

Interview - Sarah Chayes

Written by E-International Relations

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Sarah Chayes is currently a Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in the South Asia and Democracy and Rule of Law Programs. She is the author of the recently published *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security*, as well as *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan After the Taliban*. Prior to her current position, Chayes spent a decade in Afghanistan, first as an NPR reporter covering the fall of the Taliban, then running an NGO founded by President Karzai's brother Qayum; she then launched a manufacturing cooperative, Arghand, that produces skin-care products from local agriculture. In 2009 she became a special advisor to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and in 2010 to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, advising on strategic policy on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Arab Spring.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

It's not primarily the debates that interest me so much as the action. I am seeing an acceleration in initiatives on financial sanctions against corrupt government officials, asset tracing and recovery, and curbing the use of Western financial institutions and property markets by corrupt government officials.

We are still at the very beginnings of this trend, however – the analysis of corrupt governments as sophisticated and successful criminal organizations has still not made enough headway. And we in the West are still a long way from weaning ourselves off of the dirty economy. The false “trade-off,” finally, between addressing corruption or addressing security threats, particularly terrorism, is still too common.

In reality, there's no trade-off. The only way to address these security threats is to address corruption – because corruption has helped fuel most of the serious crises the world has witnessed in the past decade. It swells the ranks of terrorist movements, weakens local opposition to them, facilitates their activities, and hollows out militaries tasked with combatting them. It sparks angry protests that can turn into revolutions, with unknown second- and third-order effects, such as those in the Arab world in 2011 and Ukraine in 2014. It helps turn whole regions, like the Balkans or parts of Latin America, into lethal criminal ganglands. And it exacerbates the impact of severe environmental pressures.

The research that I am most tuned in to has to do with the changing social significance of money, and the way people increasingly value money over other ideals. In this more cultural context, I find the roots both of the financial crisis of 2008 and the intensification of corruption in many parts of the world – which has been triggering extreme reactions of various sorts since right about the same time.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

It's only in the past five years or so that I came to think of acute corruption as a form of tyranny – which can drive responses as violent and extreme as did the monarchical abuses that led to the American or French Revolutions. I have learned a lot about how shameless people can be. And slowly, over the same five years, I have come to make the connection referenced above.

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It's interesting: I was living through one of the most violent years of my decade in Afghanistan in 2008, so I hardly paid attention to the financial crisis. It was only money, after all. What we were experiencing in Kandahar seemed so much more urgent.

But when I got the time, starting in about 2011, I began systematically reading analyses of that disaster. And simultaneously, by way of the research for *Thieves of State*, I was deepening and broadening my understanding of severe corruption in developing countries. And it became clear to me there was a link.

Something devastating happened to the world in the 1980s – a major shift in values that included an explicit exaltation of money unprecedented since the Gilded Age. This new attitude has been undermining other social values, both in the West and in developing countries. The results have been widespread and disastrous – economically, in security terms, but also in terms of the values and principles that structure our societies.

The most significant shifts in my thinking are almost always prompted by conversations with ordinary people on the ground in the countries I visit. But I also convened a three-day workshop with a variety of different experts and practitioners in anti-corruption, and relevant government agencies. That kicked off an intensive period of analysis that sharpened and developed my thinking to a significant extent.

In your book *Thieves of State*, you analyse several countries, particularly Afghanistan, Nigeria, Uzbekistan, Egypt, and Tunisia. How would you describe the corruption in these states? Do you consider these states to be similar and/or markedly different to corruption elsewhere?

The corruption in those five countries is quite representative of corruption in at least thirty countries around the world, including but not limited to: Algeria, Angola, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Brazil, Bulgaria, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, Hungary, Iran, Kenya, Moldova, Morocco, South Africa, Turkey, Venezuela, Uganda, Zambia. The pre-crisis contexts in Iceland, Ireland, and the United States also presented similarities. Every country is unique, but all exemplify three important traits – which are frequently underestimated in the West.

1) Enormous sums of money are in play. In Nigeria, the looting in the oil sector alone has run to upwards of ten billion dollars per year lately, including theft of crude by government officials and non-remittance of oil revenues. Add to that rampant public procurement fraud at every echelon of government and so-called petty bribery, and you're talking a king's ransom.

2) The type of corruption I am talking about is not the work of a few rogue actors filling their own pockets on the margins. Whole governments have become structured around the objective of maximizing private returns to their members. In effect, they are not fragile or failing governments so much as successful criminal organizations. And like most successful criminal organizations these days, they are structured. They should be understood and analyzed as networks that are both horizontally and vertically integrated.

By horizontally integrated, I mean they incorporate government officials, private sector actors such as construction companies or shippers, criminals such as smugglers, and often insurgents. By vertically integrated, I mean that the street-level officials who are extorting bribes from the population usually send a portion of their "take" up the line, in return for protection from repercussions.

Officials repurpose critical elements of state function to serve their objectives and to enforce compliance, meaning the entire machinery of government is profoundly denatured, and people are denied any avenue of recourse.

Such a system selects for criminality, by rewarding corrupt officials and punishing troublemakers. Before long, people are faced with an impossible choice: either they become victims or perpetrators. There is almost no room in between.

3) There is nothing indirect or victimless about this kind of corruption. When a cop pulls you over on a pretext to extract some money, he doesn't do it politely. The exactions are high-handed, humiliating, and often brutal. As a result, people's indignation eventually boils over into violence.

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A key argument in the book is that there is a connection between acute and abusive corruption and dramatic global upheavals such as the revolutions of the “Arab Spring” and the spread of violent extremism. Can you outline how you came to this conclusion?

I watched it happening. I watched Afghans who were completely inoculated against political Islam, having suffered under the Taliban and al-Qaeda for six years, eventually become permeable to their propaganda once more, as they discovered that the government the international community ushered in to replace the Taliban was nothing but a mafia in disguise.

Then in late 2009, I shared my reflections with a multinational group of counternarcotics officers, who clamored that the model I had just sketched of how the Afghan government was functioning perfectly described their countries. And there was an extremist insurgency in every one of them. That’s when I realized the phenomenon I had been witnessing wasn’t just an Afghan peculiarity.

Then came the Arab Spring. A month spent in four different North African countries convinced me that that upheaval was largely an anti-corruption insurrection.

That the corrupt capture of public resources should lead to revolution should come as no surprise to Americans. After all, our own country was founded on a similar principle, and a glance at the notes of the Convention proceedings shows that our Constitution is largely an elaborate corruption-prevention device.

Nor should the fact that militant puritanical religion is another common reaction to acute public corruption surprise Westerners. It was very instructive to me to examine documents from the Protestant Reformation as part of my research for *Thieves of State*. The grievances of the German people, sent in petitions to Rome in the early 16th century, almost mapped the type of grievances I have recorded today. And the doctrinal changes Martin Luther suggested in Christian practice all touched on areas where the Church operated a kind of toll-booth.

The point is that there will always be some who argue that the only remedy for serious lapses in public integrity is a strictly enforced code of personal morality. Even Thomas Jefferson and some of the other framers (the anti-federalists, for the most part) argued that virtue was the only reliable protection against corruption.

On balance, do you believe the West is contributing to the spread or prevention of corruption?

I’m afraid that, to date, the West has contributed to the spread of corruption far more effectively than it has contributed to its prevention. It does this by providing what a colleague of mine calls “corruption services” to corrupt officials (that is, facilitating the transfer, conversion, and enjoyment of corrupt assets), by laundering these criminals’ images as well as their money, by looking the other way when supposedly more important foreign and security policy imperatives are at stake, and by reinforcing the ethos that money equates to virtue.

Given recent elections in several states, such as Afghanistan and those which experienced the “Arab Spring,” do you think the Western emphasis on quick democratic elections may be misplaced?

I do. Elections don’t equal democracy. Most important is the establishment of a robust system of distribution of power and checks and balances, and real avenues of redress for citizens. Once such fundamentals are established, elections might reliably convey the wishes of the majority.

Do you believe that corruption can be stopped with the election of a new leader, as has been suggested with the election of Buhari in Nigeria?

It is clear to me that thoroughgoing reform in countries like the ones listed above cannot happen without the accession of anti-corruption hardliners to the highest state functions. But even such a transformation at the top may not be enough, given how systemic the problem is. Specialized temporary jurisdictions may be required, to work around a contaminated judiciary. The international community must close ranks around a targeted program to hold

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that country's corrupt officials – and their Western enablers – accountable. And finally the population can't just sit back and expect the powers that be to fix everything for them. They must stop conniving with corruption or participating when it suits them. They must stand up to corrupt officials, as a group if possible, even if it means risking the loss of time or worse.

In your first book, *The Punishment of Virtue*, you argue that US policy in Afghanistan was misguided. What lessons do you think the US and others have learned or should learn from the US experience in Afghanistan?

Good governance is a prerequisite to improved security. There is no short cut. If a country presents enough of a security threat to warrant such an intervention, then establishing legitimate and accountable governance must be the first priority.

You spent several years living in Afghanistan, and unlike most westerners, you lived with Afghans. Drawing on this atypical experience, what are your feelings on the impact that the presence of westerners has on development in conflict-affected states, such as Afghanistan?

There is nothing good or bad about such a presence, a priori. But a much deeper understanding of local realities is necessary, and far more care in how resources are deployed. In terms of economic development in particular, a much more granular analysis of implementing partners is required, and the use to which development assistance is truly being put.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Politics?

Get out there, on the ground. And not just for six or nine months. You don't even begin to understand a country for two or three years. Interact as much as possible with ordinary people, not just officials or members of the educated elite.

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This interview was conducted by Jane Kirkpatrick. Jane is an Associate Features Editor of E-IR.