted policy actions? On the basis of what criteria? These are among the questions we propose to discuss in June. Among the countries we will focus on are Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Uganda and Ukraine.

