

SYMPOSIUM ON TRUST AND GOVERNANCE INSTITUTIONS: ASIAN EXPERIENCES

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of “social capital” has been one of the mostly discussed topics in the field of social sciences. Putnam (1993: 167) perceived social capital as the most important element for improving the “efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions, and the notion of “trust” is one of the defining features of social capital. In his study, Putnam (1993) was able to demonstrate that the different stocks of social capital can better explain the variations in the level of performance among Italian local governments. It can be argued that “trust” is an important ingredient in the process of governance.

The level of “trust” varies from one culture to another (Fukuyama, 1995). Thus, the relationship between trust and governance institutions in different Asian countries becomes a salient research topic. To address the issue, a group of Asian scholars participated in a conference on December 11-14, 2008, in Puli, Taiwan, hosted by the Department of Public Policy and Administration, National Chi Nan University (Taiwan). This special issue is a collection of the papers presented by the conference participants.

In the first paper, from a comparative basis, Professor Quah tries to explain the difference between Singapore and Philippines in terms of their respective level of trust and governance by focusing on two factors: political leadership and policy context. He concludes that, although the historical evolution of the policy context (e.g., geography, formative experiences, economy, demography and political system) does pose some constraints upon political leaders to govern, it is the effectiveness of political leadership in service delivery and in combating corruption which better explains why the level of trust and governance in Singapore is higher than that in the Philippines.

The evolution of the administrative state also contributes significantly to the level of trust in Hong Kong, which is the topic of the second paper written by Professor Cheung. However, different from Quah’s analysis, the scenario in Hong Kong is that there is a deficit in trust despite governance performance. Hong Kong’s crisis of trust can be attributed to the changing political context after 1997 which has affected the “instrumental/functional trust” and the “integrative/value-oriented trust”. Cheung particularly emphasizes that the lack of “integrative/value-oriented trust” is crucial for the post-1997 HKSAR government to sustain public trust.

In mid-April, 2010, the daily life of Bangkok citizens was paralyzed by anti-government protesters, and citizen trust in the national government was very low. But rather than looking at the government as a whole, Professor Bowornwathana, in the third paper, examines the relationships between government interference, trust, and performance capacity by comparing individual governance institutions in Thailand. Based on the analysis of a questionnaire, his research indicates that trust in governance institutions is positively related to their respective performance capacity, but is

negatively associated with the level of government interference in these governance institutions.

In the forth paper, the central question is how to build and to maintain a political coalition that can minimize corruption in India? The political development in India since 2004 is described and analyzed by Professor Tummala. He observes that the proliferation of parties and the opportunism derived from coalition building have contributed to the increasing political corruption in India. Although implicit, trust in political party and the government is presumably negatively associated with the level of political corruption.

Professor Shih addresses the issues of accountability and transparency in the operation of Taiwan's anti-corruption network. A questionnaire was administered to 34 participants of a focus group in 2007, and the research results indicated that Taiwan citizens' overall trust in the anti-corruption institutions (formal and informal) was not high. To promote and sustain public trust in Taiwan's government, Shih argues that the centers of the anti-corruption network (i.e., the judicial system and the Civil Service Ethics Office, which are also the most trusted anti-corruption institutions) should take effective measures to facilitate the operation of the network.

In the final paper of this special issue, Professor Tjiptoherijanto examines the issues of accountability and transparency in Indonesia by looking at the impacts of its recent political and administration reforms. Particularly, he points out that democratization, decentralization, and openness of information have been initiated to reduce the problem of "trust deficit" in Indonesia. Tjiptoherijanto argues that a transparent mass media and a strong and determined leadership are crucial for the success of the Indonesian reform efforts.

The concept of "trust" has been studied primarily as the dependent variable in this special issue. Except for Bowornwathana, the central concern shared by the other authors is: what factors determine the level of trust in the government as a whole? They have concluded that political leadership and policy/political context are the two most important determinants of trust in government; on the other hand, Shih has suggested that the effectiveness of the anti-corruption network affects public trust in government. However, one relevant question is: what should be the pivotal question if "trust" is treated as the independent variable? More research is needed to explore this aspect of trust so that it is possible to draw a comprehensive picture of the concept according to Asian experiences.

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