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Contents

Editorial: World governance, local government, SDG, strategies, environmental complaints, corruption scandals and reforms

The PAP journal was first published in 1992 and has been published online in open access on the Emerald Insight Platform since 2018. This year marks the 32nd anniversary of its first launch and 7th anniversary of its online publication with Emerald. It now publishes three issues with at least one special issue and around twenty-five articles per year.

PAP has attracted over 160 paper submissions from authors from various countries in 2024. Its articles were widely read and cited all over the world as the monthly download was over 15,000. PAP has obtained the 2023 Journal Impact Factor (JIF) of 1.4 as released by Clarivate, being abstracted and indexed by Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI). The Scopus/WoS Citations were 198 and 106 respectively in 2023 (increased from 152 and 83 in 2022) while the Scopus CiteScore index is of 2.5 (increased from 2.1).

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Academics and practitioners in public administration, management, public policy, and related fields are welcome to contribute papers to this journal.

Summary of articles

This third issue of 2024 consists of eight articles, including the impacts of World Governance Index on Global Peace Index, Indonesian Muslim community's municipal corporation policy with Sustainable Development Goals, local governments' responses to environmental complaints in China, strategies changes in leadership management of the funeral service industry in Hong Kong, authentic strategy of local government agencies in United Arab Emirates, the dilemmas of Bangladesh as a weak state in South Asia, and two papers on corruption scandals and control in the Philippines.

A brief introduction of these articles is given below.

The first article is "The impacts of World Governance Index on Global Peace Index between 2008 and 2022" by Ahmet Keser, Oğuzhan Pehlivan and Yunus Gokmen. While many factors contribute to peace, economic and governmental factors are considered essential litmus tests for determining peace levels. This study examines the impacts of World Governance Index (WGI) variables on the Global Peace Index (GPI). The GPI serves as a key

indicator of peace levels. Data from two databases covering 161 countries from 2008 to 2022 were collected and analyzed by using a logarithmic panel data regression model. According to the Feasible Generalized Least Squares (FGLS) estimators, five WGI components exhibit inverse relationships with the GPI (increasing WGI components leads to a decline in GPI, indicating an enhancement in peace quality). The most significant factor influencing peace is "Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism", while the effects of "Voice and Accountability" and "Control of Corruption" are also noted. Extant studies have largely overlooked the interaction between governance and peace, often relying on regional data (with neighboring countries) or case studies on local solutions. This article evaluates governance quality and its dimensions in relation to peace conditions on a global scale, providing more generalizable results for policymakers and scholars.

The second article on "A text analytics study on the alignment of an Indonesian Muslim community's municipal corporation policy with Sustainable Development Goals" by Fahmi Ali Hudaefi analyses the supervision policy of Municipal Corporations (MCs) in the Indonesian Muslim community regarding its alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As a single case study, purposive sampling was adopted to select a municipal corporation policy issued by Ciamis Regency, West Java, Indonesia. A novel mixed methods approach, combining computer analytics and human intelligence, was adopted to perform text analytics. Text mining identified the most frequently occurring words — municipal corporation, regional, supervisor, regulation — from the sample but found no single word indicating business alignment with SDGs. Further qualitative inductive analysis revealed the critical role of MCs' supervisory boards in business planning, execution, and reporting to align the MC businesses with local SDG initiatives. Aligning MC business activities with local SDG actions is entirely within the authority of supervisory boards which demands transformational leadership. This research pioneered an innovative blend of computer-assisted techniques and human reasoning to investigate the supervision policies of MCs concerning local SDG actions, with evidence from a Muslim community in Indonesia.

The third article is "The effects of conflicting economic and environmental goals on local governments' responses to citizens' complaints: evidence from China" by Xinghua Zhao and Zheng Cheng. It examines how local governments' responses to citizens' complaints about environment issues are affected when the complaints involve conflicting goals, particularly economic versus environmental goals. Focusing on the responsiveness of provincial governments to citizen environmental complaints on the Local Leader Message Board (LLMB) in China, this study collected 125,364 complaints lodged by citizens from 2013 to 2021. The results indicate that provincial governments prioritize citizens' complaints across different types of issues. However, complaints embodying conflicting goals related to environmental issues are less likely to get a response. The impact of conflicting goals on government responsiveness is dynamic, with the likelihood of provincial governments responding to conflicting complaints initially increasing and then decreasing as economic dependence on industries rises. The findings enrich the understanding of the consequences of conflicting goals by highlighting their potential as a mechanism to explain the strategic reactions of governments to citizens.

The fourth article is "Strategic changes in talent development and leadership management in the funeral service industry in Hong Kong" by Alan Leung, Yui-yip Lau and Stephanie W. Lee. It identifies the strategic changes and explores the solutions for talent development and leadership management to address the challenges faced by the funeral service industry in Hong Kong. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven key personnel (funeral director, salesperson, coffin shop owner, and mortuary transporter) engaged in the funeral service industry in Hong Kong. Thematic coding was used to identify and organize emerging themes from the data. Four themes were identified: (1) Perception of the funeral service industry in Hong Kong; (2) Recruitment, retention, and talent development; (3) Prospects of the funeral service industry in Hong Kong; and (4) Other novel challenges. The findings reveal that the industry is facing radical challenges in modern times. A death-denying attitude is

observed, which has severely undermined the study of the funeral service industry. Strategic changes in talent development and leadership management are required.

The fifth article on "Measuring authentic strategy in local government agencies in the United Arab Emirates" by Naceur Jabnoun develops an instrument for measuring authentic strategy and evaluates the adoption of its dimensions by the local government agencies in the Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah (RAK) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The dimensions of authentic strategy are identified using factor analysis. Cronbach alpha coefficient and multiple linear regression are adopted to examine the reliability and predictive validity of the instrument. One-sided and one-way ANOVA are used to assess the adoption levels of the dimensions of authentic strategy. Three dimensions of authentic strategy are identified: (a) strategy uniqueness; (b) leadership commitment and stakeholders' management; and (c) implementation. The results show that RAK local government agencies have adopted all three dimensions. There were no significant differences between the levels of adoption of the three dimensions of authentic strategy. The instrument can serve as an effective self-assessment tool for organizations aiming at developing genuine strategies and improving outcomes. This article adds to the limited literature on strategy within the Arab public sector by analyzing strategy practices in the UAE.

The sixth article is "The dilemmas of Bangladesh as a weak state in South Asia" by Md Abul Hasan. The complex environment of regional and extra-regional politics in South Asia renders the region more susceptible to economically and militarily weaker states. This article investigates the challenges and dilemmas encountered by Bangladesh due to the rapidly changing geopolitical dynamics and global political and economic upheavals. Through literature review, in-depth interviews, media reports and dialogues, four key factors are identified: (a) Bangladesh's significance to major powers has increased; (b) it confronts many obstacles hindering its pursuit of a purely non-aligned foreign policy due to its strategic importance to these powers; (c) its internal factors including political turbulence, corruption, and fragile external relations, have been detrimental; and (d) the intensification of key powers' influence has constrained its autonomy. This study underscores that weak institutions, least regional integration, and limited cooperation among states have compromised the autonomy of weak states like Bangladesh in South Asia. There is a need for unity and collaboration among these nations to address dilemmas in the interest of their national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and regional stability.

The seventh article on "Strong presidents and grand corruption scandals in the Philippines" by Eric V.C. Batalla provides evidence from the Philippines that strong presidents have failed to address systemic corruption despite their anti-corruption rhetoric and promises. This case study analyzes how strong presidents have dealt with the problem of corruption in the Philippines and to examine their handling of grand corruption scandals. Data were collected from court decisions, congressional reports, news reports, journal articles, and other academic publications. There are two major findings. First, none of the strong presidents were able to build the social and political foundations for anti-corruption reform. Second, in dealing with corruption scandals, the strong presidents observed selective persecution and particularistic concealment (cover-ups) instead of allowing the rule of law to prevail. These findings dismiss the idea of the sufficiency of strong presidents, some of whom project the possession of the political will necessary to combat corruption in the country. While the need for strong leaders has been emphasized in the anti-corruption literature, this article argues that such leaders do not necessarily add to the political commitment needed to fight systemic corruption or even lay the political, institutional, and social foundations for reform. Strong presidents in the weak Philippine state are powerless against the institutions and culture that encourage and tolerate grand corruption.

The eighth article on "Essential lessons from an unpromising source: what reformers can learn from the Philippines on corruption control" by Michael Johnston investigates the corruption control in the Republic of the Philippines. Dramatic "people power" episodes have occurred, but populism has also, at times, led to repression. Essential reform lessons are

available. This article is a conceptual reassessment of corruption control in the Philippines. Central concerns include the types of corruption experienced in the country, incentives that might sustain collective action, the need to measure both corruption and reform, and linking reform to citizens' quality of life. Top-down, whole-country approaches to reform often treat corruption as if it were the same everywhere, thereby emphasizing "best practices". However, that can be misleading: a best practice in one society might be irrelevant, impossible, or harmful in another. The author advocates that contemporary reformers must carefully examine the historical, social, economic, and political contexts, as well as the consequences of corruption. Groups and activities seemingly unrelated to corruption control can prove essential. Reformers must fight corruption with people, not for them. The ultimate goal of reform must be justice: redressing imbalances of power while building social and political trust.

I wish to thank all the authors for contributing their papers to this issue and the reviewers for their critical but constructive comments in helping the authors to improve their papers. Finally, I thank Emerald and our editorial team as well as the members of both Asia Pacific Editorial Board and International Editorial Advisory Board for their contributions in making the successful publication of this issue possible. We hope these papers will enhance the understanding of various issues on world governance, local government, SDG, strategies, environmental complaints, corruption scandals and reforms across Asia and worldwide.

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About the Editor-in-Chief
Professor Peter K.W. Fong, PhD (New York University), is President of Hong Kong Public Administration Association and Editor-in-Chief of PAP Journal. He teaches strategic management and supervises DBA students' dissertations of the University of Wales TSD. He also serves as Principal Consultant of the International Chamber of Sustainable Development and holds memberships of HK Institute of Planners & Planning Institute Australia. He was a Teaching Fellow of Judge Business School, University of Cambridge; Visiting Scholar, MIT; Founding Director of EMBA programme, HKU Business School; Associate Professor, Department of Urban Planning and Urban Design, HKU; Executive Vice President of City University of Macau; Honorary Professor, China Training Centre for Senior Civil Servants in Beijing; Studies Director, Civil Service Training & Development Institute, HKSAR Government. He was appointed as Advisory/Visiting Professors by Tongji, Tsinghua, Renmin, and Tianjin universities in Mainland China, Chinese University of HK and HK Polytechnic University, and Consultants, the World Bank and Delta Asia Bank. Peter K.W. Fong can be contacted at: fongpeter@netvigator.com

The impacts of World Governance Index on Global Peace Index between 2008 and 2022

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Abstract

Purpose – While many factors contribute to peace, economic and governmental factors are considered essential litmus tests for determining peace levels. This study aims to examine the impacts of World Governance Index (WGI) variables on the Global Peace Index (GPI) which ranges from 0 (very high) to 5 (very low).

Design/methodology/approach – The GPI serves as a key indicator of peace levels. Valid data from two databases covering 161 countries from 2008 to 2022 were collected and analyzed by using a logarithmic panel data regression model. This approach ensures robust results, particularly when endogenous and exogenous variables have different measurement units.

Findings – According to the Feasible Generalized Least Squares (FGLS) estimators, five WGI components exhibit inverse relationships with the GPI (increasing WGI components leads to a decline in GPI, indicating an enhancement in peace quality). The most significant factor influencing peace is "Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism", while the effects of "Voice and Accountability" and "Control of Corruption" are also noted.

Originality/value – Extant studies have largely overlooked the interaction between governance and peace, often relying on regional data (with neighboring countries) or case studies on local solutions. This paper, based on data from 161 countries, evaluates governance quality and its dimensions in relation to peace conditions on a global scale, providing more generalizable results for policymakers and scholars.

Keywords Governance, Governance indicators, Peace, Public policy, World Governance Index, Global Peace Index, Panel data analysis

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

At first glance, peace seems the opposite of conflict. However, they can coexist within a state. For instance, while conflicts occur in some regions, others may experience significant peace, as seen in Darfur/Sudan (2003-2006) and Burundi (2005-2014). Thus, peace cannot be defined solely as the absence of conflict or the presence of collaboration (Campbell *et al.*, 2017). The literature distinguishes these as negative and positive peace, concepts debated since the 1960s (Galtung, 1969). According to Galtung (1996), negative peace, the absence of conflict, is quantifiable, indicating whether there is conflict, and serves as a basis for understanding

positive peace, characterized by cooperation. The negative peace approach is more suitable for measuring peace systematically as it assesses the absence of violence and links it to cultural and organizational factors.

Peace, in general, spans various domains. Kodila-Tedika (2012) identified three key determinants: a sound business environment, effective governance, and equitable resource distribution. The term "governance" indicates the system by which an entity is directed and controlled. This definition is derived from a study by McGrath and Whitty (2015). They ignore the conventional approach and consider other theories to construct corporate and comprehensive deliberation. Saito (2021) argued that good governance addresses societal tensions and fosters peace. Cutcu et al. (2023) emphasized the need for research across disciplines, better management, and effective policies to create a peaceful world.

Most literature on governance and peace is cross-sectional, focusing on specific years, but governance impacts peace in the long-term. Many studies use regional data and local solutions, though global interconnections exist in financial and legal matters. Several factors influence peace, including political structures, functional governments, economic welfare, and sociological and psychological well-being.

Many phenomena can be attributed to the presence or absence of peace. One factor is the political structure of nations. Another is the presence of a well-functioning government. A country's welfare indicates an effective economy and market. The sociological and psychological pulse, which can trigger feelings of safety and security amongst the people living in the country, should also be assessed accordingly.

Conventional peace evaluations often overlook good public governance and focus solely on the absence of conflict, which is considered a significant flaw (Firchow and Ginty, 2017). Another issue is the lack of longitudinal data for a comprehensive understanding (Cortright et al., 2017). This study addresses these gaps by analyzing global data from 2008 to 2022 to offer universal suggestions. The year of 2008 was chosen as the starting point because of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), the most severe worldwide economic disruption since the Great Depression. Every financial crisis has consistently hampered the order of governance. The reason why 2022 was selected as the ending year is that the current WGI data covers the period until 2022. Thus, in this study, the authors intend to fill the gap and analyze worldwide data covering the period 2008-2022 to provide universal suggestions.

The first part of the study provides a theoretical framework for governance quality, examining WGI components and their relation to peace. It also briefly explains WGI and GPI. The next part covers the hypotheses of the study within this framework. The methodology is discussed in the subsequent section, followed by the findings, discussion and conclusion.

Conceptual framework

Good governance is essential for sustainable development and improving citizens' quality of life. Keser et al. (2022) argued that countries cannot achieve human development without good governance. Governance includes rules and regulations, responsibility, accountability, fairness, transparency, and effectiveness. Global challenges, such as epidemiological diseases, climate change, war, and population movements, strain governance systems worldwide (Liu et al., 2022). To address these issues, scholars and policymakers work to enhance various aspects of governance. Bornemann and Christen (2019) suggested that public administrations play a central role in sustainable governance, given their importance in policymaking and implementation.

At this point, the question arises: What are the main types of governance expected to adjust their mechanisms? Kaufmann et al. (2010) identified three main types: political, economic, and institutional governance. Tusalem (2015) added that governance comprises four components: regulation quality, political stability, corruption control, and the rule of law.

While defining the quality of governance is challenging, scholars often divide it into two main parts: the economy and the quality of governance. The first part emphasizes economic performance as the root of good governance (Acemoglu and Johnson, 2005). The second part highlights the social roles of states, viewing the quality of public services and effective bureaucracy as critical contributors to governance quality (Kurtz and Schrank, 2007).

Rodrik (1997) argued that conflicts, as latent frictions within communities, diminish economic and governance performance. Bolaji (2010) asserted that good governance ensures stability and discourages political instability, criminality, corruption, and other security threats. Similarly, Fayissa and Nsiah (2010) found that good governance positively impacts growth and peace. Norris (2012) stated that all governance dimensions are crucial for fostering peace. In "Why Nations Fail", Acemoglu and Robinson (2013) argued that regulation and governmental institutions are vital to promoting innovation, growth, and peace.

Adegbami and Adepoju (2017) revealed that Nigeria's governance deficiencies have led to poverty, crime, unemployment, insurgent activities, internal violence, disease, and loss of life and property, causing underdevelopment. They recommend good governance, peace, stability, and development to resolve these conflicts.

Researchers often use the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) due to their broad applicability and measurability (Langbein and Knack, 2010). The WGI provides comprehensive and individual governance indicators for over 200 countries and territories from 1996 to 2022, covering six dimensions: voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. The WGI compiles data from over 30 sources, reflecting the perspectives of citizens, business leaders, and experts from public, private, and NGO sectors globally (The World Bank, 2022). Figure 1 illustrates the WGI indicators, their definitions (Asongu *et al.*, 2019), and this study's research model.

Global Peace Index (GPI), the dependent variable of the research, has been constructed from 23 indicators. The indicators are in three main categories: (1) continuing local, national, and international conflict, (2) welfare and security in society, and (3) militarization. Another categorization used in GPI is internal peace (a weight of 60 percent) versus external peace (a weight of 40 percent), which was agreed on by the decisive panel because a more considerable level of internal peace is probably to usher (IEP, 2011). So, GPI data is used to indicate peace.

Hypotheses

After briefly explaining WGI and GPI, we will examine each variable and define the hypotheses for the WGI variables in this section. Voice and accountability refer to citizens' freedom in choosing their government and expressing themselves freely, whether criticizing or praising governance quality. This also involves securing human rights and creating a political environment for a better future. According to IEP (2011), a statistically significant negative Pearson correlation coefficient (at the level $\alpha=0.05$), which is a statistical measure of the relationship between two variables and ranges from $+1$ for a high positive correlation to -1 for a high negative correlation, and 0 for no correlation between variables, exists between WGI and GPI indicators(VA, PSAVT, GE, EQ, RL, and CC) ranging from -0.645 to -0.843, covering 153 countries dataset of 2010 using the equation of $r_{xy} = \frac{cov(x,y)}{SD_x \times SD_y}$ (Schober *et al.*, 2018). In a nutshell, the "voice and accountability" dimension is expected to correlate with the peace index in a different direction, and it is thought to be one of the essential indicators for governance quality and peace. Thus, the first hypothesis for this paper is articulated as follows:

   H_1: *"Voice and Accountability" has a statistically negative impact on GPI (Increasing "Voice and Accountability" decreases the GPI value, expressing a better indicator of peace).*
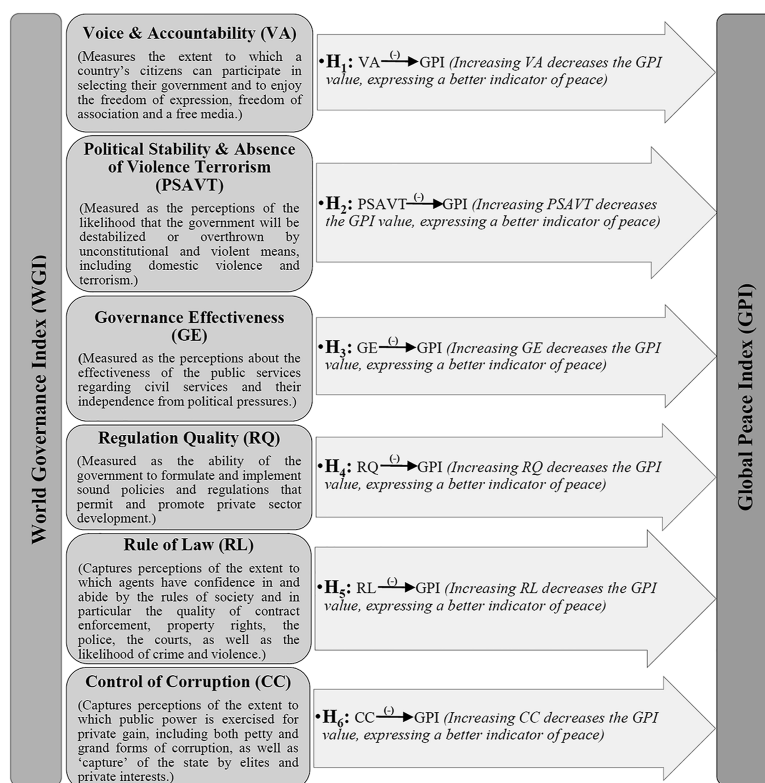
Source: By authors

Political stability serves as a crucial factor in reducing conflicts stemming from terrorism, internal violence, war, insurgency, and riots. Governments utilize various tools to mitigate these hazards, and political stability enables effective use of these measures. Stokke (2009) analyzed the peace process in Sri Lanka, suggesting that a shift from political stability to instability can weaken state power and trigger conflicts. Amavilah *et al.* (2014) asserted that peace and political stability are positively correlated within governance frameworks. Therefore, political stability is expected to directly correlate with peace and have a lasting impact on stabilizing peace-related issues. As discussed earlier, the second hypothesis is as follows:

H_2: *"Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism" has a statistically negative impact on GPI (Increasing "Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism" decreases the GPI value, expressing a better indicator of peace).*

Jorgensen (2008) proposed that implementing political will, military enforcement, and economic integration effectively transformed a failed state into a peaceful and prosperous community. Another study (IEP, 2011) highlighted that the quality of civil and public services, policy information, and government commitments to these policies, indicators of government effectiveness, strongly correlate with peace. Iheonu *et al.* (2021) demonstrated that government effectiveness enhances peace even under challenging conditions. Therefore, the third hypothesis of the study is:

H_3: *"Government Effectiveness" has a statistically negative impact on GPI (Increasing "Government Effectiveness" decreases the GPI value, expressing a better indicator of peace).*

In a globalized world, the growth and success of businesses are pivotal factors impacting every sector, from military expenditures to the food supply chain. Government regulations significantly influence trade volume, economic strength, military capabilities, and political stability. Brown *et al.* (2009) demonstrated that regulation quality correlates with GPI. Similarly, Iheonu *et al.* (2021) found that regulatory quality enhances peace, especially in regions with minimal peace levels. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis of the study is:

H_4: *"Regulation Quality" has a statistically negative impact on GPI (Increasing "Regulation Quality" decreases the GPI value, expressing a better indicator of peace).*

The rule of law is crucial in upholding human rights and governance quality, essential for human dignity. It ensures accountability across public and private sectors and enhances government credibility. Brown *et al.* (2009) demonstrated a correlation between the rule of law and GPI. Despite its complex nature, Haggard and Tiede (2011) found that this indicator correlates with other WGI indicators, consistent across highly industrialized and developing countries. Baris *et al.* (2021) concluded that the rule of law, as a governance indicator, fosters business confidence and prosperity, indicating an indirect relationship with peace. Day and Caus (2021) noted that a strong rule of law reduces corruption and increases impartiality in governance and courts. Protecting all individuals within a country underscores the importance of the rule of law. This leads to the fifth hypothesis of this study:

H_5: *"Rule of Law" has a statistically negative impact on GPI (Increasing "Rule of Law" decreases the GPI value, expressing a better indicator of peace).*

Economic disruptions can swiftly permeate through other public and private sectors. In an organic ontological analogy, like removing a diseased cell to prevent its spread, corruption can be likened to a disease within a body. Left unchecked, it can severely undermine governance quality. Cammett and Malesky (2012) argued that good governance effectively reduces corruption, increases citizen satisfaction, reduces conflicts, and fosters a peaceful environment within the country. Iheonu *et al.* (2021) also found that controlling corruption enhances peace, particularly in regions where peace levels are at their lowest.

Reducing corruption enhances governance credibility, instills greater confidence in the future among people, prevents financial leakage, and creates more secure and livable environments. The final hypothesis is based on the outcomes derived from the theoretical framework discussed earlier and stated as follows:

H_6: *"Control of Corruption" has a statistically negative impact on GPI (Increasing "Rule of Law" decreases the GPI value, expressing a better indicator of peace).*

Methods and materials
In this study, the authors collected data from two databases available on official websites: Global Peace Index (Institute for Economics & Peace - https://www.economicsandpeace.org/) and World Governance Index (The World Bank - https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/worldwide-governance-indicators), to test the hypotheses. Due to data limitations for some countries, valid data intersecting between 2008 and 2022 were gathered for 161 countries.

As previously mentioned, the Global Peace Index (GPI) comprises 23 indicators initially selected by experts and reviewed annually by an expert panel. Each indicator's scores are normalized on a scale of 1-5. GPI data were obtained from the official website of the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP, 2022).

On the other hand, the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), supported financially by the Knowledge for Change Program of the World Bank, provide aggregate and individual governance indicators (percentile ranks from 0 to 100) for over 200 countries/territories spanning from 1996 to 2022. The WGI covers six dimensions of governance: voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. Data for these six components are sourced from over 30 different institutions and organizations. WGI data can be accessed from its official website (The World Bank, 2022).

For a detailed examination of our dataset structure, definitions, and summary statistics, refer to Table 1.

In the investigation, to test our hypotheses and explore the explanatory power and impact of exogenous variables on the endogenous variable (GPI), we conducted panel data regression analysis for 161 countries from 2008 to 2022. Our approach follows explanatory modeling principles (Shmueli, 2010), focusing on minimizing deviations to present the underlying theory accurately. We proposed a logarithmic panel data regression model to achieve our objectives, ensuring robust results. It is mainly recommended when endogenous and exogenous variables have different measurement units, as suggested by Wooldridge (2013:192). The logarithmic panel data regression model is represented as Equation 1.

$$\ln GPI_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 lnVA_{it} + \beta_2 lnPSAVT_{it} + \beta_3 lnGE_{it} + \beta_4 lnRQ_{it} + \beta_5 lnRL_{it} + \beta_6 lnCC_{it} + u_{it} \quad (1)$$

$lnGPI_{it}$: The natural logarithm GPI score of ith country relevant to t^{th} year related to 2008-2022.

$lnVA_{it}$: The natural logarithm VA score of ith country relevant to t^{th} year related to 2008-2022.

$lnPSAVT_{it}$: The natural logarithm PSAVT score of ith country relevant to t^{th} year related to 2008-2022.

$lnGE_{it}$: The natural logarithm GE score of ith country relevant to t^{th} year related to 2008-2022.

Variable	Abbr.	Source	Unit of Measurement	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Global Peace Index	GPI	The Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP, 2022)	Index Value (0-5)	1.093	3.648	2.061	0.462
Voice and Accountability	VA	World Bank (WB, 2022)	Index Rank Value (0-100)	0.000	100.000	44.374	28.662
Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism	PSAVT			0.000	99.528	41.887	26.298
Government Effectiveness	GE			0.000	100.000	46.493	28.968
Regulatory Quality	RQ			0.000	100.000	47.445	29.104
Rule of Law	RL			0.000	100.000	44.667	29.003
Control of Corruption	CC			0.000	100.000	44.284	29.051
Period			2008-2022				
Number of Years (T)			15				
Countries (N)			161				
Total Observation			16,905				

Sources: By authors

$lnRQ_{it}$: *The natural logarithm RQ score of ith country relevant to t^{th} year related to 2008-2022.*

$lnRL_{it}$: *The natural logarithm RL score of ith country relevant to t^{th} year related to 2008-2022.*

$lnCC_{it}$: *The natural logarithm CC score of ith country relevant to t^{th} year related to 2008-2022.*

u_{it} : *is the error term of the models.*

Econometric analysis
Researchers have commonly utilized panel data analysis for the last two decades. The main form of panel data regression diverges from a standard cross-section/ time-series regression with a dual subscript, as expressed in Equation 2 (Baltagi, 2005).

$$y_{it} = \alpha + X'_{it}\beta + u_{it} \qquad i = 1, ..., N; \ t = 1, ..., T \tag{2}$$

In this equation, i denotes firms, countries, families, etc., and t expresses time. Here i sub-index indicates the dimension of the cross-section, while t demonstrates the dimension of the time series. α is a scalar, β is $K \times 1$, X_{it} is the it^{th} observation of K exogenous variables, and u_{it} is an error term. Before applying panel data regression, all series in the panel regression model should be checked by performing a unit root test for the panel regression model. Thus, we employ panel unit root tests for all series in the next section.

Panel Unit Root Test
As a rule of thumb for panel data models, the unit root test of the panel data models should first be employed to detect whether the variables concerning them are stable. If variables in the models are non-stationary, spurious regressions relevant to the analysis may be induced (Baltagi, 2005). Two kinds of panel unit root tests have been extensively used in the literature. If the permanent parameters of the model are widespread over the cross-section, then this process is designated as a common unit root test. A common unit root process (LLC) improved by Levin *et al.* (2002) utilized this assumption. Conversely, if the permanent parameters freely act over the cross-section, the kind of process is denominated as a process of the individual unit root. IPS, Fisher-ADF, and Fisher-PP tests are designed depending on this form (Im *et al.*, 2003). Scrutiny of the results of these unit root tests [Common Unit Root Test (LLC) and Individual Unit Root Tests (IPS, Fisher-ADF, and Fisher-PP) with automatic lag length selection-based Schwarz information criterion (SIC), Newey-West automatic bandwidth selection, and Quadratic Spectral kernel] reveals that whole variables in the models are stable (stationary) in the level form at the significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. Thus, we may perform panel data regression analysis for the model stated in Equation 1.

Model estimation and results
To find the proper model, it is advised to fit the model for the panel data after controlling whether multicollinearity makes the regression coefficients more unstable by increasing their variance. This creates problems in interpreting the coefficients (Keith, 2015). As checking the VIF scores (lnRL=10.444, lnCC=6.990, lnGE=6.878, lnRQ=6.794, lnVA=2.857, and lnPSAVT=2.126) of the independent variables, the VIF score of lnRL is higher than threshold value (VIF<10) suggested by Marquardt (1980), Belsley (1991), Weisberg (2005), Shrestha (2020). It means that the model contains a multicollinearity problem. Hence, we omitted the independent variable (lnRL) with the highest VIF value from the model recommended in the first phase by Hair *et al.* (2014) to remedy the multicollinearity. The final version of the model is expressed in Equation 3.

$$\ln GPI_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 lnVA_{it} + \beta_2 lnPSAVT_{it} + \beta_3 lnGE_{it} + \beta_4 lnRQ_{it} + \beta_5 lnCC_{it} + u_{it} \quad (3)$$

For determining the most suitable technique, the assumption of residuals (autocorrelation, normality, homoscedasticity, etc.) should be checked by suitable statistic tests for the panel regression model expressed in Equations 3. The EViews 10.0 and Stata 16.0 statistical package is used to compute these statistic tests. When controlling the assumption of residuals in the panel regression model, it is found that there are violations concerning the assumption of autocorrelation (*LBI Test* =0.780 / *p=0.000<α=0.05*) (Baltagi and Wu, 1999), cross-sectional dependence (*CD= 8.490 / p=0.000<α=0.05*) (Pesaran, 2004), and heteroscedasticity *(Modified Wald Statistic (χ2)= 6505.24 / p=0.000<0.05)* (Baum, 2001) in the regression model. Thus, we compute the Feasible Generalized Least Squares (FGLS) estimators, which estimate the covariance matrix and coefficients of a multiple linear regression model when nonspherical innovations are present but the covariance matrix is unknown, as recommended by Hansen (2007) and Bai *et al.* (2021) as more effective than the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) in case of the problems of serial and cross-sectional correlations (cross-sectional dependence), and heteroskedasticity problems. The panel regression model (FGLS) results are indicated extensively in Table 2.

In Table 2, all coefficients of the independent variables in the model are significant in the reverse direction according to the estimation results of FGLS with a significance level of 5 percent. It can be inferred that all the specifications for the model are appropriate, and the signs of all coefficients comply with our theory. According to the literature in the previous sections, our prospect for endogenous/exogenous variables is that the greater the increase in exogenous variables, the more significant the decline in endogenous variables in the proposed model. Looking at the magnitude of the significant coefficients in the FGLS model, it can be easily expressed that the three most effective exogenous variables are lnPSAVT (b_i= -0.0500), lnVA (b_i= -0.0258), and lnCC (b_i= -0.0189) respectively, since the model is a logarithmic panel data regression. The results of the association between endogenous and exogenous variables related to our hypotheses are illustrated in Table 3.

Findings and discussion

Significantly, good governance can be viewed as the foundation for peace-building and maintenance. The detrimental effects of poor governance quality represent a primary threat to peace. Indeed, at the conclusion of the statistical analysis presented in this study (as shown in Table 2), correlations between WGI and GPI are observed in a reverse direction. These results are consistent with those found in Table 4. Therefore, the findings of this study align with previous research.

As stated in the first hypothesis of the theoretical framework, voice and accountability enable people to express themselves and engage freely through various media platforms. The analysis confirms that these findings align with the theory: individuals who believe they have a role in selecting their government tend to experience greater societal peace. Conversely, lack of involvement can lead to feelings of exclusion, contributing to societal structural challenges. As emphasized in sociology's structure-agency dichotomy (Jessop, 1996), societal structures and individual agency influence each other reciprocally; neither can be fully understood in isolation. Achieving a peaceful governance environment requires converging societal structure and personal agency in common goals.

As a result of the analysis of the second hypothesis, it is evident that political stability and the absence of violence/terrorism are paramount for peace. Giddens (1984) emphasizes "ontological security", a stable sense of existence derived from predictability in life events, which individuals and states seek. Mitzen (2006) expands this to include states' pursuit of ontological security alongside physical security, preferring manageable conflicts over

DV	T	N	TO	Wald Test		IDV	Unstandardized Coefficients (b_i)	z	p	Collinearity Statistics	
				$\chi 2$	p					Tol.	VIF
lnGPI	15	161	16,905	2557.98	0.000[*]	Constant	1.5429	165.12	0.000[*]		
						lnVA	-0.0258	-9.51	0.000[*]	0.351[♣]	2.847[♣]
						lnPSAVT	-0.0500	-20.59	0.000[*]	0.499[♣]	2.005[♣]
						lnGE	-0.0189	-5.95	0.000[*]	0.160[♣]	6.243[♣]
						lnRQ	-0.0131	-4.55	0.000[*]	0.170[♣]	5.869[♣]
						lnCC	-0.0186	-6.91	0.000[*]	0.188[♣]	5.315[♣]

Source: By authors
DV: Dependent Variable, T: Number of years, N: Number of countries, TO: Total observations, and IDV: Independent Variable.
(*) : The test values are significant at $\alpha = 0.05$.
(♣) : Since the tolerance value >0.1 and VIF<10, it can be deduced that the model does not contain a multicollinearity problem (Hair *et al.*, 2014).

Hyp. ID	Hypothesis	Accepted /Rejected	Statement
H_1	VA —(-)→ GPI *(Increasing VA decreases the GPI value, expressing a better indicator of peace)*	*Accepted*	The signs of coefficients of independent variables (lnVA, lnPSAVT, lnGE, and lnRQ) are negative and significant in the FGLS model.
H_2	PSAVT —(-)→ GPI *(Increasing PSAVT decreases the GPI value, expressing a better indicator of peace)*	*Accepted*	
H_3	GE —(-)→ GPI *(Increasing GE decreases the GPI value, expressing a better indicator of peace)*	*Accepted*	
H_4	RQ —(-)→ GPI *(Increasing RQ decreases the GPI value, expressing a better indicator of peace)*	*Accepted*	
H_5	RL —(-)→ GPI *(Increasing RL decreases the GPI value, expressing a better indicator of peace)*	***Rejected***	Since the VIF score of lnRL is higher than the threshold value (VIF<10), we omitted the lnRL variable from the model.
H_6	CC —(-)→ GPI *(Increasing CC decreases the GPI value, expressing a better indicator of peace)*	*Accepted*	The sign of the coefficient of lnCC is negative and significant in the FGLS model.

Source: By authors

Table 3.
The Results of
Hypotheses

Reference of the Study	Method	Findings
IEP (2011)	Correlation Analysis	The authors found a statistically significant and negative correlation between GPI and all WGI (VA, PSAVT, GE, RQ, RL, and CC).
Nadeem *et al.* (2020)	Unit Root Tests & ARDL Approach	The authors found that VA correlate negatively with terrorism and positively with peace.
Iheonu *et al.* (2021)	The Ordinary Least Square (OLS), the Tobit regression, and the Quantile Regression (QR)	The authors found that GE increases peace, where the preliminary level of peace is at its lowest level.
Fisher *et al.* (2021)	Linear Regression	The authors found that RG is highly correlated with sustainability rather than peace.
Deyshappriya (2015)	Linear Regression	The author found that the lack of CC negatively affects the per capita economic growth, while peace stimulates the economic growth of the tested countries.
Nguyen *et al.* (2021)	Fixed-Effects Regression	The authors found that better GE and public administration benefit peace and prosperity.
Our Study	*Feasible Generalized Least Squares (FGLS)*	*We found that the effects of independent variables [five WGI (VA, PSAVT, GE, RQ, and CC]] on the dependent variable (GPI) are statistically negative and significant, with a significance level of 5%.*

Source: By authors

Table 4.
The Comparative
Analysis

intractable ones, akin to the adage "The wise warrior avoids the battle" (Tzu, 2012). Nadeem *et al.* (2020) corroborate these findings, highlighting three negative impacts of terrorism on peace: economic inequality, social division, and institutional inefficacy.

The third hypothesis analyzes the impact of government effectiveness (GE) on the peace index, and the findings support the theoretical framework. For example, Iheonu *et al.* (2021)

worked in 43 African countries and found that government effectiveness increases peace where the preliminary level is at its lowest level. GE was considered the penultimate least effective compared to the other five components. In today's world, governments generally prefer civil services over public services. By doing this, the possible political pressures on the civil services have decreased. There might be two reasons why this indicator is less effective. First, this effect is felt more strongly in establishments, firms, and facilities than in people. Second, the globalization of the world mitigates the impact of this indicator. Amavilah et al. (2017) also articulated that globalization has positive and negative effects on peace and stability. As a result, even though government effectiveness is one of the components of WGI, its impact on peace seems to have minor significance. Therefore, we assume that governance effectiveness's impact on peace is indirect, and this mediate relation probably lessens the correlation.

In this research, regulation quality was detected as *the least significant indicator* of WGI on GPI. People do not consider the permission and promotion of private sector development in a state to be peace suppliers. The community's real idea about peace is to feel secure. From this perspective, a country's economic regulations, whether directed in a liberal or non-liberal way, have little importance in peace. Peace is enthusiasm and feeling; quantitative rather than qualitative measures will give additional value to actualize an unconflicted environment. In a nutshell, money is not the needed tool for peace. Fisher et al. (2021) found the same results. According to them, regulation quality is highly correlated with sustainability rather than peace.

The hypothesis regarding the Rule of Law was rejected because we omitted the RL variable to remedy the multicollinearity issue. In the long run, relatively well-ordered societies should aim to integrate outlaw states and burdened societies into the culture of well-ordered peoples. It generally allows them to sustain national stability and legal order. However, the intertwined relations of RL with the other variables are the primary catalyst that leverages the interdependence. Therefore, claiming that RL does not impact peace should not be an accurate assumption.

In another study, Keser and Gökmen (2017) assessed that an improved governance mechanism with all its prerequisites, including control of corruption, is a sin qua non-necessity for any nation-state's prospective high human development level. Even though economic variables seem less effective in ensuring peace, people are still against corruption and favor governmental action on this issue. Corruption is not only a leakage in the monetary system but is also regarded as an attack on the community's property rights. Deyshappriya (2015) studied the Corruption Perception Index and Global Peace Index introduced by Transparency International and the Institute for Economics and Peace and found that while good governance prevents corruption, it secures peace. These results also coincide with the findings of the research conducted by Nguyen et al. (2021), which concluded that poverty decreases significantly due to the inequality-reducing effect and income-increasing effect of better governance. So, the research results indicate that "poverty is highly sensitive to governance and public administration". Similarly, Cutcu and Keser (2024) argued that a good level of democracy supports the level of governance and the accumulation of foreign capital and economic performance. Consequently, these favorable conditions might pave the way for sustainable development.

In a nutshell, this study contributes to three main areas of literature. First, the findings support the studies of Nadeem et al. (2020) and Fisher et al. (2021). Secondly, it has investigated the relationship between all components of WGI and GPI in a relatively broad scope. This study is also one of the few examining the impacts of all WGI components on peace. Finally, the findings indicate that all WGI variables correlate with GPI in the context of peace. The data sets have some limitations. As explained before, there are 161 common countries in the WGI and the GPI covering 2008-2022 due to the lack of valid data for some nations. The sample size is statistically adequate. In the future, the number of countries can be increased in further studies.

Conclusion

To conclude, while the disputes between international humanitarian law scholars and military thinkers regarding to the reasons for fighting and the rules that govern conflicts are ongoing, the findings of this study indicate that if the states desire peace, they must be prepared to use military and police instruments to secure it. The results concerning the association between endogenous and exogenous variables related to the Rule of Law and GPI support this notion. However, other governmental agencies, such as courts, are also effective instruments for maintaining peace. It is essential to address the wounds caused by being outside the law; therefore, every state must construct its governmental and legal regulations to prevent unlawful formations that can distort its governance system.

In essence, all variables in WGI impact peace at different levels. Policymakers should enhance community contributions to decision-making to stimulate cooperation, avoid escalating political tensions, provide a safe and secure environment, establish the rule of law across all administrative institutions, create and strengthen balanced order, and implement transparent policies against corruption. The foundation for achieving peace in any country relies on avoiding conflicts and ensuring well-functioning governance, which serves as a leverage for prosperity and reconciliation.

Lastly, the authors recommend shifting the focus from WGI to other aspects to further elaborate on peace in various domains. Additionally, political stability and the absence of violence/terrorism – the two significant peace indicators – should be scrutinized to support the findings of this study.

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A text analytics study on the alignment of an Indonesian Muslim community's municipal corporation policy with Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

Purpose – This study analyses the supervision policy of Municipal Corporations (MCs) in the Indonesian Muslim community regarding its alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Design/methodology/approach – As a single case study, purposive sampling was adopted to select a municipal corporation policy issued by Ciamis Regency, West Java, Indonesia. A novel mixed methods approach, combining computer analytics and human intelligence, was introduced to perform text analytics.

Findings – Text mining identified the most frequently occurring words — e.g., *'perumda'* (municipal corporation), *'daerah'* (regional), *'pengawas'* (supervisor), *'peraturan'* (regulation) — from the sample but found no single word indicating business alignment with SDGs. Further qualitative inductive analysis was conducted, revealing the critical role of MCs' supervisory boards in business planning, execution, and reporting to align the MC businesses with local SDG initiatives.

Originality/value – Aligning MC business activities with local SDG actions is entirely within the authority of supervisory boards which demands transformational leadership. This research pioneered an innovative blend of computer-assisted techniques and human reasoning to investigate the supervision policies of MCs concerning local SDG actions, with evidence from a Muslim community in Indonesia.

Keywords BUMD, Ciamis, Indonesia, Municipal Corporation, SDGs, Text analytics

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Municipal Corporations (MCs) play a strategic role in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In many countries, MCs' core businesses are primarily engaged in providing essential services, e.g., water supply, sanitation, and waste management, making them critical for realising some goals, e.g., good health and well-being (SDG 3), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), and sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11) (UNDP, 2019). Furthermore, MCs hold significant potential in empowering the local economy through

various means, e.g., creating employment, supporting local businesses, and promoting sustainable production practices (UNDP, 2019).

In Indonesia, Presidential Decree No. 59 of 2017 integrated SDGs into national development plans. This regulation outlines a roadmap for implementing SDGs at national, provincial, and municipal levels. The Minister of National Development Planning (PPN/Bappenas) is appointed to coordinate SDG action plans at both national and regional levels. Framed within SDGs, Indonesia's development plan is established on four pillars, i.e., the advancement of society, economic growth, ecological sustainability, and the progression of legislative frameworks (Hudaefi, 2020). This work aims to examine the extent to which the contents of MCs' policies in Indonesia align with local SDG actions. In doing so, this study focuses on an MC policy from a Muslim community, with a specific case study from Ciamis Regency – one of the regencies in West Java, Indonesia.

West Java is a province on Indonesia's western Java Island, home to almost 50 million people, making it the most populous province in the country. It encompasses a wide range of communities, e.g., rural farmers, urban professionals, etc., and hosts several important industries, e.g., manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism. West Java consists of 27 administrative divisions (18 regencies and 9 municipalities) and thus SDGs may provide a comprehensive framework for addressing its socioeconomic issues. In 2022, the West Java government initiated its SDGs West Java Awards (in local terms: Jabar/Jawa Barat Awards), attracting participation from 16 local governments. Among the attendees, Garut Regency, Ciamis Regency, Indramayu Regency, Bogor City, and Bandung City were recognised as winners of this award (DPMD, 2022).

This study purposefully sampled Ciamis Regency for a single case study to investigate the supervision of MCs in relation to the SDGs through one of its recently published MC policies. The selection of this regency and the sampled policy for text analytics is elaborated in the Research Method section.

Sustainable Development Goals and Indonesia's achievement

Extant studies have predominantly focused on MCs' business operations rather than analysing policy contents and SDG initiatives. Other studies have examined the adaptation of SDGs, international collaboration, and private sector involvement, but with no attention to the regulatory oversight of MCs concerning SDGs. With limited research on how MCs' supervision policy aligns with local SDG actions, this study aims to fill this gap.

SDGs comprise 17 global goals with 169 sub-goals initiated by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda. These goals aim to address the world's most persistent challenges, such as poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, and more (UNDP, n.d.). This global initiative replaced the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UNDP, n.d.). In September 2015, representatives from 193 UN member countries, including Indonesia, signed the document "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" at the UN General Assembly in New York, USA.

According to an independent report on SDGs by Sachs *et al.* (2022), Indonesia ranked 82th out of 163 countries in achieving SDGs in 2022. Figure 1 illustrates this achievement, indicating a moderate commitment score of 69.2 (Sachs *et al.*, 2022). This commitment is characterised by three trends: i.e., a moderate upward trend in nine goals (SDG 1, SDG 2, SDG 3, SDG 5, SDG 7, SDG 9, SDG 10, SDG 13, and SDG 16), a stagnating trend in four goals (SDG 11, SDG 14, SDG 15, and SDG 17), and an on-track trend in four goals (SDG 4, SDG 6, SDG 8, and SDG 12).

Municipal Corporations (MCs) and SDGs

In Indonesia, the term MCs refers to BUMD (*Badan Usaha Milik Daerah*). BUMD Persero and Perumda are MCs characterised by a minimum government ownership of above 50 percent

Source: Sachs *et al*. (2022)

and 100 percent full government ownership of shares, respectively, with BUMD Persero allowing partial ownership by external entities, e.g., corporates, private companies, or the general public through the Indonesian Stock Exchange. MCs operate in various business sectors, including utilities (e.g., water, electricity), transportation (e.g., public transportation), waste management, and social services (Paul and Cumbers, 2023; Voorn *et al.*, 2017). As commercial entities, MCs generate revenue from their services and cover their operating costs (Paul and Cumbers, 2023; Sharma and Prince, 2023).

One advantage of MCs is that they enable local governments to exercise greater control over public service provision, helping them achieve specific goals, e.g., improving access to essential services and creating job opportunities (Krause and Swiatczak, 2020). Given Indonesia's recent achievement in SDGs, this study particularly investigates the degree to which supervisory policy content of MC supports local SDG actions.

There is a notable scarcity of studies discussing the supervision of MCs in the context of SDGs, highlighting the need for scholarly work to better understand whether the supervision of MCs has been integrated into local SDG initiatives. While some studies in the Indonesian context (e.g., Pahlevi, 2022; Susanti, 2022) have addressed MC issues, they primarily worked on the business activities of MCs, lacking substantial discussion of SDG actions, particularly regarding supervision policy analysis.

Literature review

Previous studies have explored SDGs within various contexts yet with no relation to the supervision of MCs in achieving SDGs. Notable research includes the SDG adaptation path approach (Butler *et al.*, 2016), international collaboration for forest restoration (Bastos Lima *et al.*, 2017), the involvement of the private sector in achieving SDGs, e.g., Islamic fintech (Hudaefi, 2020), and company report analysis on contributions to SDGs (Gunawan *et al.*, 2020). There is a gap in the literature specifically addressing the policy supervisory strategies of MCs in relation to SDGs. While there exists scholarly literature addressing Indonesian MCs in SDGs — e.g., MC Tirta Medal Sumedang in SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) by Susanti (2022) and Perum Damri in SDG 8 (economic growth) by Pahlevi (2022) — these studies primarily analyse business practices rather than investigating the regulatory oversight of MCs in local SDG actions.

SDGs in municipal administration

Some studies have examined SDGs within the framework of municipal development, with evidence from some cities in European countries and United Kingdom (UK). For instance, Gustafsson and Ivner (2018) explored the roles and preconditions of municipalities in SDG implementation process, focusing on the strategic planning and management of Region Östergötland in Sweden. They derived practical implications for leveraging existing organisational qualities in management and working procedures to effectively implement SDGs at local administration.

Similarly, Krantz and Gustafsson (2021) analysed an integrated approach — i.e., aspects of structure, leadership, coordination, flexibility, organisational learning, timing, and the challenge of management systems, budgets, and employee motivation across organisational levels — to better understand the steps of SDG localisation in a Swedish municipal organisation. They argued that such an integrated approach is critical for Swedish municipalities to review their organisations through a broad perspective on sustainability.

Furthermore, Fox and Macleod (2023) critically reflected on SDG 'localisation', presenting findings from an action research project in Bristol, UK. Their study facilitated the integration of SDGs into local policy and urban monitoring through a university-city partnership, highlighting SDGs' local convening power, role in building international city networks, and use by cities to signal global ambitions and progressive identities. They emphasised that new monitoring methods and frameworks are necessary to fully realise the emerging 'subnational turn' in global policies.

Research question

Although previous studies have discussed SDGs within the context of municipalities, there remains a prominent scarcity of research investigating the alignment of MCs' businesses oversight with local SDG actions in Indonesia.

MCs are among the keys to the progress of the local economy, and therefore they have the potential to accelerate SDGs. In Indonesian context, it is crucial to examine the supervision of MCs in relation to SDGs as governed by local regulations, given that Presidential Decree No. 59/2017 has established a legal framework for integrating the SDGs with municipal development. Based on this context, this study assesses the MCs' oversight strategy in terms of its alignment with SDG actions. This study aims to address the following research question:

To what extent have the supervision policies of MC businesses aligned with local SDG actions?

Mixed methods research

In this study, the author combined text analytics (applying quantitative methods) with human qualitative reasoning. This approach first evaluates the content of MC's policies through quantitative text analytics, i.e., clustering and word analytics. Then, human intelligence reasoning is applied through inductive analysis, as guided by Table 1.

Single case study of Ciamis Regency

A single case study from Ciamis Regency was conducted to better understand the alignment between MC's supervisory policy materials and local SDG actions. A single case study is deemed suitable for exploring a new perspective on an issue that is not well understood, involving a limited data source for proposition development (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Case

	Questions	Types of Inquiry
1	What is the scope of the supervision of MC outlined in the sample?	General inquiry
2	To what extent does the sampled local regulation respond to the Presidential Regulation concerning local SDG actions?	Evidence inquiry
3	Are there specific articles and clauses that address the supervision of MC businesses in alignment with SDGs?	General inquiry
4	If such provisions are absent, what are the content and clauses related to the supervision of MC businesses that could legitimise their operations to be carried out in accordance with local SDG actions?	Evidence inquiry
Source: By author		

studies encompass a single case or a small number of cases (Dul and Hak, 2008), allowing researchers to examine multiple facets of the phenomenon and conduct a systematic investigation (Stake, 1995), which is practical for policy analysis (Cheung and Yu, 2020).

Ciamis Regency is an administrative area situated in the southern part of West Java province, Indonesia, covering approximately 1,597.67 square kilometers. As of 2022, its population was estimated at around 1.3 million people. This regency is renowned for its natural attractions, e.g., waterfalls, and produces a significant portion of its gross regional domestic product (GRDP) from agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. The regency is subdivided into 27 districts, with the Town of Ciamis serving as its administrative hub. The regent, elected by the local populace, oversees governance in this regency.

This regency was selected for a single case study due to the stark contrast between its poverty issues and its recognition with the West Java SDGs Best Practice Awards in 2022. Despite witnessing a 3 percent reduction in the poverty rate and a 0.6 percent, decline in open unemployment from 2021 to 2022 (as per data from https://ciamiskab.bps.go.id/), significant challenges persist in the local industry. This disparity underscores the need for concerted efforts from local stakeholders to address such socioeconomic issues in the region. Therefore, analysing recent MC policies issued by the local government is imperative for local stakeholders to understand the policy content's alignment with the SDGs.

Local regulation as data texts
Analysing policy content can reveal unforeseen outcomes and increase accountability for policymakers, which helps create policies that are more efficient, equitable, and beneficial for all stakeholders involved (Goodwin, 2011). This study purposefully examined the published local regulation of Ciamis Regency Municipal Corporations (MCs), specifically Local Regulation No. 3 of 2022, which governs the Municipally-Owned Enterprise of *Galuh Perdana*. The regulation was enacted on January 28, 2022, by the Regent of Ciamis, Heridiyat Sunarya (2019-2024). This sampled policy is written in Bahasa Indonesian and was selected using purposive sampling, aiming to choose relevant policy material that can offer pertinent information to address the research questions.

Text analytics
Text analytics is a part of big data analytics that focuses on analysing unstructured or semi-structured text data. Similar techniques that combine computer analytics and human analysis have emerged to discover practical knowledge (Hudaefi *et al.*, 2022; Shergis *et al.*, 2015; Sukanya and Biruntha, 2012; Zhang *et al.*, 2015). The text mining approach used in this

study is based on the following frameworks, i.e., information retrieval (IR), information extraction (IE), data visualisation (DV), and knowledge discovery (KD). The machine learning tool used in this study is Orange Data Mining, developed by Demšar *et al.* (2013). Specifically, this study employs text mining techniques, i.e., word clouds, word clustering, and word analytics.

The formula presented below outlines the foundation of the wordcloud visualisation employed in this study:

$$\frac{sel_w/sel_{tot}}{(net_w/net_{tot})k} \qquad (1)$$

The sel_w denotes the number of selected nodes, sel_{tot} represents total number of nodes, net_w is the number of nodes in the entire network, net_{tot} is the total number of nodes in the network, and k is the network normalisation coefficient (Hudaefi *et al.*, 2023; Oesper *et al.*, 2011).

Furthermore, for word clustering, the cosine distance metric is applied, which can be understood as follows, where x and y are two vectors for comparison:

$$sim(\boldsymbol{x}, \boldsymbol{y}) = \frac{\boldsymbol{x} \cdot \boldsymbol{y}}{\|x\| \|y\|} \qquad (2)$$

Han *et al.* (2012) explain that $\|x\|$ is the Euclidean norm of vector:

$$\boldsymbol{x} = (x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_p) \qquad (3)$$

It is further defined as:

$$\sqrt{x_1^2 + x_2^2 + \cdots + x_p^2} \qquad (4)$$

where theoretically, it forms as the length of the vector (Han *et al.*, 2012). Likewise, $\|y\|$ is the Euclidean norm of vector y (Han *et al.*, 2012; Hudaefi *et al.*, 2023).

In addition, for word analytics, a scatter plot is employed to identify the relationship between word frequency and the ratio of total identified words to frequently occurring words in the sample. The logic of the scatter plot is as follows:

$$y=mx+b \qquad (5)$$

where y is the dependent variable, x is the independent variable, m is the slope of the line, and b is the y-intercept.

Text analytics results
Descriptive statistics of the data
The sample comprises 45 pages and contains approximately 10,588 words. Figure 2 is a word cloud visualisation that exemplifies the sample, where words such as '*perumda*' (MC), '*daerah*' (regional), '*galuh*', '*perdana*', '*pengawas*' (supervisor), '*direksi*' (directors), '*peraturan*' (regulation), and '*dewan*' (council) are depicted as larger than the remaining words. This indicates the frequency of word occurrences in the sample, i.e., meaning the larger the word size, the more often it appears. These words are fundamentally important for explaining the substance of the sampled policy.

Source: Author's analysis via Orange Data Mining. Number of stop words; approximately
57 words (e.g., *pasal* (article), *ayat* (verse), and etc.).

Figure 2.
Word Cloud
Visualisation of the
Sample

Word clustering

The cosine distance metric was used to identify similarities among the term frequencies in
the sample. It determines the degree of similarity between words and ranks the words in a
particular vector of queries (Han *et al.*, 2012).

Figure 3 represents the hierarchical clustering of words from the sample. The greater the
distance between clusters, the more varied the differences between them. Conversely, the
closer the distance between clusters, the more similar the words are. The shortest cluster in
terms of distance reflects the closest substantive relationship between the words. For
instance, in the shortest cluster, C1 in Figure 3 (blue), the words 'galuh' and 'perdana' as well
as 'dewan' (board) and 'direksi' (directors) demonstrate the close relationship of these words
in the sample.

Word analytics

The use of a scatter plot facilitates the judgment of response patterns within a real context
(Touchette *et al.*, 1985). This study employed a scatter plot for word analytics, identifying the
correlation between word frequency and the ratio of total identified words to frequently
occurring words in the sample.

Figure 4 visualises the word analytics of the observed correlation. The x-axis represents
word frequency, while the y-axis shows the ratio of the total words identified to the word
frequency. This allows for demonstrating the significance of the term '*pengawas*'
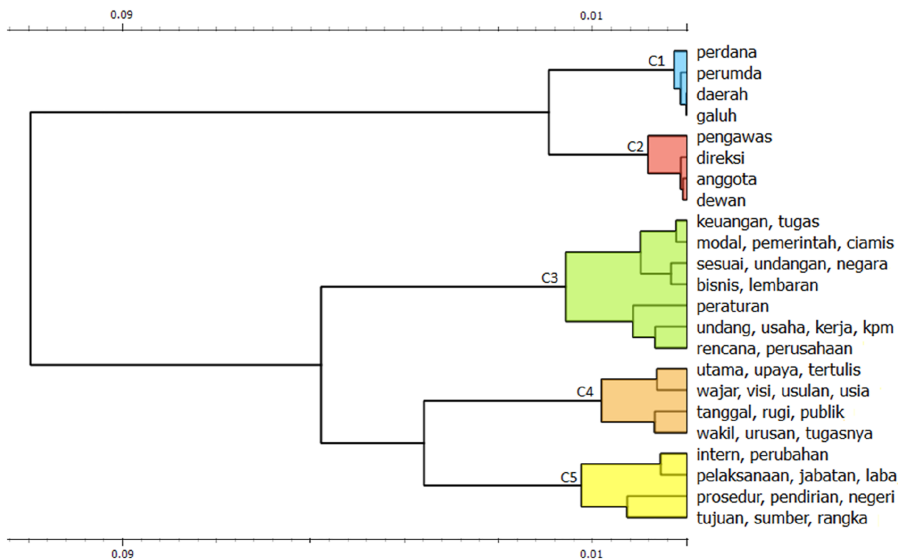
Figure 3.
Hierarchical Clustering
of Words

Source: Author's analysis via Orange Data Mining. Distance Metric: Euclidean. Linkage:
Ward. Adjustment was made for better readability.
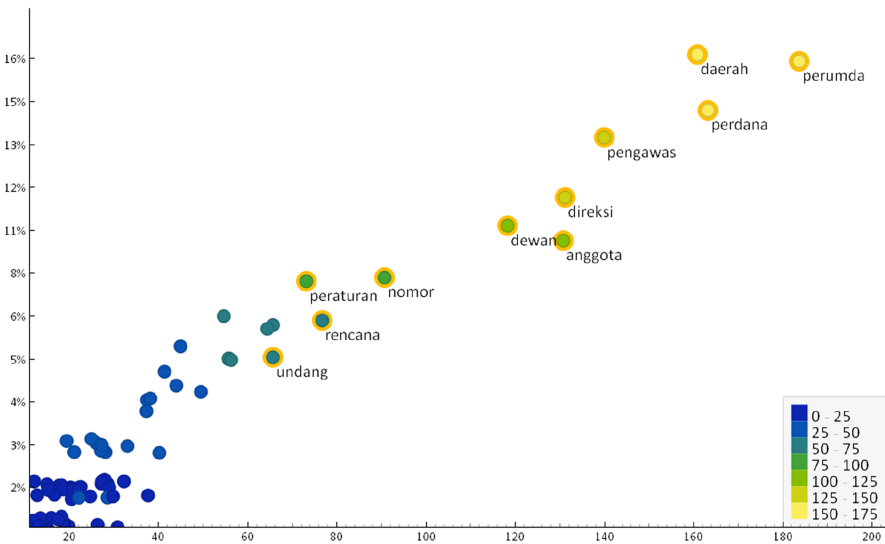
Figure 4.
Scatter Plot of Word
Count to Ratio of
Total Words

Source: Author's analysis via Orange Data Mining. Only words with significant occurrence
are highlighted for better visualization.

(supervisor) in relation to the supervisory role of MC Galuh Perdana in Ciamis Regency. The prominence of this word indicates a notable level of attention given to supervising the MC, as it constitutes 15 percent of the total frequency of identified words. This may suggest the practice of MC supervision is highly crucial in its operations.

Qualitative analysis

The qualitative method of human reasoning, i.e., inductive reasoning, was further employed to discover the role of MC's supervisory board as potentially governed in the sampled regulation. In this qualitative analysis, the framework of 'What's the Problem Represented to be' (WPR)?' by Bacchi (2009) was used as the basis for further investigating MCs supervision and SDG local actions. This framework provides a systematic approach to explore discursive aspects of policy, examining how policy problems are represented and how policy subjects emerge as a consequence of these representations (Bacchi, 2009; Goodwin, 2011). Table 1 outlines the author's approach to inductive reasoning.

Qualitative analysis results

The author's inductive analysis identified 13 out of 91 articles (14 percent) that could legitimise the supervision of MC business operations to be aligned with local SDG actions. The overarching provisions governing the supervisory board and its strategic role in delineating duties and authorities are fundamental aspects enabling the implementation of MC oversight in addressing SDG-related initiatives.

Generally, the outcomes stemming from qualitative analysis can be categorised into three primary themes, i.e., (1) oversight of business planning, (2) supervision of business activities, and (3) the role of reporting in business oversight. Regarding business planning, various provisions empower the supervisory board to inspect business plans crafted by the board of directors, utilizing SDG indicators as a reference framework for evaluation and recommendation. In the supervision of business practices, several provisions have been identified as potentially enabling the supervisory board to advocate for the implementation of business collaborations with other entities and the establishment of business Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) aligned with SDG indicators. In the reporting role, certain critical provisions may authorise the incorporation of SDG indicators in monitoring reports, thereby serving as a basis for voluntary SDG reporting. Table 2 details the author's analysis.

Discussion

The analysis of MC business supervision in local SDG actions within Ciamis Regency regulations reveals several insights. While the term 'supervision' emerges as significant (Figure 4), there is a notable absence of explicit emphasis on aligning MCs business supervision with specific SDGs in policy content. Despite comprising 16 chapters and 91 articles, Local Regulation No. 3/2022 of Ciamis Regency lacks clear references to local SDG actions, especially concerning business supervision.

This finding is significant, especially considering this regency's recognition for its accomplishment in the Jabar Award 2022 for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The discrepancy between the lack of explicit regulatory alignment and the municipal SDGs award underscores the necessity for a more robust and coordinated approach to integrating SDGs into municipal business supervision. Collaborative efforts among relevant stakeholders, e.g., local government, industry representatives, and civil society, are crucial, as explained by Fox and Macleod (2023), particularly in integrating SDGs into local regulations. Given this finding, it follows that supervisory boards have the jurisdiction to synchronise MC business operations with local SDG actions, which leads to the practical

Chapter, Article (Verse)	Content of Ciamis' MC Policy No. 3 of 2022	Interpretation of MC Supervision in Local SDG Actions
Chapter I, Article 1 (9)	The Supervisory Board is the organ of MCs Galuh Perdana that is tasked with supervising and providing advice to the Directors in carrying out the management of regional public companies.	The legal role of the Supervisory Board includes incorporating SDG indicators in the supervision of MCs Ciamis.
Chapter IV Article 5 (3)	The implementation of the type of business in the form of a partnership and/or cooperation with other parties, as referred to in paragraph (3), is carried out by the Board of Directors with the approval of KPM through the Supervisory Board.	The Supervisory Board may use SDG indicators in approving MCs' business with other parties. Analysis can be carried out using several SDG indicators, such as SDG 8, SDG 11, SDG 13, and others.
Chapter VI Article 16 (1)	The Supervisory Board is an organ of MCs Galuh Perdana that supervises the management policies and operations of the business.	Oversight of MCs' business policies can be aligned with regional actions and SDG indicators, as outlined in the SDGs Bappenas action guidebook.
Chapter VI Article 23 (1)	The Supervisory Board is in charge of: a. supervising MCs Galuh Perdana; and b. supervising and advising the Board of Directors in managing MCs Galuh Perdana.	Oversight tasks can be contextualised within regional SDG actions.
Chapter VI Article 36 point (b)	Establish the organisational structure and work procedures of MCs with the approval of the Supervisory Board.	The Supervisory Board can approve efficient work procedures aligned with regional SDG actions.
Chapter VIII Article 56 (3)	The Board of Directors submits a draft business plan to the Supervisory Board for joint approval.	The Supervisory Board can recommend aligning SDG indicators with the MCs' business plan.
Chapter VIII Article 58 (2)	The Supervisory Board may review and request the Board of Directors to refine the draft Business Plan according to the review results within 15 working days, as referred to in paragraph (1).	
Chapter VIII Article 63 (3)	The Board of Directors submits the work plan and budget to the Supervisory Board by the end of November for joint approval.	
Chapter VIII Article 64 (2)	Changes to the Annual Work Plan and Budget (RKA), as referred to in paragraph (1), are submitted by the Board of Directors to the Regent for approval after being approved by the Supervisory Board.	If there is a change in the RKA, the Supervisory Board can first identify related changes and their relevance to regional SDG actions.
Chapter VIII Article 65 (2)	The standard operating procedures referred to in paragraph (1) are prepared by the Board of Directors and approved by the Supervisory Board.	For several business units, SOPs can be contextualized with various SDGs.
Chapter VIII Article 68 (1)	MCs Galuh Perdana can cooperate with other parties with the approval of the Supervisory Board.	Before giving approval, the Supervisory Board can analyze the impact of MCs' business collaboration with other parties on the achievement of SDGs.

Table 2.
Qualitative Analysis
Results

(*continued*)

Chapter, Article (Verse)	Content of Ciamis' MC Policy No. 3 of 2022	Interpretation of MC Supervision in Local SDG Actions
Chapter VIII Article 71 (2)	The Supervisory Board report, as referred to in paragraph (1), at least contains: a. implementation of the Business Plan and RKA; b. factors affecting the performance of MCs Galuh Perdana; and c. efforts to improve the performance of MCs Galuh Perdana.	Monitoring reports can be integrated with SDG/TPB objectives as outlined in the Bappenas SDG/TPB action guidebook. These reports can also serve as a reference for voluntary SDG reporting.
Chapter VIII Article 73 (1.e)	Report on the supervisory duties carried out by the Supervisory Board during the past financial year.	
Source: Author's qualitative analysis		

implications for administrative accountability. This further calls for the urgency of transformational leadership for the MC supervisory board members.

The need for transformational leadership
Burns (1987) explained transformational leadership as an approach to inspire and motivate followers to achieve exceptional performance beyond their immediate self-interests, and is applicable to organisational management. Thus, given the absent emphasis on business supervision with SDGs, transformational leadership provides practical implications for aligning MC supervision regulation with local SDG actions.

Supervisors have a strategic position to create innovative solutions and best practices to translate the local regulation into MC business strategies that are aligned with local SDG actions. Therefore, the recruitment process for supervisory boards should set aside political interests. In Indonesia, the practice of political patronage is pervasive, in particular within the appointment of MCs' top management positions. This politically driven appointment often results in those who lack the necessary competencies taking the top management positions, causing chaos in the business. This political patronage has caused the continuity of structural corruption in emerging Southeast Asian countries, including in Indonesia (Quah, 2021).

One of the supervisory board's key responsibilities is to guarantee administrative accountability. That is, fighting corruption from the outset of supervisory board nominations is essential to good governance. Intergenerational conflicts of interest among political leaders have contributed considerably to the survival of corruption in Asian countries, including Indonesia (Quah, 2021). This emphasises the need of transformational leadership and highlights the necessity of honest politicians. This is especially important when it comes to SDG actions, as institutional constraints in other developing nations, e.g., Bangladesh, have impeded progress in their achievement (Rahman, 2021), as structural corruption has caused such institutional bottlenecks.

Conclusion
This study has examined one of MCs' policies in a Muslim community, i.e., Ciamis Regency, regarding its alignment with SDG actions. In doing so, this study employed a combination of computer-assisted and human intelligence text analytics to explore the degree to which the sampled policy contents support local SDG actions. The text mining analytics found no

words evidencing policy content that supports this global action. A further qualitative approach with inductive analysis was carried out, identifying three major themes that could legitimise MC's supervisors for aligning the businesses with local SDG actions. These findings suggest the practical implications for transformational leadership among the MC's stakeholders.

The text analytics primarily identified significant terms — e.g., '*perumda*' (municipal corporation), '*daerah*' (regional), '*pengawas*' (supervisor), '*peraturan*' (regulation) — related to the supervision of MCs but found no substantial references to SDG oversight. Further qualitative analysis, conducted through an inductive method, revealed that the supervisory board is tasked with overseeing MCs for SDG compliance within 14 percent of the policy's provisions. This strategic oversight encompasses business planning, practices, and reporting.

This study is limited to a single case and thus, the findings highlight the need for further research in this area. In particular, the findings from the qualitative analysis — i.e., (1) business planning oversight, (2) business practice supervision, and (3) the significance of reporting in business supervision — can theoretically serve as a framework for future research to examine MC supervision in relation to local SDG actions. Additional case studies are deemed essential to broadly understand MCs' oversight methods concerning local SDG initiatives. This work pioneers a mixed-method strategy combining human and machine learning analytics, which is crucial for future studies dealing with unstructured or semi-structured data.

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The effects of conflicting economic and environmental goals on local governments' responses to citizens' complaints: evidence from China

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper examines how local governments' responses to citizens' complaints about environment issues are affected when the complaints involve conflicting goals, particularly economic versus environmental goals. This study focuses on the responsiveness of provincial governments to citizen environmental complaints on the Local Leader Message Board (LLMB) in China.

Design/methodology/approach – This study collected 125,364 environment-related complaints lodged by citizens on the LLMB from 2013 to 2021 and identified complaints embodying conflicting goals through a Structural Topic Model (STM). Advanced supervised machine learning (ML) algorithms were employed to enhance the robustness of the findings.

Findings – The results indicate that provincial governments prioritize citizens' complaints across different types of issues. However, complaints embodying conflicting goals (related to environmental issues) are less likely to get a response. This relationship is moderated by an inverted U-shaped effect of economic dependence on industries. This suggests that the impact of conflicting goals on government responsiveness is dynamic, with the likelihood of provincial governments responding to conflicting complaints initially increasing and then decreasing as economic dependence on industries rises.

Originality/value – The findings enrich the understanding of the consequences of conflicting goals by highlighting their potential as a mechanism to explain the strategic reactions of governments to citizens.

Keywords Conflicting goals, Government responsiveness, Structural topic model, Machine learning algorithms, Environmental complaints, China

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Often, public agencies and their agents are confronted with multiple goals, and sometimes even conflict with each other, imposed by themselves or their superiors (Gao, 2009). For example, effectiveness, efficiency, equity, and others are all utilized to define goals that governments must accomplish (Nam, 2019; Piatak and Jensen, 2024). Many studies investigate the antecedents and consequences of multiple goals (Chen and Jia, 2023; Zhang, 2021). However, knowledge about how multiple goals (i.e., conflicting goals) influence governments in response to public demands is still scarce. This scholarly omission is puzzling given the government's responsiveness acts as a critical characteristic of democracy (Verba and Nie, 1987). Therefore, uncovering the relationship between

conflicting goals facing governments and their responsiveness to public complaints is of great theoretical and practical significance.

In applying the theory of multiple goals in hierarchical governments, this research selects typical conflicting goals confronted by governments, namely economic growth competing with environmental governance (Chen and Jia, 2023; Zhang, 2021). According to Environmental Kuznets Curves (EKCs), environmental quality initially deteriorates with economic development, and only after transcending the peak is the association reversed (Egbetokun *et al.*, 2018). Currently, many countries stay at the left part of EKCs, indicating a wicked problem of balancing economic growth and environmental protection that needs to be handled. Taking China as an example, when making their economic decisions, both provincial-level and prefecture-level governments, often rely on the performance information of pollution reduction. Only when the goals of environmental governance are met do they tend to engage in setting higher economic goals (Zhang, 2021). This study argues that the conflicting nature of the economy-environment link also affects governments' decision-making in response to citizens' complaints. Governments are inclined to make a conscious distinction between plentiful and heterogeneous citizen complaints. They tend to be less likely to respond to complaints embodying the conflicting nature of the economy-environment. Thus, two research questions will be addressed. First, how do conflicting goals influence governments' responsiveness to citizen complaints? Second, how does economic dependence on industrialization moderate this relationship?

To answer these questions, this research focuses specifically on the empirical case of the responsiveness of local governments to citizen environmental complaints in China. Relevant data are gleaned from the Local Leader Message Board (LLMB) from 2013 to 2021, a major online participation forum launched by China's central media in 2008. The paper employs a Structural Topic Model (STM) to identify the complaints embodying conflicting economic-environment goals from over 120,000 environmental complaints. The results indicate that the responsiveness of provincial governments varies substantially, with a decrease in the probability of responding to citizens' complaints embodying conflicting goals. This reaction pattern is subject to the inverted U-shaped moderating effect of economic dependence on industrial development. This study provides a nuanced understanding of government responsiveness and adds new insights into the organizational literature by uncovering the unintended consequences caused by multiple goals.

Literature review
Government responsiveness and its potential influential factors
Government responsiveness, conceptualized as the government's ability to satisfy the public's concerns, is frequently viewed as one of the critical characteristics of democracy (Verba and Nie, 1987). Conventional wisdom has long viewed seeking re-election as an important mechanism to incentivize politicians to cater to their constituents in democracies (Cain *et al.*, 1987). However, nondemocratic governments have also shown high responsiveness to public pressure (Hassid and Brass, 2015; Jiang *et al.*, 2019; Meng *et al.*, 2017; Reilly, 2011). This is counterintuitive for scholars, and further inspires them to delve into the factors that shape government behavior in response to public demands in a non-Western context (Distelhorst and Hou, 2014; Distelhorst and Hou, 2017).

In many countries, local governments have designed numerous channels to respond to citizens' complaints conveniently. Yet, local governments tend not to treat all citizens' complaints equitably; instead, selective responsiveness is common (Su and Meng, 2016). The drivers of governments in response to societal requests selectively primarily come from accountability pressure imposed by higher authorities (Yang *et al.*, 2023). The central government sets multiple performance goals and holds local cadres accountable for them

(Wang, 2018). These local governments failing to complete the defined goals will face severe punishment. Often, economic issues and maintaining social stability (*weiwen*) are the two priorities that governments must accomplish (King *et al.*, 2013). Citizens' complaints about these issues, thus, are more likely to get more attention from governments. Some studies have consolidated the above arguments, with the collective action threats of citizens usually facilitating governments to respond to their grievances (Chen *et al.*, 2016; King *et al.*, 2013; King *et al.*, 2014).

Conflicting nature of "economy-environment" and its influence on government responsiveness

Governments and bureaucrats are said to operate within a web saturated with multiple expectations from different accountability forms, various governance logics, and multiple performance tasks (Nielsen and Andersen, 2024; Tu and Gong, 2022). Governments have now developed numerous tactics to deal with this dilemma. Bureaucrats' coping, including rule bending/breaking, prioritization, and even aggression, is a typical case (Tummers *et al.*, 2015). At the agency level, goal prioritization is commonly utilized as a reasonable choice for governments to cope with conflicting expectations. For example, Chen and Jia (2023) indicated that local governments tend to seek a balance among multiple goals by prioritizing them. They are more willing to prioritize environment-related goals only when they are outperforming in economic issues. Following this logic, this research further conjectures that the responsiveness of governments to citizens' demands is also influenced by multiple expectations they confront, particularly regarding the conflicting goals.

Often, conflicting goals delineate the negative correlation between two goals, with one goal achieved inhibiting the other. It is fairly common for governments to wrestle with multiple goals, especially conflicting goals (Christensen *et al.*, 2018; Gilad, 2015). Chun and Rainey (2005) further distinguish between two forms of conflicting goals, i.e., direct and indirect. The direct conflict may occur when achieving one goal directly impedes the accomplishment of another desired goal (Lee *et al.*, 1989); indirect conflict refers to potential competition among numerous goals in acquiring resources, usually observed when multiple goals coexist at the same hierarchical level.

The typical case of conflicting goals is the complicated relationship between the economy and the environment, which is theorized as the EKCs (Egbetokun *et al.*, 2018). This parsimonious model suggests that environmental quality initially worsens in the early development phase and gradually improves as the country attains a higher GDP. In most countries, including China, the upward curve is commonly observed because they fail to surpass the threshold value depicted by the EKCs (Dasgupta *et al.*, 2002). Hence, the trade-off between economic growth and environmental quality appears to be prominent in government decision-making in these countries. Some studies based on China reflect this argument. For illustration, one study investigates the provincial-level government decisions to set economic goals that rely on the performance outcome of obligatory pollutant emission reduction targets (Zhang, 2021).

In China, in response to citizens' environmental complaints, local governments are influenced by the conflicting nature between the economy and the environment. On the one hand, the promotion tournament model predicts that economic growth is a credible signal for local cadres and that they are more likely to be promoted only if they perform well in economic issues (Li and Zhou, 2005; Su *et al.*, 2012). This incentive mechanism powerfully enables local governments to prioritize the economic issue as their most important policy agenda, even when large-scale environmental pollution occurs (Di Tella and MacCulloch, 2008). On the other hand, governance in the environmental field has been placed at an unprecedented level since Xi Jinping's administration. The central authority holds a

zero-tolerance attitude toward local governments that perform poorly in governing environmental pollution (Zhang, 2021). The local leaders will face severe punishment and even lose their promotion opportunities once they are not up to the standards of ecological tasks (Wu and Cao, 2021). Therefore, local governments may find themselves embedded within a "cage" of conflicting goals. If they desire to increase their promotion probability, they must spare no effort to promote the economy, yet it may inevitably contradict environmental issues (Ma, 2016). Additionally, they strive to avoid severe punishment imposed by the central authority in a manner that prudently deals with pollution that potentially impedes economic growth (Chen, 2024; Krause *et al.*, 2019).

It is arguable to assume that local governments display strategic patterns when responding to citizens' environmental complaints. Specifically, they tend to consciously categorize the pooled citizens' complaints and selectively circumvent the complaints embodying conflicting goals. Resolving such complaints usually benefits the environment but largely hampers economic development. Hence, the first hypothesis is proposed.

   H1: Local governments are less likely to respond to conflicting complaints, i.e., these embody conflicting economic and environmental goals.

The generalized hypothesis appears to assume that local governments are homogeneous regarding economic dependence on industry (industrial dependence). However, this is not true in reality. Notably, China varies substantially in economic structure among its subnational units. Shanghai, Guangdong, and Beijing are very economically developed, and ICT and the tertiary sector enable their economic enhancement (Zhang, 2021). This directly reflects the low dependence of economic growth on industrialization. However, Hebei and Heilongjiang rely mainly on energy-intensive industries to promote their economic growth (Zhang, 2021), and their economic rank is relatively low.

Based on the above reasoning, the study argues that economic dependence on industry conditions the tendency of governments to respond to conflicting complaints. Drawing on the EKCs, this research hypothesizes that the responsiveness of governments to conflicting complaints is subject to the inverted U-shaped moderating effect of the level of industrial dependence. A province's low level of industrialization denotes that its contribution to the economy is not high. In that case, the provincial government may have more confidence to tackle the environmental pollution caused by industrialization. Therefore, the likelihood of responding to conflicting complaints increases even if the industry is gradually developing. However, suppose a province's economic growth mainly relies on its industry rather than the primary or tertiary sector. In that case, the provincial government is more reluctant to deal with environmental pollution caused by industrialization because the resolution of such issues hampers economic growth (Chen and Jia, 2023). Thus, conflicting complaints are less likely to be responded to with the development of the industry. As such, this study posits the second hypothesis.

   H2: The tendency of governments to respond to conflicting complaints is subject to the inverted U-shaped moderating effect of economic dependence on industry.

Local governments' responses to citizens' complaints on the LLMB in China

Recently, many governments worldwide have increasingly employed internet-based platforms to facilitate their active interaction with citizens. China is no exception. Currently, multiple channels, such as Mayor's Mailbox, 12345 hotlines, and government official Weibo (and WeChat), are used to articulate citizens' grievances and more importantly, enabling the governments to reach out to every segment of society. This research focuses on a major government-sponsored cyber participation platform named the

Local Leader Message Board (LLMB) in China, initially launched by *People's Daily* Online (www.people.com.cn) in 2008. It mainly aims to provide a convenient communication channel for citizens to express their grievances to local leaders (party secretaries and government heads) across county-, prefecture-, and province-level governments. LLMB has emerged as the most popular portal for interaction between the government and citizens in China. Public administration and political science scholars have employed it to examine classic issues in their respective fields (Jiang *et al.*, 2019; Su and Meng, 2016).

The case of the LLMB on which local governments respond to citizens' complaints has been selected to test the hypotheses based on two reasons. Firstly, according to Nie and Wang (2023), the interviewed street-level civil servants in charge of LLMB found that the LLMB could mostly reflect the level of local responsiveness compared with other channels. Other channels such as government web forums, the Mayor's Mailbox, and official Weibo (and WeChat) are, to a greater extent, controlled by the local authorities who would have more room to maneuver in deciding whether to disclose the complaints sent to these channels. Conversely, local agencies barely controlled the operation of the LLMB, and all complaints were publicly available and fully recordable. Secondly, local governments have been encouraged to enhance their responsiveness to citizens' complaints online since 2012. The provincial-level authorities have established a formal institution to guide the handling of citizens' demands sent to the LLMB. *People's Daily* has used a ranking tool to motivate local governments to actively respond to citizens' complaints on the LLMB. Hence, the LLMB is viewed as a representative case to examine the research issue of governments' responsiveness to citizens' complaints.

Nie and Wang (2023) and Su and Meng (2016) developed web crawler software to access the interaction traces between local governments and citizens. They are textual data that record the content of citizens' complaints sent to the LLMB and the corresponding responsiveness information ranging from 2013 to 2021 (N = 2,334,753). From these complaints, 125,364 environmental complaints targeting the provincial-level leaders were identified, including party secretaries and government heads, 79 percent of which received responses from the relevant local leaders.

The provincial distribution of citizens' environmental complaints on the LLMB is plotted in Figure 1. Henan and Sichuan rank the highest, with the largest number of citizen complaints concerning environmental issues. Guangdong, Anhui, and Gansu follow them. Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Xinjiang, Tibet, and others have the least number of environmental complaints, with the volume below 3500. Overall, the volume of environmental complaints appears not to be associated with the provincial economic level. Zhejiang and Jiangsu, as the economically developed provinces, received extremely few complaints. Henan is at the middle level of its economy, and yet submitted the largest volume of citizens' environmental complaints.

Research methodology
Clustering citizen environmental complaints on the LLMB by STM
The Structured Topic Model (STM) is used to capture the contents of citizen environmental complaints recorded on the LLMB. STM is an unsupervised topic model that identifies the latent dimensions (topics) of text. STM estimates topics by treating documents as a mixture of underlying topics and topics as a mixture of a latent set of words that contribute to them. In this manner, each identified topic is interpreted as a group of words that STM determines have the largest probability associated with that topic. Hence, the topic-word association is used to guide researchers in interpreting each topic by reading its associated words. Moreover, documents are categorized under similar topics. The method has been used in previous public administration research (Hollibaugh, 2019).

Figure 1.
Provincial distribution of citizens' environmental complaints from 2013-2021
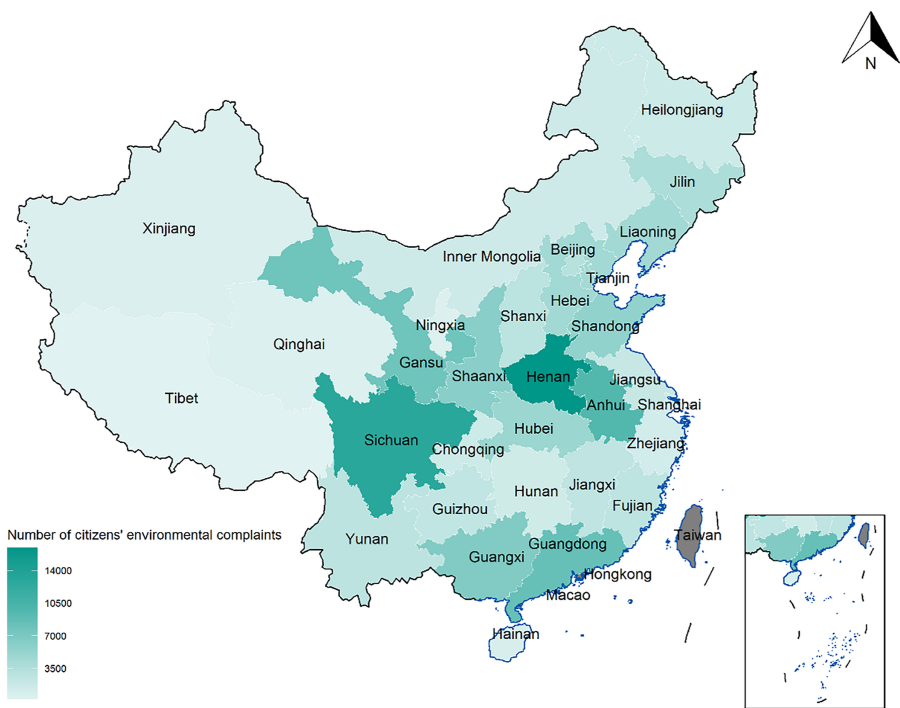
Source: By authors

With STM, researchers must first manually specify the number of topics, k (Roberts *et al.*, 2019). Four metrics, including residual fit, held-out likelihood, semantic coherence, and exclusivity, are commonly used to help researchers make such decisions (Hollibaugh, 2019). $k = 5$ is chosen as the most appropriate topic number, and an STM is estimated for the whole corpus of 125,364 preprocessed citizens' complaints. The details of the 5 topics identified by STM are presented in Table 1.

Measures, data sources, and model specifications
In line with previous research (Chen *et al.*, 2016; Distelhorst and Hou, 2014; Su and Meng, 2016), government responsiveness is defined as government behavior that "responds (or not)" to public complaints. It is measured by a dummy variable that equals 1 for a citizen complaint that is responded to.

The independent variable of interest is conflicting complaints. Following previous studies (Wu and Cao, 2021), this research argues that the topic of industrial pollution identified by STM, to some extent, reflects the conflicting nature of the economy and the environment. Industrial development is conducive to economic growth but also detrimental to the environment. A dummy variable is created, which takes a value of 1 if a complaint pertains to an industrial pollution topic. The moderating variable, economic dependence on industrialization (abbreviated as industrial dependence), is proxied by industrial value added as a share of GDP in a certain province.

Topic	Highest words	Documents
Topic 1: Noise nuisance	Noise, construction, residents, impact, rest, nuisance, night 噪音, 施工, 居民, 影响, 休息, 扰民, 晚上	The housing resettlement project is located in Yj village of Yt District, was constructed overnight. This generated noise, caused by dump trucks, disturbed residents. The roar and yellow soil was piled openly, resulting in pollution. I filed a complaint with the Ca District. Chang 'an District information center said that it is difficult for them to deal with the construction of Yangjia village resettlement housing project in Yt district across regions. Please, leadership, solve this! Yt 区 Yj 村安置房项目整晚施工, 噪音扰民, 渣土车轰鸣, 黄土露天堆放。反馈长安区, 长安区信息中心说是 Yt 区杨家村安置房项目施工, 请领导解决!
Topic 2: Oily fume, particularly in the concentration of fumes from barbecues	Community, residents, fumes, owners, operations, impacts, residents 小区, 居民, 油烟, 业主, 经营, 影响, 住户	Barbecue smoke at street level, located on Ly Creek Street, seriously affects the rest of upstairs residents at night. The smoke from the barbecue makes people breathless, upset, have headaches, and cough. It is a poisonous gas, and long-term exposure is harmful to public health. The relevant departments need to help solve this problem. Thank you! Ly 溪街临街门市烧烤排烟严重影响楼上居民晚上休息, 熏得人无法呼吸, 心烦, 头疼, 咳嗽。烧烤碳烟本为有毒气体, 长期熏闻有害身体健康。有关部门帮忙协调解决。谢谢!
Topic 3: Urban and rural live environment	Community, residents, fumes, owners, operations, impacts, residents 垃圾, 小区, 环境, 生活, 居民, 影响, 道路	Dear leaders: Hello! Bu vegetable market, there is piled with garbage, and no one cleaned it up nearby the west door of Buji River Vegetable Market, located at the old Finance Bureau west entrance. It's summer and flies are everywhere. It stinks when people pass by. There are a lot of people defecating in demolition buildings. I hope the leader can send staff to manage the sanitation in this area. Thank you. 尊敬的领导: 你好! 卜吉河蔬菜市场老财政局西门口, 垃圾成堆, 无人清理, 现在正值夏天, 苍蝇到处都是, 行人从此处经过把人臭的, 还有好多人在拆迁楼里, 随地大小便。希望领导能派人清理一下, 管理一下这一块的卫生, 谢谢。

(continued)

Table 1.
Topics, relevant highest words, and documents

Topic 4: Industrial pollution	Pollution, residents, living, emissions, impacts, smells, production 污染, 居民, 生活, 排放, 影响, 气味, 生产	Dear leaders: Hello! The environment around the Reiqixin Jiayuan Community is unacceptable to the residents. It is opposite the Zhuoyuan heavy industry, less than 100 meters away from the residential area. It's not only disturbing the people, but also a serious threat to the health of the residents. For years, nobody managed. Why are residential buildings built in industrial areas? Please pay attention to the leadership, give a solution! 尊敬的领导：您好！瑞奇馨家园小区，周围环境老百姓无法接受，对面是桌远重工业，离居民小区不到一百米，不但扰民，而且对居民身体健康也存在严重威胁，多年来，无人问津，为什么在工业园区会建筑住宅楼？领导重视，给予解决！
Topic 5: Rural ecosystems	Villagers, government, pollution, environmental protection, construction, company, country 村民, 政府, 污染, 环保, 建设, 公司, 国家	Dear leaders, hello. I am a villager of the QL Village. What I would like to complain about is that every family in the village has tap water, which contains mud and sand all year round. In 2017, since neighbor villagers reported the problem of mud and sand, the well has been panned, and they got clear tap water. However, the problem in our village is still not solved, and the water flowing out in the past two years has remained muddy and sandy water. Water is what everyone eats and drinks every day. I hope that the leaders can pay attention to the quality of water. 尊敬的各县委领导，我是 QL 村西塬的一位村民，我要反映的是自从村里每家通了自来水以后，家里的水常年流出来的水都有泥沙，2017 年邻村的人反映泥沙问题以后淘了井，但是我们村的问题还是没有解决，这两年流出来的水依旧是泥沙水。水是大家每天都要吃喝的，望各位领导能关注一下底层村民的吃水质量问题。

Source: By authors

Table 1.

This research also controls for issue-, provincial- and leader-level variables (Pan and Chen, 2018). Issue-level variables are complaint prevalence (1 = citizen complaints pertaining to the topic with the highest proportion calculated by the STM; 0 = otherwise), and sentiment (emotion score of citizen complaints calculated by a dictionary-based method. The larger the values, the more positive the emotion.), and collective action (1 = yes; 0 = no). Provincial controls include provincial GDP (hundreds of million-yuan, log) and population density (tens of thousands of people per square kilometer). The leader-level variable is provincial official changes, including party secretary (change occurred in a certain year = 1, otherwise = 0) and governor (change occurred in certain year = 1, otherwise = 0). The summary statistics of the variables are reported in Table 2.

Variable name	Source	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Responsive variable						
Complaints responded	LLMB	125364	.79	.41	0	1
Explanatory variable						
Conflicting complaints (Industrial pollution)	LLMB	125364	.17	.38	0	1
Moderating variable						
Industrial dependence	CSY	31	.32	.06	.07	.49
Industrial dependence^2	CSY	31	.11	.04	.004	.24
Control variables						
GDP (log)	CSY	31	10.31	.7	6.69	11.73
Population density	CSY	31	.04	.05	0	.4
Governor change	PD	31	.31	.46	0	1
Party sectary change	PD	31	.27	.44	0	1
Collective complaints	LLMB	125364	0	.04	0	1
Sentiment	LLMB	125364	-.24	2.97	-31	73
Top prevalence	LLMB	125364	.33	.47	0	1

Note: LLMB denotes local leader message board; CSY denotes China statistical yearbook; PD denotes online
public data.
Source: By authors

Table 2.
Summary statistics of
variables

Considering that provincial industrial dependence and government responsiveness are two
levels of variables, and the latter is nested in the former, a multilevel logit model is estimated.

Results
The results of STM
Compared with other topic models, STM allows researchers to estimate the effect of
document-level variables on the proportion of a certain topic. Figure 2 visually plots the effect
of government responsiveness (document-level variable) on the prevalence of five topics. The
points represent the mean effect, and the horizontal lines refer to 95 percent confidence
intervals. An estimate above zero indicates that topics are more likely to receive
responsiveness, while an estimate below zero indicates that topics are less likely to be
responded to. If the horizontal lines cross the vertical red line, this means that government
responsiveness does not influence the proportion of that topic.
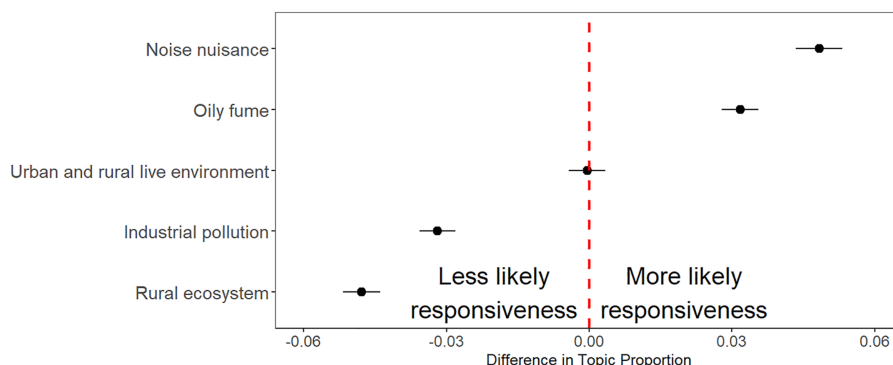
Source: By authors

Figure 2.
Effects of government
responsiveness on
topic prevalence

Figure 2 shows that provincial governments are less likely to respond to citizen complaints about industrial pollution and rural ecosystems. Hypothesis 1 was intuitively supported. Additionally, noise nuisance and oily fumes are more likely to receive responsiveness from local governments.

Regression results

Table 3 reports the baseline results. Model 1 only includes conflicting complaints and controls for yearly trend effects with a set of year dummy variables. Model 2 adds the provincial-, issue-, and leader-level variables, while Model 3 tests the moderating effect of industrial dependence by interacting conflicting complaints with industrial dependence and its square term (*industrial dependence²*).

Model 1 reports a negative and significant coefficient for *conflicting complaints* (β = -0.184, t = -10.20), suggesting that provincial governments are less likely to respond to citizen complaints about industrial pollution. This is consistent with the result of Model 2 (β = -0.090, t = -4.68), which includes control variables. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported. Similar to logistic regression, an odds ratio of the coefficients on explanatory variables can be utilized to evaluate their effect size. The odds ratios of *conflicting complaints* are 0.832 and 0.913 in Models 1 and 2, respectively. This implies that if citizen complaints are recognized to be

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Conflicting complaint (Industrial pollution)	-0.184***	-0.0900***	-1.104***
	(-10.20)	(-4.68)	(-3.77)
Industrial dependence			1.959**
			(2.33)
Industrial dependence²			-4.351***
			(-3.07)
Conflicting complaints * Industrial dependence			7.355***
			(3.86)
Conflicting complaints * Industrial dependence²			-12.49***
			(-4.05)
Collective action		-0.899***	-0.904***
		(-6.55)	(-6.58)
Sentiment		-0.0135***	-0.0136***
		(-5.63)	(-5.69)
Prevalence		0.0847***	0.0857***
		(5.05)	(5.11)
GDP (log)		-0.251***	-0.216***
		(-20.19)	(-15.26)
Population density		-4.247***	-4.324***
		(-31.15)	(-30.23)
Provincial party secretary change		-0.0236	-0.0292
		(-1.17)	(-1.45)
Provincial governor change		0.0950***	0.105***
		(4.73)	(5.18)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	2.316***	5.154***	4.609***
	(93.67)	(37.95)	(24.25)
Number of provinces	31	31	31
N	125364	125364	125364

Table 3.
Predictors of government responsiveness to citizens' complaints on the LLMB

Note: *t* statistics in parentheses. level of significance: *p <0.1, **p <0.05, ***p <0.01.
Source: By authors

merely related to industrial pollution, they have a 0.168 or 0.087 lower chance of being responded to.

Model 3 shows that the interaction effect of *conflicting complaints * industrial dependence* is positive and significant (β = 7.355, t = 3.86). However, the interaction effect of *conflicting complaints * industrial dependence²* is negative and significant (β = -12.49, t = -4.05). These findings confirm Hypothesis 2 (inverted U-shaped effect). Figure 3 plots the marginal effects of conflicting complaints on the probability of government responsiveness. The symmetry axis of the curve is approximately 0.294. This means that when the industrial-added value as a share of GDP is below the threshold value, provincial governments engage in increasing the probability of responding to conflicting complaints as it increases. Conversely, if the provincial economy is more dependent on industrial development, namely the industrial-added value as a share of GDP exceeds the threshold, provincial governments tend to reduce the probability of responding to conflicting complaints as it increases.

Additionally, collective action and positive sentiment seem to decrease the likelihood of government responsiveness, while complaint prevalence is more likely to be responded to. Increased GDP and population density significantly reduce the probability of government responsiveness. The model also indicates the significant effect of provincial governor change and the null effect of provincial party secretary change.

Robustness checks

To test the robustness of the identified topic of industrial pollution by STM, an alternative method of supervised machine learning (ML) algorithms is employed to classify citizen complaints. The research randomly selected 7,240 citizen complaints as the training set and manually coded the topic of industrial pollution. Following Chen *et al.* (2023), boosted decision trees (GBDT), naive Bayes (NB), and random forest (RF) are selected as classifiers to categorize the remaining citizen complaints. Model 3 is replicated in the baseline analysis by

Source: By authors

Figure 3.
The marginal effects of industrial dependence on the government responsiveness coefficient

replacing the conflicting complaints captured by the STM with the ones classified by ML algorithms. The results are fundamentally consistent with previous major findings. More details are reported in Table 4.

Discussion and conclusion

Despite the continuous investigation into numerous determinants of government responses to societal demands, few studies tap into how conflicting goals influence the reaction of local governments to different citizen complaints. The study tests the arguments based on the most widely used citizen-government interaction platform, LLMB, in China, which records the contents of citizen complaints and relevant information on government responsiveness. The results confirmed the hypothesis that provincial governments are less likely to respond to citizen complaints related to industrial pollution, which embodies the conflicting nature of the economy and the environment. Moreover, the moderating effects of economic dependence on industry exhibit an inverted U-shape. The research theoretically and practically contributes to the existing literature and policy governance.

Firstly, previous studies have largely explored the salience of electoral institutions on government responsiveness (Cluverius, 2017). Government decision-making actively reflects public preference because of the strong incentive for re-election (Grossman and Slough, 2022; Kornreich, 2019). This research theorizes government responsiveness from the managerial approach perspective and further argues that governments' responses to citizen complaints are shaped by the conflicting goals facing them. This deepens the understanding of government responsiveness from the organizational managerial perspective.

Secondly, many studies have indicated that the control level of the goal may trigger strategic responses from governments and bureaucrats (Li, 2015; Muller, 2018). For example, Xiao and Zhu (2022) found that a high degree of bureaucratic control potentially reduces subnational compliance with central guidelines. This work focuses on the consequence of conflicting goals by examining how provincial governments engage in responding strategically to public demands when confronted with conflicting goals. Hence, the findings provide an extensive understanding of goal setting in governments.

	GBDT	RF	NB
Conflicting complaints	-1.055***	-0.884***	-1.288***
	(-3.56)	(-3.39)	(-5.10)
Industrial dependence	2.583***	2.356***	2.085**
	(3.12)	(2.78)	(2.43)
Industrial dependence^2	-5.620***	-5.069***	-4.640***
	(-4.05)	(-3.54)	(-3.19)
Conflicting complaints * Industrial dependence	5.579***	4.812***	7.032***
	(2.86)	(2.81)	(4.26)
Conflicting complaints * Industrial dependence^2	-8.232***	-7.694***	-10.88***
	(-2.59)	(-2.76)	(-4.05)
Controls	Y	Y	Y
Year trend FE	Y	Y	Y
Constant	2.310***	5.177***	4.550***
	(93.66)	(38.22)	(24.22)
Number of provinces	31	31	31
N	125364	125364	125364

Table 4.
The regression results of employing ML algorithms

Note: *t* statistics in parentheses. Level of significance: *p <0.1, **p <0.05, ***p <0.01.
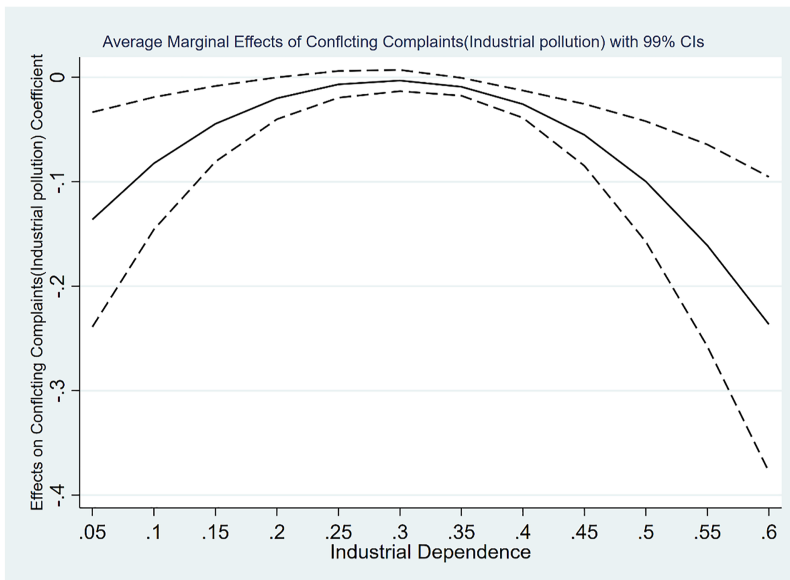Source: By authors

Thirdly, politicians and public managers should pay attention to the unintended, particularly unfavorable consequences of conflicting goals for governments and bureaucrats. Compared with the private sector, conflicting goals are more common for public counterparts (Chen and Jia, 2023). Regulated by multiple goals, governments often operate in a self-interested manner that may hinder the goals of public governance. The strategic responsive pattern for environmental complaints indicated in this study is one of the numerous cases in which governments cope with conflicting goals. Based on this, future researchers and practitioners are called upon to design effective mechanisms to avoid the dilemma of conflicting goals.

This study has policy implications for public governance. The findings suggest that the strategic delayed response of local governments in China to citizens' environmental complaints is caused by the conflicting nature between economic development and environmental protection. To ensure local agencies' strict compliance with environmental governance policies, the central authority needs to design a reconciled incentive mechanism that efficiently avoids the occurrence of deviation in solving citizens' environmental complaints. Further, given that the degree of reliance on local industrial development moderates the responsive pattern of local governments, there is a need to facilitate industrial transformation by developing the tertiary sector, as well as the new and advanced technology industries.

China is adopted as an empirical case in this study, which differs substantially from Western countries. Future research may replicate the study in other contexts to strengthen the generalization of the findings. Other policy domains have conflicting goals, such as economic investment, which usually competes with national welfare. It is recommended that more studies be done on other policy areas. Finally, the findings are interpreted as the generalizable responsive pattern of China's local governments to citizens' preferences. There are some other sources such as Weibo, WeChat, government reports, etc., which can also provide useful data in revealing the relationship between governments and citizens. Future research may use multiple sources to investigate the research question of this study.

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Strategic changes in talent development and leadership management in the funeral service industry in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper identifies the strategic changes and explores the solutions for talent development and leadership management to address the challenges faced by the funeral service industry in Hong Kong.

Design/methodology/approach – In this study, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven key personnel (funeral director, salesperson, coffin shop owner, and mortuary transporter) engaged in the funeral service industry in Hong Kong. Thematic coding was used to identify and organize emerging themes from the data.

Findings – Four overarching themes were identified: (1) Perception of the funeral service industry in Hong Kong; (2) Recruitment, retention, and talent development; (3) Prospects of the funeral service industry in Hong Kong; and (4) Other novel challenges. The findings reveal continuous, radical, and complex challenges that may exceed the capacity of any leader to develop workable solutions.

Originality/value – The funeral service industry is facing radical challenges in modern times. A death-denying attitude is observed, which has severely undermined the study of the funeral service industry.

Keywords Life and death, Funeral service industry, Leadership, Death-denying attitude, Hong Kong

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The emergence of the modern funeral industry has been shaped by the evolution of various elements within the industry, notably the profession of embalmer and the embalming process since the mid-20th century. Currently, there is a noticeable trend toward fewer traditional funerals and an increase in cremations due to two main factors. Firstly, the baby boomer generation is becoming more eco-conscious and is exploring body disposal methods that have less environmental impact. Secondly, the economic recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has led consumers to seek more cost-effective body disposal options, with cremation providing such feasible solutions (Beard and Burger, 2020; Kumar, 2023). Additionally, there is an increasing use of technology and numerous alternative approaches to memorializing the deceased and disposing of remains, deviating from traditional funeral practices. It is now common for funeral homes to develop extensive websites and utilize a

wide range of social media platforms. Furthermore, various funeral homes have adopted tailor-made slideshow videos and presentations of the deceased's life, real-time streaming videos of funerals and visitations, and state-of-the-art audio technology to enhance the funeral service technologically. Moreover, the funeral industry has expanded the use of technology in the preparation, storage, and display of bodies (Beard and Burger, 2017; Fletcher and McGowan, 2021). Research by Lau et al. (2020), Lee et al. (2022), and Shelvock et al. (2022) indicates that environmentally friendly funerals, such as ecological, natural, and green funerals, are becoming a future trend in the funeral industry.

The study of the universal phenomenon of life and death has attracted considerable interest from various disciplines (Beard and Burger, 2020). Life and death are unique yet inevitable phenomena. Notably, death-denying cultures and attitudes are observed across different societies and cultures. There is a long history of studying life and death in literature, and these concepts are presented differently across various cultures. However, a common feature in facing death is the attitude of denial, which has become one of the biggest challenges for end-of-life products and services. Beard and Burger (2020) stated that researchers have conducted numerous studies on death, including reviews of both contemporary and historical funeral rituals and rites, legal regulation of the funeral industry, cultural and social changes influencing the industry, gender and race differences within the industry, consumer knowledge of the funeral process, and the pricing of funerals. Notably, studies related to leadership development and talent management strategies in the funeral service industry appear limited. Despite the universality of the industry, its work remains widely under-studied in the literature (Ludlum and Ludlum, 2010). Furthermore, the importance of the funeral service industry from the perspective of leadership theory, particularly in understanding the role of the funeral director, is underdeveloped (Chism and Strawser, 2015; Fletcher and McGowan, 2021). Funeral directors perform various daunting tasks and encounter numerous challenges related to religious beliefs, technological and scientific innovations, and family preferences. As family expectations continuously evolve and technological advancements progress, funeral directors must adapt accordingly (Roche et al., 2022; Bi and Ploeger-Lyons, 2022).

More importantly, there is a lack of definite studies about the funeral service industry in Hong Kong. The most comprehensive and recent work on the subject was published over two decades ago by Chan (2000), who concluded that socioeconomic factors had altered the way people manage death in Hong Kong. Notably, Hong Kong has undergone a period of intensive urbanization, which has brought about the homogeneity of a Chinese material culture relating to death and funerals. As a result, funeral services have turned into ready-made, homogenized commodity sets. The current study aims to explore the challenges and implications of talent management and leadership solutions in the funeral business in Hong Kong in response to these ongoing challenges. Therefore, the research question of the study is: What are the challenges faced by the funeral service industry in Hong Kong, and how do talent management and leadership play a role in addressing these challenges?

Literature review
The funeral service industry in Hong Kong
Hong Kong is a highly urbanised and densely populated city with over 7 million people (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2024), fusing traditional Chinese values with substantial influence from Western culture due to its colonial history. There are approximately 64,000 deaths yearly (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2024). The funeral service industry in Hong Kong is mainly operated as a family business, and the key stakeholders are divided into two categories: the coffin shops and the funeral parlours, and they are referred to as the

undertakers (Chan, 2000). The funeral business in Hong Kong is organised and commercialised. It is a profitable business and has attracted the two largest funeral service providers listed in the stock market (Low, 2019). The evolution of the business model from a family-owned business to an enterprise brought significant challenges (Jalland, 2006). Moreover, funeral businesses in Hong Kong adopt a standardised and conventional marketing strategy of generating sales through referral, and homogenised "package services". The high urbanisation and medicalisation of death also affect the way people manage death (Chan, 2000).

Leadership and talent development in the funeral service industry in the face of challenges
The funeral service industry is found to be a male-dominated industry. In America, women are underrepresented as funeral directors (Penepent, 2015). It is assumed that funeral directing is synonymous with a masculine role identity and is considered to be a male-dominated profession (Cathles *et al.*, 2010). Although the scope of the funeral director's responsibilities is gender-neutral, the funeral profession exhibits a gender imbalance that favors men. In recent years, increased visibility of the industry and shifts in the labour force have been observed in the funeral service industry. In America, where funeral directing and embalming are primarily dominated by white males, it has become increasingly open to women and minorities, and there is a need for a better-educated funeral industry workforce (Whittaker, 2005). In Hong Kong, males primarily dominate the funeral service industry (Lau *et al.*, 2023).

With a predictably increasing number of deaths of baby boomers, talent management is, therefore, a must for the funeral service industry. There is a need to recruit new workers in the industry, and importantly, provide professional training and a foreseeable career progression to retain them and develop a career in the industry. Recent news articles have stated that there are new joiners who are interested in joining the workforce in the funeral service industry due to the attractive monetary rewards. On the contrary, career progression is a discouraging factor in attracting newcomers to the industry (Lau *et al.*, 2023). Nonetheless, there are limited empirical findings to validate these two contrasting views.

The combination of transactional and transformational traits can be contributing elements to the leadership culture of the funeral home (Havlak, 2014). In a quantitative research study, the authors found that leadership style is correlated with the culture of the organization. Notably, the authors made an essential point that funeral homes have been following the same practices for providing products and services despite the rising cost of delivering these products and services, and the reluctance to change. Getting employees to conform and recognise the leadership of the managers, therefore, becomes essential and correlates with organisational culture and thus enables the provision of new strategies for serving the changing demographics.

Research design
Research methodology
To address the research questions, the study adopted a qualitative approach (i.e., interviews) to obtain a deeper and richer understanding of the meanings people attribute to funeral service incidents and actions, and to investigate the complex scenarios faced by funeral service researchers and industry practitioners. Initially, a pilot study was carried out to assess content validity. Following ethical approval from the University of Sunderland Ethics Committee, participants were recruited using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling, a group of non-probability sampling techniques, is especially useful for exploring information-rich cases (Guarte and Barrios, 2007). Seven participants were invited to join the study

through direct communication within the researcher's network. Participants were informed about the study's purpose and provided their consent. All participants remained anonymous. The interviews were scheduled on various days throughout August and September 2020 and were conducted face-to-face in a conference room at the researcher's office. A topic guide was used, and the interviews followed a semi-structured format to facilitate in-depth discussions. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the current challenges faced by the funeral service industry in Hong Kong and the corresponding changes. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point during the interview if they felt distressed or uncomfortable.

After an in-depth literature review, guiding questions were designed for the qualitative interviews and are provided below in English. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted face-to-face in Cantonese. The study included four males and three females, all Hong Kong Chinese, aged 31 to 60 years. Participants had at least five years of working experience in the funeral industry in Hong Kong, holding various capacities such as funeral directors, salespersons, coffin shop owners, and mortuary transporters. Selection criteria required participants to have at least five years of experience in the funeral service industry, membership in a funeral association, and extensive industry networks. This allowed the researcher to gather diverse insights and perspectives on the overall funeral service industry in Hong Kong. The interviews were audio-recorded to enable the researcher to focus on in-depth discussions with the participants. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and a coding approach was used for data analysis. Since the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, excerpts were translated into English. The profiles of the interviewees and the interview questions are listed in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Analysis
The present study applied grounded theory using a thematic analysis approach to identify emerging themes from the data, a common method in qualitative research. The data analysis process included three key stages: data reduction, data display, and interpretation. The researcher continued conducting interviews until thematic saturation was reached, meaning no new information was being uncovered (Austin and Sutton, 2014). Subsequently, the data were grouped and utilized to describe the phenomenon. Thematic analysis involves searching for themes that describe the phenomenon (Daly *et al.*, 1997) and includes identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas (Guest *et al.*, 2012). The transcripts were analyzed for recurring words, phrases, or themes, which led to an initial understanding of the dominant themes. The findings were then presented under headings that best described the emerging themes. The data were coded and grouped into common themes to provide clarity for the reader. Through repeated analysis, the researcher identified four thematic categories, which were divided into ten sectional headings. Interviewers and

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Position	Number of Years of Working Experience
1	Female	41-50	Funeral Director	25
2	Female	51-60	Salesperson	6
3	Male	51-60	Salesperson	15
4	Male	51-60	Coffin Shop Owner	20
5	Male	31-40	Mortuary Transporter (i.e. responsible for the transport of deceased bodies)	5
6	Female	41-50	Salesperson	20
7	Male	41-50	Salesperson	21

Table 1.
Interviewee Profiles

Source: By authors

	Interview Questions
Q1	How long have you been working in the funeral service industry? How and why did you initially join the funeral service industry?
Q2	In your opinion, how do people generally perceive the funeral service industry? What reactions do you receive from others, such as family and friends, when they learn that you are working in this field?
Q3	What are your thoughts on the current challenges faced by the funeral service industry in Hong Kong?
Q4	Do you believe the funeral service industry is becoming more competitive today? In your specific role, do you find it more challenging and competitive compared to previous years?
Q5	Wat are the typical pathways or steps for individuals interested in joining the funeral service industry?
Q6	Are you involved in the recruitment of new employees?
Q7	Is technology helpful in attracting newcomers to join the funeral service industry?
Q8	How do you perceive your career progression in the funeral service industry, and what are your thoughts on career advancement opportunities for newcomers?
Q9	Could you provide more details about the demographics of workers in the funeral service industry? Is there a preference for hiring males or females?
Q10	To what extent has technology impacted the growth and development of your funeral service business?
Q11	What factors do you believe would be helpful in sustaining your funeral service business?
Q12	How has the pandemic affected your work and the funeral service industry?

Source: By authors

Table 2.
Interview Questions

experienced researchers were invited to review the coding, integrate identical codes, examine them, and minimize duplications (Sutton and Austin, 2015). After analyzing the entire data set, four overarching themes were identified, as shown in Table 3.

Findings and results
Perception of the funeral service industry in Hong Kong

(a) Taboo nature of the funeral business

Funeral rites are often regarded as "taboo" (Han, 2016), reflecting a death-denying attitude prevalent across various cultures and societies. This attitude involves using psychological and behavioral defenses to deny the existence of death. Such a mindset seeks to avoid reflecting on death-related products to mitigate anticipated negative emotions (Lau *et al.*, 2023). This death-denying attitude was evident during the interviews conducted for the present study. The researchers observed that participants frequently referred to the funeral business as "this industry", conspicuously avoiding the explicit terms "funeral" or "funeral service".

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Perception of the funeral service industry in Hong Kong	1.1 Taboo nature of the funeral service industry
	1.2 Mysterious perception
	1.3 Evolving impression in recent years
2. Recruitment, retention, and talent development	2.1 Referrals and Family-Owned Businesses
	2.2 Newcomers
3. Prospects of the funeral service industry in Hong Kong	3.1 Sustainable development
	3.2 The realm of technology
	3.3 Intense competition
4. Other novel challenges	4.1 Funeral rites
	4.2 COVID-19 Pandemic

Source: By authors

Table 3.
Summary of Themes
and Sub-themes

(b) Mysterious perception

The words or phrases "mysterious" and "brave" were mentioned several times during the interview when the participants were asked, "How do people generally perceive the funeral service industry?".

According to Interviewee 1 (funeral director),

People perceive those who work in the funeral service industry as brave and unafraid of ghosts. Yes, it is true. Working with dead people is not an easy task for some. After all, Chinese people believe in the existence of spirits, which can be frightening for some. They may wonder, 'Will the spirits follow me home?'. So, it takes some guts to work in this industry. Importantly, the industry is not 'open' enough in certain matters, and people are unsure about what we do. It is a mysterious industry.

According to Interviewee 4 (coffin shop owner),

Many years ago, it was an industry which people did not want to talk about it. It was once an industry that people avoided discussing. Many years ago, it was an industry which people did not want to talk about. My family and friends gave me strange looks if they knew I worked in this industry. Due to superstitions, my mother-in-law did not let me visit her home during Chinese New Year. I could only visit her after the 15th day of the Lunar Calendar, and I could not visit my friends as people usually do during Chinese New Year. However, things have improved in recent years. My mother-in-law now allows me to visit her during Chinese New Year, and I can also go eat dim sum with my friends.

Recruitment, retention, and talent development

(a) Referrals and family-owned businesses

"Referrals" and "Family-owned businesses" emerged as overlapping sub-themes when participants were asked, "How and why did you initially join the funeral service industry?". Four out of five participants expressed that they joined the funeral service industry either by inheriting a family business or through referrals from friends. In other words, the network had already been established when the participants began working in the industry. Notably, the word or phrase "fate" was frequently mentioned by participants as a reason for joining the industry or when advising outsiders interested in working in this field.

According to Interviewee 4 (coffin shop owner),

I have been working in the industry for over 20 years and was referred by my friend. I think it was just an opportunity that came by serendipity. I did not intend to work in this industry at all, but here I am. I was working in another company and then started another business. That business did not succeed, but it led to the opportunity to start the shop I have now. It has been doing okay; at least I won't go hungry with this shop.

Interviewee 5 (mortuary transporter) is the only exception among the participants in that he did not have any prior connection to the funeral industry before joining the workforce. He stated,

I think I am a rare exception in that I joined the industry not through a referral. Yes, a rare exception. Usually, people work in the industry because they have a connection, such as it being a family business. For me, there was a window of opportunity, and it felt like having a mid-career change. I was working for the Mass Transit Railway Corporation, then joined the industry. So, it is just like that.

(b) Newcomers

Interviewee 1 (funeral director) confirmed that,

> The aging population is a problem faced by the funeral industry in Hong Kong nowadays.

However, most of the participants stated that they have never recruited or are not planning to recruit newcomers to the industry.

Furthermore, Interviewee 4 (coffin shop owner) stated,

> The seemingly luring remuneration of around 50k to 60k per month, as reported by news articles recently, is not accurate. It takes a long time to reach a sales peak that can sustain a living, making it challenging for new joiners. Therefore, some new joiners might quit when they are unable to generate any sales. For newcomers without existing connections in the industry, seminars, and schools are now operating to attract people interested in learning more about potential opportunities.

> I delivered seminars previously, and some of my students expressed interest in joining the workforce, so there they were. Initially, there were around 10 of them, but half dropped out later. Do not think this is an industry where you can make fast money. If anyone is interested in working in the industry, I believe they should have enough savings to sustain their living for at least six months. More importantly, they must be very, very interested in working in the industry to give it a try.

Interviewee 2 (salesperson) said,

> We do not actively recruit newcomers. Usually, newcomers join us through someone they know who is already working in this industry, or their family is already in the business. I do not think you can say there is a prospect in the industry, can you? It is not a company or some sort of big organization. There is no career progression. So these descriptions — prospect, career progression —don't fit us.

Prospects of the funeral service industry in Hong Kong

(a) Sustainable development

In the face of radical and continuous challenges, the funeral service industry needs to implement corresponding strategic changes to cope and thrive. The literature indicates that strategies are necessary. Researchers have further explored how stakeholders in the funeral service industry respond to these challenges and sustain their businesses. However, the participants appeared hesitant in their responses to this question.

Interviewee 2 (salesperson) mentioned,

> I do not know what exactly can be done, to be honest. I don't have much idea. I might not be the right person to answer this question.

Interviewee 1 (funeral director) said,

> What can I do? I do not know. I will just do my job, as usual, I guess. It is my family's business, so it depends if my children want to take over the business. If they are not interested, then I may just close it down when I get old.

(b) The realm of technology

Technology has a profound impact on the funeral service industry. Particularly, social media has become an educational platform for death-related information, products, and services. However, in Hong Kong, limited literature or research findings indicate such trends. Therefore, the researchers were eager to gather information from stakeholders working in the funeral service industry in Hong Kong. In response to the question, "To what extent has

technology impacted the growth and development of your funeral service business?", most participants perceived that technology is impacting their business to a certain extent.

Interviewee 3 (salesperson) said,

Technology does impact us. Information can be found online much more easily these days. Prices also become more transparent, and many of my peers now put their price lists online. This leads to increased competition. I think technology can be helpful, as customers can reach us more easily. In the old days, referrals were the main channel through which we could get customers. Moreover, technology circulates information more easily. Customers used to trust whatever the salesperson told them, but now they can get information more easily online. One downside is that when my peers put their price lists online, it becomes more competitive. I just hope that it won't turn into a vicious cycle of competing on lower prices.

Interviewee 4 (coffin shop owner) said,

Customers can get information much more easily online. Death is not something they avoid talking about now. I deliver talks about funeral services in Hong Kong, and people are less taboo about the topic. So, they know where they can get information. It is no longer a business that relies solely on word of mouth.

(c) Intense competition

The funeral business in Hong Kong is both organized and commercialized. It is a profitable industry that has attracted the two largest funeral service providers listed on the stock market (Low, 2019). This development might impact family-based funeral businesses in Hong Kong. However, participants expressed that the fierce competition they face is not from the corporate nature of the business but from regional competition among their existing counterparts.

Interviewee 4 (coffin shop owner) said,

Yes, I heard about those listed companies in the Hong Kong stock market. It does not impact us, though. We are just doing our business as usual. Many of us are still operating as family businesses in the older generation. So, it depends on whether our next generation wants to take over the business or not. We are not aiming to earn a big fortune, just enough to sustain ourselves. If my next generation does not want to take over the business, then I will let it go. It is okay. So, I don't care if the industry is getting more competitive.

Interviewee 3 (salesperson) said,

Yes, I think the industry is getting more competitive. More people are working in the industry now. To get more sales, some of them will lower their prices. It is not a good sign, is it? It leads to vicious competition, and this is not what I would like to see. The relationship between salespeople and families is changing nowadays, too. In the old days, families simply trusted whatever the salesperson told them. But now, information can be accessed easily online or through other sources. Families, therefore, have a better idea of what they are looking for and what they can get.

Other novel challenges

To conclude the interview, the researchers asked the participants if they had any other information or views they would like to share from their working experience in the funeral service business in Hong Kong. One participant mentioned the changing funeral rites and rituals.

(a) Funeral rites

Interviewee 5 (mortuary transporter) said,

I think one of the biggest challenges faced by the industry now is the losing grip on tradition. For instance, the 'burning joss paper' rituals are not allowed these days. I believe it is imperative to hold on to these rituals. Moreover, many people now prefer simplified ceremonies, unlike the old days when lavish ceremonies were more common.

(b) COVID-19 pandemic

With the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the participants were asked, "How has the pandemic affected your work and the funeral service industry?". This was also the concluding question in all interviews. Most participants expressed that the pandemic had minimal impact on their work, but it appeared that the working procedures in handling human remains became more precautionary due to the contagious virus.

According to Interviewee 3 (salesperson),

Of course, the virus has an impact on us. Deceased bodies are now transported directly from the hospital. When the virus first began, we did not pay much attention and just worked as usual. Recently, we have been more careful, especially in observing the color of the tag. More precautionary procedures are also being taken.

Interviewee 5 (mortuary transporter) said,

The pandemic does not affect us. I think it is because of the nature of my job. People are still dying every day, and I am just working as usual. If you want to know if there is an impact on the industry, I think many people have lost their jobs or have less income now, and this affects the budget they want to spend on funerals. That is the only impact I can think of.

Discussion

Previous literature indicated that funeral rites are often "taboo" in nature (Han, 2016), and a death-denying attitude is observed across different cultures and societies, manifesting through psychological and behavioral defenses to deny the existence of death. The findings from the current study are closely related to some of the findings in the extant literature. In line with the previous findings, the death-denying attitude and the taboo nature are still prevalent and confirmed in contemporary society. One striking observation during the interviews was that participants barely mentioned the term "funeral" or "funeral service", often referring to it as "this industry" instead. This reluctance to use the terms "funeral" and "funeral service" is deeply rooted in tradition. To address this issue, the government may consider supporting institutions to deliver specialized courses on funerals and funeral services or establish funeral training institutions. These institutions could provide a variety of on-the-job training courses related to funerals and funeral services. Such courses may help improve public perceptions of the funeral industry.

The increased use of technology has led funeral homes to become more technologically oriented in general, as their consumer base increasingly relies on technology to access information (Lau *et al.*, 2023). A digital presence for funeral products and services can serve as an online education platform to demystify sensitive and controversial products or services (Beard and Burger, 2017). Social media is widely used to promote the businesses. In response, prices have become more transparent, customers can access services more easily, and the industry has become more competitive. Despite these advancements, several bereaved families still report experiencing instances of cheating by funeral operators. To address this issue, the government may consider developing an IT platform to manage funeral operators, providing information on funeral service packages and their acceptable price ranges.

In building around the traditional foundation of funeral products and services, families nowadays tend to choose less expensive options based on economic factors. The rise of customized funerals that reflect the uniqueness of individuality is becoming more prevalent, especially among the baby boomer generation, who are opting for custom-designed funerals (Lynch, 2004; Beard and Burger, 2017). Contemporary funerals are often chosen from a cafeteria-style presentation of what might loosely be termed "rites" along with the necessary accouterments and selected techniques for personalization, all aimed at "celebrating the uniqueness" of the deceased. The new "me" generation further emphasizes the need to address themes of personalization and individualism over traditional funeral practices (Beard and Burger, 2017). Consequently, the funeral service industry needs to adapt to changing customer needs and desires. This study confirmed that the pattern of funeral rites and rituals in Hong Kong is changing. These changes include the personalization of funeral ceremonies and the simplification of funeral practices, which are now preferred by the younger generation. Additionally, the economic impact brought by COVID-19 has influenced these preferences. Recently, a few funeral operators (e.g., Forever Green) have introduced innovative funeral ceremony activities, such as designing ceremonies based on the life story of the deceased. However, there is a lack of promotion channels and strategies for such innovative funeral products or services. Consequently, citizens are not confident in trying innovative funeral products or services during their life planning. Furthermore, the present study observed a lack of change, innovation, and a fear of change within the organizational culture of funeral businesses (Crespell and Hansen, 2008). This resistance is primarily due to the conservative culture of family-run businesses. Outsiders and younger generations find it difficult to obtain information on how to enter the funeral industry and establish a career path.

Conclusion

Organizational survival in a globally competitive environment depends heavily on leadership development and talent management (Day, 2007). Therefore, to survive and thrive, successful organizations must be aware of their leadership talent and how best to develop it across all levels (Lewis and Heckman, 2006). The present study provided findings that meet its objectives, some of which are consistent with previous research. It identified the challenges faced by the funeral service industry in Hong Kong and examined leadership and talent management strategies in response to market changes. Importantly, the study provided recommendations to the management of the funeral service industry on how to respond to these changes.

Firstly, the sustainability of the funeral industry is a debatable issue for the future. In Hong Kong, the funeral service industry is facing a shortage of workers, and the aging workforce with the static demographics of employees presents a significant challenge in driving change. According to Leung et al. (2023), the average age of workers in the funeral service industry is 50, with some of the oldest workers being over 90 years of age. Concurrently, the death rate is predicted to increase over the next five to ten years as the baby boomers are ageing. This study found that recruitment in this industry is not conducted through traditional channels such as job advertisements but rather through referrals and family business networks. This indicates that there must be some form of established network to join the funeral service industry. More importantly, factors such as "fate" or opportunity play a crucial role. Unlike other industries, funeral workers do not have clear career prospects; their success depends on their network and the opportunity to establish and expand their customer base. Talent management, the practice of using strategic human resource planning to improve business value and achieve organizational goals, is essential in this context. It involves not only recruiting talented individuals but also retaining them,

especially when the business faces challenges. Therefore, talent management is a critical success factor for the sustainability of the funeral industry.

Secondly, funeral directors lack professionalization. The experience of unsatisfactory professional conduct and incompetence can be jeopardizing. Therefore, demonstrating control, knowledge, and skills are essential characteristics of a profession, including authority and credibility, community sanction, a code of ethics, and professional culture (Greenwood, 1957; Bottomley *et al.*, 2017). In response, educational institutions may offer training courses for funeral directors to enrich their knowledge and skills. As a result, funeral directors may demonstrate professional consistency as a "means to control the asymmetric expert-client relation" (Abbott, 1988, p. 15). The study has generated a foundation for forthcoming research. The findings primarily concentrate on qualitative analysis, reflecting continuous, radical, and complex challenges that may exceed the capacity of any single leader to develop workable solutions. Identifying and tackling novel challenges and generating human capital through talent development is critical for leaders to adopt the new transformation of the funeral service industry. In the face of these challenges, scholars have emphasized that leadership development is a vital process for sustainable organizational development. However, the present study utilized a small sample size and was unable to find significant findings regarding talent management and leadership development in the funeral service industry in Hong Kong. This preliminary study constructs a framework for developing a large-scale survey involving researchers, policymakers, and industry practitioners in future research. This will be useful in addressing the leadership style most suitable for solving novel challenges and identifying the main challenges leaders face when encountering changes in the funeral service industry.

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Measuring authentic strategy in local government agencies in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper develops an instrument for measuring authentic strategy and evaluates the adoption of its dimensions by the local government agencies of the Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah (RAK) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Design/methodology/approach – The dimensions of authentic strategy are identified using factor analysis. Cronbach alpha coefficient and multiple linear regression are used to examine the reliability and predictive validity of the instrument. One-sided and one-way ANOVA are used to assess the adoption levels of the dimensions of authentic strategy.

Findings – This paper has identified three valid dimensions of authentic strategy: (a) strategy uniqueness, (b) leadership commitment and stakeholders' management, and (c) implementation. The results show that RAK local government agencies have adopted all three dimensions. There were no significant differences between the levels of adoption of the three dimensions of authentic strategy.

Originality/value – The instrument can serve as an effective self-assessment tool for organizations aiming at developing genuine strategies and improving outcomes. This paper adds to the limited literature on strategy within the Arab public sector by analyzing strategy practices in the UAE.

Keywords Authentic strategy, Mission, Leadership, Stakeholders, Implementation, Public sector, United Arab Emirates

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The public sector is facing increased pressure to enhance effectiveness and optimize public value. Despite an increase in literature on public value and strategy (Alford and O'Flynn, 2009), this body of work still falls short in comparison to the extensive and detailed literature on strategy in the private sector, where competition is keen (Alford and Greve, 2017).

The profit-centric nature of the private sector underscores the significance of strategic decision-making and the establishment of processes that facilitate the replication of successful choices. Bryson and Roering (1988) contend that profitability and shareholder value drive private businesses, leading them to focus on capturing additional market share and expanding into new markets. While strategy in the private sector often assumes rivalry and competition in markets (Rumelt, 2011), it is argued that public sector strategy can be conceptualized as a means by which organizations enhance their performance and provide better services (Johnsen, 2018). However, neglecting competition in public sector strategy may contradict the very essence of strategy itself (Angwin and Cummings, 2017). Khalifa (2020) defines strategy as a theory of winning, emphasizing that a strategy lacking a logic on how to succeed in the marketplace is not truly a strategy (Jabnoun and Khalifa, 2024). The heightened recognition of the public sector's influence in attracting investment, developing

human capital, and enhancing societal well-being has prompted a greater focus on competition and public sector strategies among managers and policymakers.

Awareness of the significance of strategies in local and federal government agencies varies across countries. In the United States, the recognition of the role of local government in attracting residents has existed for decades. Tiebout (1956) asserts that citizens move to a community whose local government best aligns with their preferences. Indeed, strategic planning has gained widespread adoption in the United States over the past decades, with government and public agencies embracing this approach to improve performance and achieve goals (Poister and Streib, 2005). In the UAE, where a strong emphasis is placed on competitiveness, strategic planning has been extensively employed at both federal and local levels since 2007 (Elbanna, 2010). European governments have mandated their ministries and local authorities to implement strategic planning (Joyce and Drumaux, 2014). Many Asian countries, including Malaysia, China, Thailand, and India, have integrated strategic management into their public sectors (Sarker, 2006).

Despite the global adoption of strategic planning in the public sector, its authenticity have been questioned in the literature. Prevailing concerns suggest that strategic plans formulated within the public sector may lack true strategic essence (Bryson, 2011; Poister *et al.*, 2010). Cohen (2006) contends that public sector strategic planning tends to be too internally focused to be considered genuine strategy. Jabnoun (2023) observes that many organizations mistake strategy for goals, reducing strategic planning to mere template filling. He calls for the development of authentic strategies that are unique to each organization, rooted in a sound diagnosis, and functioning as levers for organizational performance (Jabnoun and Khalifa, 2024). The lack of authenticity and seriousness of strategies has been addressed by many authors (Liedtka, 2008; Vermeulen, 2017) but there is no tested instrument for measuring strategic authenticity. In fact, instruments and self-assessment tools are scarcely developed in the field of strategy. Furthermore, the assessment of strategy is often left to performance measurement, which may make it late to avoid wrong decisions and to respond effectively to opportunities and threats (Rumelt, 2011). This paper addresses the lack of literature on strategic instruments and particularly the lack of measures of authentic strategy. There is also a knowledge gap on strategy practices in the Arab world, particularly within the public sector (Elbanna, 2010) that this paper aims to address.

This paper develops a valid instrument for measuring authentic strategy by assessing how authentic the strategies of RAK government agencies are. It addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the valid and reliable dimensions of authentic strategy in RAK government agencies?

2. To what extent are the dimensions of authentic strategy adopted in RAK government agencies?

3. Is there a significant difference between the adoption levels of the dimensions of authentic strategy in RAK government agencies?

RAK, one of the seven Emirates in the UAE, is situated a one-hour drive north of Dubai. The economy of the Emirate is characterized by diversity, with no single economic sector contributing more than 30 percent to its GDP. The population of RAK is a blend of nationals and expatriates hailing from around 200 countries. The government agencies in RAK play a crucial role in attracting investment and human capital, with their strategies serving as instrumental drivers for the economic development of the emirate and the well-being of its people.

RAK government agencies have been implementing the European Foundation for Quality Management Excellence model (EFQM, 2018) since 2006. The model is used to assess

management enablers and results. The enablers section of the model mandates organizations to have a strategy, providing guidelines for its development, implementation, and review. The results section addresses various performance indicators, offering guidance on their scope, usability, targets, trends, and comparisons with competitors (EFQM, 2018). In 2017, RAK government further embraced the Government Excellence Model, placing significant emphasis on strategy (GEM, 2023). The adoption of these excellence models has played a crucial role in fostering a culture of strategic management within RAK government.

The next section of this paper covers the literature including the challenge of authenticity in both private and public sectors, and the components of authentic strategy. After the methodology, the results are presented and discussed. The last section is the conclusion and research limitations.

Literature review

The challenge of authenticity

The formulation and implementation of coherent strategies are crucial for local government agencies dealing with complex social, demographic, economic, and environmental challenges, and evolving customer expectations (Worrell *et al.*, 1998). Consequently, strategic planning has been widely employed by local governments in America, Europe, and Asia. However, evidence of the effectiveness of strategy in the public sector remains limited (Safi and Mahmoud, 2022). Johanson *et al.* (2017) suggest that the effectiveness of public sector strategy remains a matter of controversy. Johnsen (2018) observes that strategic planning and management are generally viewed positively in Norwegian Municipalities. However, when objective metrics such as efficiency are considered, formal strategic planning appears to have either a negative or no discernible effect. This aligns with the findings of Andrews *et al.* (2012) in their analysis of Welsh local authority services.

According to McKinsey, 80 percent of public sector transformation initiatives end in failure (Checinski *et al.*, 2019). Bryson (2003) emphasizes that challenges in effectively engaging stakeholders hinder the success of strategies in public sector organizations. Radnor and McGuire (2004) cite various difficulties faced by public sector organizations in implementing performance management systems, including environmental complexity, bureaucratic obstacles, resource constraints, resistance to change, and challenges in stakeholder engagement. Erisia-Eke and Soriakumar (2021) argued that government over-regulation, bureaucracy, and the politicized nature of governmental work pose serious barriers to effective strategic implementation. Bryson *et al.* (2017) state that public-sector strategic planning is not a singular entity but a collection of concepts, procedures, tools, and practices that must be applied sensitively and contingently in specific situations. They further note that it remains unclear how to best conceptualize context and match processes to context in order to produce desirable outcomes. Many authors question the seriousness of strategy in public sectors and argue that government organizations are practicing planning and not strategy (Bryson, 2011; Poister *et al.*, 2010).

The lack of strategic effectiveness is not exclusive to the public sector; business companies, despite having utilized strategic planning longer than their public or nonprofit sector counterparts (Gordon, 1997), exhibit an alarming failure rate. Some authors estimate this failure rate to be between 50 and 90 percent (Cândido and Santos, 2015; Sirkin *et al.*, 2005). While some attribute strategic failures to implementation challenges (Hrebiniak, 2006; Niven, 2003), others point to a lack of seriousness about strategy (Rumelt, 2011; Jabnoun and Khalifa, 2024).

Tregoe and Tobia (1991) emphasize the distinction between strategy and planning. Rumelt (2011) argues that stretch goals, budgets, and endless organizational to-do lists do not constitute strategic plans; effective strategy, he posits, emerges when organizations confront

imminent threats. Vermeulen (2017) argued that many strategies fail because they are not actually strategies as they do not represent a set of clear choices. Many organizations claim to have strategy just because they filled "strategy" templates, which tend to create similarity rather than uniqueness. Harney (2012, p. 127) stated that "the language of strategy (mission, vision, objectives, etc.) has become increasingly empty, promoting convergence and similarity as opposed to divergence and uniqueness". Liedtka (2008) notes a lack of authenticity in strategy formulation. Jabnoun (2023) observes that many organizations have fragmented strategic processes, including missions, visions, and values that are disconnected from the passion of leaders and the behaviors of employees. The core values of many private and public organizations often describe general positive qualities, contradicting Selznick's (1957) claim that values should emanate from unique institutional identities. Many organizations view a values initiative as another marketing launch or "a one-time event measured by the initial attention it receives, not the authenticity of its content" (Lencioni, 2002, p. 115).

Organizations commonly use various tools, such as SWOT analysis and PESTEL Analysis for diagnosis, especially in the public sector (Preciado, 2015). However, they may not necessarily use the output of their diagnosis to determine strategic objectives and initiatives. Hill and Westbrook (1997, p. 46) found that over twenty out of fifty surveyed companies used SWOT, yet "no one subsequently used the outputs within the later stages of the strategy process."

Authentic strategy

An authentic strategy is considered realistic, credible, and practical, avoiding imitation or reliance on unchallenged best practices (Jabnoun and Khalifa, 2024). Uniqueness is a key theme of authentic strategy, recognizing that different organizations deal with different realities and, as such, need distinct strategies to respond to their own unique challenges. This uniqueness should be reflected in the mission, vision, and values of an organization (Harney, 2012). Angwin and Cummings (2017) indicate that authentic strategy is unique to the organization and its environment, leading to competitive success. Authentic strategies are the product of organizational creativity and the collective insights of its people (Jabnoun and Khalifa, 2024). Liedtka (2008) asserts that the participation of employees is a condition for strategic authenticity, and strategies lacking creativity to provide unique customer value and gain a competitive advantage are not considered authentic. Well-formulated strategies may lack authenticity if they lack a serious intent for implementation, highlighting the importance of strategic implementation in the literature (Bej and Das, 2019; Hrebiniak, 2006).

Authentic strategy is an extension of the concept of good strategy (Jabnoun and Khalifa, 2024). Rumelt (2011) identified two types of strategy: bad strategy and good strategy. Bad strategy is characterized by fluff or restatements of the obvious, failure to face challenges due to inadequate diagnosis, mistaking goals for strategy, and setting impractical objectives. Good strategy, in contrast, is a serious approach aimed at gaining a competitive advantage. It is built around a kernel consisting of a diagnosis defining the nature of the challenge, a guiding policy or overall approach for dealing with the challenge, and a set of coherent actions designed to carry out the guiding policy. While good strategy satisfies some requirements of authentic strategy, it would not be considered authentic if formulated without the participation of employees (Liedtka, 2008).

While both authentic strategy and good strategy share the common goal of achieving a competitive advantage, authentic strategy places explicit emphasis on the requirement for creativity to ensure that the strategy effectively provides the necessary leverage to surpass competitors.

Despite the increased interest in having serious, good, or authentic strategies as opposed to non-strategies, bad strategies, or unauthentic strategies (Vermeulen, 2017; Rumelt, 2011;

Liedtka, 2008; Jabnoun and Khalifa, 2024). There is no tested instrument that assesses how good or authentic a strategy is. A search of major business research databases such as Ebsco, Proquest, and Emerald with unlimited time frame and using keywords of strategy and scale/ instrument resulted in one single paper that developed a valid of strategic openness (Radomska, 2023). Jabnoun (2023) proposed a self-assessment tool for authentic strategy but did not test it. The instrument includes the following five dimensions:

1. Authentic mission: Mission statements are recognized as a vital component of strategic management in the public sector (Taiwo *et al.*, 2016). There is a positive relationship between mission statements and financial performance (Desmidt *et al.*, 2011), as well as employee effectiveness, satisfaction, and retention (Kim and Lee, 2007). An authentic mission should represent a worthy cause (Khalifa, 2012) that employees are committed to pursuing in their daily work. It is unique to the organization, and its simplicity facilitates effective communication with stakeholders (Jabnoun and Khalifa, 2024).

2. Authentic vision: Visions statements that employees relate to improve effectiveness of private and public organizations (Darbi, 2012). They increase customer satisfaction, employees' satisfaction and employees' commitment (Kantabutra and Pisanu, 2009). Lack of top management passion for the vision induces employees not to take it seriously. An authentic vision is one that reflects the leadership passion and takes the thinking of employees beyond day-to-day activity (Schraeder and Self, 2010). It is realistic and acted upon by employees (Lattuch and Dankert, 2018). It is unique to the organization, simple and well communicated (Hastings *et al.*, 2011).

3. Authentic core values: Values have a positive impact on continuous improvement, customer satisfaction, and competitiveness. Authentic core values are unique to the organization and its industry (Lencioni, 2002). They are reflected in the norms of behavior of employees and translated into actions (Jabnoun, 2017).

4. Core of authentic strategy: Strategy produces decisions and actions that shape and guide. It addresses two fundamental questions — what an organization does and why (Bryson, 2011). These questions are answered in the core of authentic strategy, which includes the three components of the kernel of good strategy (Rumelt, 2011) — diagnosis, guiding policy, and a set of coherent actions. Additionally, authenticity involves elements such as creativity, participation, and stakeholder management (Jabnoun, 2023). The diagnosis must rely on accurate and reliable data, as the use of inaccurate or incomplete information can result in incorrect diagnoses and, subsequently, inappropriate strategies. It should also be action oriented (Rumelt, 2011), focusing on the needs of stakeholders.

   The guiding policy, stemming from the diagnosis, should offer direction to the organization, empowering it to make informed choices and eliminate less viable options. A set of coherent actions, developed based on the guiding policy, is crucial for enhancing organizational capabilities and multiplying outcomes. The coherence of various projects and actions is critical in creating a competitive advantage, as underscored by Lafley and Martin (2013).

5. Implementation: Childress (2013) views strategy and execution as inseparable yet distinct elements, akin to the two sides of a coin. According to him, when these components are separated, they fail to function effectively. He characterizes strategy as a dynamic entity that manifests itself through the process of implementation, emphasizing it as a distinctive and disciplined journey that involves the entire organization. Consequently, strategy devoid of execution is deemed non-existent.

Niven (2003) highlights a staggering 90 percent failure rate in the execution of strategies for public sector organizations, attributing this high rate to the unique challenges faced by governments both internally and externally. This suggests that executing strategies in the public sector may pose greater difficulties compared to the private sector (Olivier and Schwella, 2018). Implementation includes leadership commitment, alignment with systems and structure (Hrebiniak, 2006), in addition to alignment with projects (Lippitt, 2007), and operations (Kaplan and Norton, 2008).

Research methodology

The initial dimensions of this instrument are authentic mission, authentic vision, authentic core values, core of authentic strategy and implementation. These dimensions are presented in the literature review. A five-point Likert scale questionnaire, including the five above initial dimensions and four general statements that measure authentic strategy, was used for this study. The questionnaire was delivered by email to all division and department managers in RAK government agencies in addition to employees of strategy and development offices. 141 responses were collected, including 104 managers and 37 employees of the strategy and development offices.

Collected responses of all items of the five original dimensions of the questionnaire are factor analyzed using principal component extraction with varimax rotation, which is a method commonly used for developing instruments (Roussel, 2005). The number of factors is unconstrained. For the sake of convergent validity, 0.5 is used as a factor loading cut-off point (Wei and Nguyen, 2020; Roussel, 2005). Factors including less than three items are eliminated. For the sake of discriminate validity, items must display a 0.2 loading difference with any other factor. The reliability of the dimensions is tested based on Cronbach alpha coefficient. A reliability coefficient of 0.8 is recommended for most studies (Lance *et al.*, 2006). The predictive validity of the dimensions is tested using multiple linear regression. The extent to which RAK government agencies adopted authentic strategy is addressed using one-sided T test with test value of 3, while the difference between the levels of adoption of the dimensions of authentic strategy in RAK government agencies is addressed using one way ANOVA.

Results

Dimensions of authentic strategy in RAK government agencies

Using factor analyses with the criteria specified above resulted in three dimensions of authentic strategy in RAK government agencies. These dimensions are: (a) strategy uniqueness, (b) leadership commitment and stakeholders' management, and (c) implementation. The Cronbach alpha coefficients of these three dimensions were 0.933, 0.934, and 0.874 respectively (Table 1). These results indicate that the three dimensions are reliable (Lance *et al.*, 2006). This supports the internal cohesiveness of the items forming each dimension and creates a good foundation for replacing them with one latent variable.

To check the predictive validity of the instruments, this study tested the following regression model:

AU = f (SU, LCSM IMP) where AU is the mean of items describing the dependent variable, authentic strategy, SU is the mean of items of strategy uniqueness, LCSM is the mean of items of leadership commitment and stakeholders' management, Imp is the mean of items of implementation.

The above regression model was conducted using SPSS. The model had a significant F value and an R-squared of 0.786. This means strategy uniqueness, leadership commitment

ITEMS	Original Dimension	Factor Loading
Strategy Uniqueness (1-6,8,16,17)	α = (0.933)	
Our mission statement is unique to our organization	Authentic Mission	0.721
The mission statement of our organization expresses a noble cause	Authentic Mission	0.606
The mission statement is simple and well understood by all stakeholders	Authentic Mission	0.571
Employees truly believe in the mission of the organization	Authentic Mission	0.745
Employees relate their daily activities to the mission of the organization	Authentic Mission	0.645
Our vision statement is unique to our organization	Authentic Vision	0.756
Employees believe in the vision and are eager to achieve it	Authentic Vision	0.694
The strategy includes a guiding policy based on a sound diagnosis	Core of Authentic Strategy	0.708
The strategy includes a set of coherent activities, projects, and initiatives guided by the guiding policy	Core of Authentic Strategy	0.675
Leadership Commitment and stakeholders' Mgt. (21, 23-26)	α = (0.934)	
Employees participate in developing the strategy of the organization	Core of Authentic Strategy	0.734
The strategy addresses the concerns of all stakeholders	Core of Authentic Strategy	0.761
Leaders protect and champion core values	Serious Implementation	0.727
Leaders are committed to empowering employees to complete strategic projects and initiatives and provides the necessary resources.	Serious Implementation	0.776
Leaders motivate employees to achieve strategic objectives	Serious Implementation	0.744
Implementation (28-30)	α = (0.874)	
The policies, organizational structure, processes, and systems are aligned with strategy	Serious Implementation	0.635
Key performance indicators are balanced, and their targets are ambitious and feasible.	Serious Implementation	0.829
Scheduled targets of strategic indicators are aligned with those of strategic projects and key processes.	Serious Implementation	0.713
Source: By author		

Table 1.
Dimensions and Reliability of Authentic Strategy

and stakeholder's management, and implementation explain 78.6 percent of the variations in authentic strategy. The resulting model is:

$$AU = \text{-}0.71 + 0.34\,SU + 0.377\,LCSM + 0.291\,IMP$$

Table 2 shows that the above regression coefficients have significant T values.

Model	Beta	T	F	R^2
(Constant)	-0.71	-0.325	165.921**	0.786
SU	0.34	4.401**		
LCSI	.377	5.718**		
IMP	.291	4.671**		
Dependent Variable AU (authentic strategy)		** Significant at the 0.01 level		
Source: By author				

Table 2.
Regression Model for Authentic Strategy

The above result supports the validity of the instrument indicating that the three above dimensions do measure authentic strategy. The resulting valid dimensions are well established in the strategy literature in general (Bej and Das, 2019; Johanson *et al.*, 2017; Carmouz *et al.*, 2019), particularly in the literature on authentic strategy (Jabnoun and Khalifa, 2024).

Extend of adoption of authentic strategy
To assess the extent of the adoption of authentic strategy, a one-sided T-test was conducted for the three dimensions of authentic strategy, in addition to the dependent variable of authentic strategy, using a test value of 3. The results of the test, shown in Table 3, indicate that the mean values for the four variables are significantly higher than 3. This suggests that RAK government agencies have indeed adopted authentic strategy.

Differences in the level of adoptions of authentic strategy dimensions
Conducting a one-way ANOVA reveals an F value of 0.8520 with a significance level of 0.439, indicating that there is no significant difference between the adoption of the three dimensions of authentic strategy (refer to Table 4).

Conclusion
The paper provides a valid and reliable measure of authentic strategy to help improve strategic management process and outcomes. The instrument developed in this paper may help public sector institutions in different parts of the world to assess their strategies. As a self-assessment tool, it can identify areas of improvement in the strategic process and ensure that public sector strategies are authentic and unique to their institutions.

The paper contributes to the scant literature on instruments for assessing strategies. It also contributes to filling the knowledge gap on strategy in the Arab public sector. Three dimensions of authentic strategy are identified: (a) strategy uniqueness, (b) leadership commitment and stakeholders' management, and (c) implementation. Strategy uniqueness and implementation are key themes of authentic strategy (Jabnoun and Khalifa, 2024).

	T	DF	Test value $= 3$ Sig. (2 tailed)	Mean difference
US	25.789	140	0.000	1.33333
LCSM	23.025	140	0.000	1.36028
IMP	20.926	140	0.000	1.26005
AU	21.790	140	0.000	1.1688
Source: By author				

Table 3. One-sided T – Test for Authentic Strategy

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean	F	Sig.
Between Groups	0.759	2	0.379	0.8520	0.439
Within Groups	193.239	420	0.460		
Total	193.998	422			
Source: By author					

Table 4. Comparing the Dimensions of Authentic Strategy

Implementation has been strongly emphasized in the strategy literature (Bej and Das, 2019). Both dimensions are mentioned in the statements of the dependent variable of this questionnaire.

Leadership plays a key role in formulating and executing strategy (Johanson *et al.*, 2017). Leaders create a vivid vision for any strategic program. They champion the core values and make sure they are translated into actions. Effective leaders communicate the strategy to employees and align their behaviors with its guidance (Vermeulen, 2012). Managing stakeholders is one of the roles of effective leaders. The EFQM model that RAK government agencies used includes stakeholders' relations in the sub-criterial of both leadership and strategy. Identifying and involving stakeholders is one of the main components of strategic planning (Carmouz *et al.*, 2019). Engaging stakeholders is one of the main challenges of strategic management in the public sector (Bryson, 2003). Government agencies of RAK working on strategy since 2006 have adopted the dimensions of authentic strategy. There was no significant difference in the level of adoption of the three dimensions.

This paper delved into authentic strategy within a local government context. The findings of this study might not be directly transferable to the private sector, where a stronger emphasis is often placed on competitive dynamics. Moreover, the methodology employed in this paper utilized a statistical survey, providing a comprehensive overview of authentic strategy implementation. Going into more details about the implementation of authentic strategy in RAK government may require employing a case study approach that can offer a more profound, albeit more focused, understanding of the adoption of authentic strategy.

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The dilemmas of Bangladesh as a weak state in South Asia

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Abstract

Purpose – The complex environment of regional and extra-regional politics in South Asia renders the region more susceptible to economically and militarily weaker states. This article investigates the challenges Bangladesh faces due to rapidly changing geopolitical dynamics and global political and economic upheavals.
Design/methodology/approach – This study delves into the dilemmas encountered by Bangladesh as a weak state through literature review, in-depth interviews, media reports and dialogues.
Findings – Four key factors are identified: (a) Bangladesh's significance to major powers has increased; (b) it confronts many obstacles hindering its pursuit of a purely non-aligned foreign policy due to its strategic importance to these powers; (c) its internal factors including political turbulence, corruption, and fragile external relations, have been detrimental; and (d) the intensification of key powers' influence has constrained its autonomy.
Originality/value – This study underscores that weak institutions, least regional integration, and limited cooperation among states have compromised the autonomy of weak states like Bangladesh in South Asia. There is a need for unity and collaboration among these nations to address dilemmas in the interest of their national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and regional stability.

Keywords Bangladesh, Dilemmas, Foreign policy, International politics, South Asia, Regional politics, Weak states
Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Weak states constitute the largest number in the world, including but not limited to those in South Asia; however, these states are facing complex and harsh realities that limit their material capabilities compared to hegemonic powers, both regionally and globally (Hall, 2022; Plagemann, 2022). The vast disparities in geography, culture, population, economy, and military power among these states have heightened the region's vulnerability (Buzan and Weaver, 2003). South Asia grapples with inter-state and intra-state conflicts, harsh geopolitical realities, least regional integration and cooperation, weak institutions, and numerous security and development hurdles (Ganguly and O'Donnell, 2022), with weak states bearing the burden of these challenges (Manoharan, 2024).

International politics have pervaded South Asia since the Cold War era, with the U.S. and Russia vying for hegemonic influence in the region through local powers such as India and Pakistan. The ever-growing presence of China has further reshaped the region's political, economic, and security dynamics, leading to intensified competition among both regional and extra-regional powers (Ganguly and O'Donnell, 2022; Riaz, 2022; Hossain and Islam, 2021), especially influencing weak states in South Asia (Paul, 2019). As the Cold War powers deemed it inappropriate to solely view the region through the lens of India and Pakistan, the hegemonic powers have increasingly directed their attention towards individual states. In comparison, China's strategies and policies towards South Asia worked much better than

those of other powers, resulting in a radical change in their foreign policy towards the region (Wagner, 2016; Ranjan and Guo, 2022). The competition among foreign officials visiting several countries, such as Bangladesh, in recent years is an obvious example.

This study investigates how regional political dynamics and foreign influences constrain South Asia's prosperity, and how weak states become the primary victims. The existing research on South Asian weak states basically focuses on major powers' rivalries and competition and how these rivalries benefit them, especially in economic development. There has been little focus on comprehensive analyses of the challenges weak states have persistently faced in navigating major power competition, particularly, how do these weak states respond to the growing geopolitical competition in the region? Do weak states like Bangladesh feel secure in a political landscape where great powers dominate? What strategies does Bangladesh employ to safeguard its national sovereignty and interests? How can this issue in South Asia be contextualized? This paper aims to address these questions in a comprehensive manner.

To address the research questions, this study employs a historical-geographic approach, integrates key international relations theories, and utilises qualitative methods to analyse regional dynamics in South Asia. It begins with a conceptual and theoretical examination of weak state' behaviour in international relations, focusing on South Asian nations. The findings indicate that weak states often navigate great power rivalries by aligning with stronger nations, like Bhutan seeking protection, or maintaining neutrality, as seen with Bangladesh, to avoid entanglement in power struggles. Second, the study highlights disparities among South Asian states, particularly the dominance of India due to its material superiority over all except Pakistan. However, India's influence is waning as China's foreign policies and investments in the region gain traction, alongside the U.S. and Russia's shifting perspectives that do not solely focus on India and Pakistan.

The empirical section draws on in-depth interviews, fieldwork, and media reports to examine Bangladesh's challenges amid rising regional power competition and its strategic significance to major powers. The study concludes by summarising the findings and offering recommendations for Bangladesh to enhance its leverage in both regional and global politics.

A conceptual and theoretical framework

In international politics and relations, the concept of "weak state" is highly contentious, particularly regarding its definition, characteristics, and determinants. Generally, weak states are understood as nations with limited political, economic, and military power compared to more developed countries. Jackson (2000) argues that a weak state is not necessarily synonymous with being underdeveloped, undemocratic, or ravaged by international conflict; rather, it stems from political failures. He emphasises that weak states often struggle to maintain essential civic conditions for their populations, including domestic peace, law and order, and effective governance. Consequently, these states may experience deteriorating infrastructure, widespread corruption, unregulated borders, and rampant crime (Krasner, 2004). These states typically struggle with ineffective governance, lack the capacity to meet the basic needs of their citizens, and are vulnerable to internal and external influences and threats. They also face challenges in asserting their national interests on regional and global stages (Stewart, 2011).

Weak states face material and structural disadvantages that influence their behaviour in regional and international politics. Their military and economic weaknesses lead them to seek a peaceful environment regionally and globally, or at the very least, meaningful security assurances (Plagemann, 2022). In South Asia, weak states often rely on foreign aid and investments, limiting their bargaining power with larger economies. This is evident in the growing trade deficits between weak and powerful nations in the region. Furthermore,

political instability in these weak states restricts their influence in both regional and extra-regional forums.

From a theoretical point of view, weak states are often defined by their limited power and influence within the global system, as explored through the lenses of mainstream IR theories: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Realism posits that weak states frequently become pawns in the power struggles of stronger nations (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2018). To enhance their security, these states may seek to balance power through alliances with peer nations or by aligning themselves with more powerful states for protection (Morgenthau, 1948). For instance, in South Asia, countries like Bangladesh grapple with security concerns stemming from hegemonic regional powers, facing increasing pressure to align with one of them.

In contrast, liberalism offers a more optimistic view. Scholars like Keohane and Nye (1977) and Ikenberry (2020) argue that weak states can leverage international organisations and diplomatic channels to advocate for their interests and safeguard their sovereignty within the liberal international order. South Asian states have, for example, utilised platforms like the United Nations and the International Criminal Court (ICC) to address disputes with neighbouring countries and mitigate direct conflicts. Nonetheless, challenges remain evident, such as Bangladesh's ongoing water disputes with India and the Rohingya crisis involving Myanmar.

Constructivism emphasises the significance of identity and norms in shaping state behaviour. Weak states may strive to assert their unique identities amid intense power rivalries (Wendt, 1999) and may form alliances based on shared values and norms (Acharya, 2017). In South Asia, the diverse cultural and religious backgrounds of these weak nations complicate efforts to unite against major powers. Instead, their cooperation tends to focus on common interests like regional integration, economic collaboration, and strengthening regional institutions. Although there have been some advances toward regional cooperation, it is essential for leaders of these states to prioritise practical implementation over mere rhetoric.

Research methodology

This study utilised qualitative research methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the literature on smaller and weaker states and to conduct a comparative analysis of major power politics in South Asia concerning these weaker states. The primary objective was to investigate the foreign policy approaches of major powers towards weak states in South Asia, as well as the responses of these states to such approaches.

To address the complexities of the South Asian political landscape and its implications for weak states, a triangulated qualitative approach was adopted. This approach comprised three methodological components: a literature review, in-depth interviews, and content analysis. A thorough examination of both scholarly and non-scholarly literature, including media sources and online information, was conducted to evaluate key issues and fundamental questions related to the topic.

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted during a one-and-a-half month fieldwork trip in Bangladesh. These interviews aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of experts in the region. The study sought to deepen the understanding of the challenges faced by weak states, particularly Bangladesh, and to analyse how the nation navigates these complexities. A total of twenty-five experts were selected for this study based on their extensive knowledge and expertise regarding Bangladesh and the region as a whole. This group included seven academicians, four diplomats, five government officials, five politicians, and four journalists, all of whom have played (and continue to play) significant roles in the decision-making processes related to Bangladesh and South Asian

affairs. Invitations to participate in interviews were distributed via email and social media platforms (LinkedIn and WhatsApp). Each invitation outlined the purpose of the study and included a brief overview of potential questions.

Before conducting the interviews, interviewees were briefed on the study's objectives, potential risks and benefits, and verbal informed consents were obtained regarding the use of their names and identities in the study. The semi-structured interviews featured open-ended questions that focused on the challenges faced by weak states due to intense power competition in the region, coping strategies employed by these states, and recommendations for vulnerable countries. All interviews were conducted through video calls using Zoom, with participants' consent obtained for recording some sessions for transcription and analysis. The interviews lasted between one and one and a half hours.

The data obtained from the in-depth interviews were analysed using content analysis to identify key themes and patterns from the experts' responses. Notably, variations in perceptions among experts were observed, particularly between politicians and government officials. These differing perspectives provided valuable insights that encouraged a re-evaluation of South Asian political dynamics from a fresh viewpoint.

South Asian regional politics and weak states

Geo-structure of South Asian nations

The geographical positioning of a nation or region holds significant sway over both regional and global politics and has long been recognised as a pivotal determinant of foreign policy (Jha, 2011). Geography fundamentally determines whether a state has easier access to neighbouring and extra-regional entities for enhanced cooperation. However, the geo-structure of South Asian nations presents challenges that impede seamless cooperation. There exists a substantial imbalance among these states in terms of their geographical expanse. India, for example, encompasses approximately 63 percent of the total area, leaving the remaining countries with only 37 percent (Table 1), including the Maldives, which accounts for less than 0.1 percent. Moreover, India shares borders with all other states except Afghanistan. Nepal and Bhutan are landlocked by India, rendering them heavily reliant on it for trade and access to the sea, while Bangladesh has limited access via the Bay of Bengal, with two major ports serving to reduce excessive dependency on India. Furthermore, apart from Afghanistan and Pakistan, no other countries have direct borders with each other, preventing smooth cooperation among them.

Countries	Area (%)	Population (%)	GDP (%)	State Language	State Religion	Political System
Afghanistan	12.5	2.2	1.7	Pashto & Dari	Islam	Islamic Emirate
Bangladesh	2.8	9.0	9.1	Bengali	Islam	Democracy
Bhutan	0.7	0.0*	0.2	Dzongkha	Buddhism	Monarchy
India	63.0	73.4	72.8	Hindi & English	Hindu	Democracy
Maldives	0.0*	0.0*	0.1	Maldivian	Islam	Democracy
Nepal	2.8	1.6	0.8	Nepali	Hindu	Democracy
Pakistan	16.9	12.6	6.9	Urdu & English	Islam	Democracy
Sri Lanka	1.3	1.1	8.3	Sinhala & Tamil	Buddhism	Democracy

Note: 0.0* - Less than 0.1%
Sources: Worldometer (2023), The World Bank (2023), and Statista (2024).

Table 1.
Diversities and disparities among South Asian countries

South Asian states share several major rivers, which have become sources of major concerns among some weaker nations (Jayaram and Sethi, 2022). Bangladesh has long-standing disputes over water sharing and boundaries with India, given the shared ownership of 54 rivers. Despite assurances from previous and current Indian leaders, some of these disputes remain unresolved, leading to doubts among the people of Bangladesh regarding their goodwill and fostering an anti-Indian sentiment. Similarly, Nepal and Pakistan also face water-sharing disputes with India, straining relations among states and impeding efforts to deepen regional integration and cooperation (Suhail, 2023).

Power asymmetries among South Asian states

South Asia is characterised by conflict and competition, marked by significant power and resource disparities among its constituent states (Hall, 2022). The distribution of power within the region holds critical importance in realist analysis, as it influences the decisions of both regional and external actors. India, with 73.4 percent of its population and 72.8 percent of its GDP, dominates the region's economy (Table 1). This substantial imbalance in resources and capabilities gives India significant leverage in regional affairs (Rajagopalan, 2022). Pakistan is the only country that attempts to rival India, but in terms of military strength, New Delhi far exceeds Islamabad. Pakistan's nuclear capabilities may match India's, but both countries' economic growth and military expenditures indicate that this equilibrium may not hold in the near future.

Furthermore, cultural and language differences, as well as political systems in South Asian states, play a critical role in shaping regional political dynamics and provide significant leverage for a single state.

Domestic capacity of weak states

The significant imbalance of power among South Asian nations has a profound impact on weak states. Firstly, because they lack the domestic capacity to compete with or counterbalance India, these countries consistently harbour security apprehensions towards New Delhi (Manoharan, 2024). In every comparison, except for Pakistan, no single state can counteract India. While both India and Pakistan possess nuclear weapons, weak states do not even have secondary-category armaments, severely constraining their choices and actions.

Secondly, the major challenge for weak states lies in their domestic political volatility and the politicisation of key institutions and government sectors, coupled with widespread corruption and money laundering. Consequently, leaders of these states struggle to unify themselves, even on a single issue, in the best interests of their own states and citizens. This creates an opening for external powers to establish strong footholds in weak states through various means.

Lastly, the influence of hegemonic powers in the domestic politics of these states is a primary factor exacerbating the erosion of democratic principles. It is noteworthy that dominant powers support specific political parties to ascend to power, impeding the people's ability to elect their government independently. Consequently, many prominent political parties primarily rely on foreign sources to gain and maintain power, prioritising their regime over the national interests and wielding significant domestic leverage. This has curtailed the domestic capacity of weak nations to wield influence in their foreign relations, thereby perpetuating their dependency on external sources.

Regional institutions in South Asia

In international relations, liberals argue that both domestic and international institutions play crucial roles in shaping the behaviour of states by constraining their options, altering

their incentives, and providing platforms for diplomatic interactions. Governmental regulations hinder the efficacy of domestic institutions in South Asia, while regional institutions fall short of those in other regions like ASEAN and the EU. Despite its establishment in 1985 with the ambitious goal of fostering a robust and prosperous South Asia akin to the EU (Chakma, 2020), SAARC has failed to significantly impact international relations in the region (Sahasrabuddhe, 2024). While ASEAN member countries trade with one another at a rate exceeding 25 percent, SAARC members have a meagre trade volume of less than 5 percent (Nayak, 2024). As against this, intra-regional trade accounts for nearly 50 percent of the total trade in the East Asia and Pacific region and 22 percent of the total trade in the Sub-Saharan African region (The World Bank, 2024).

SAARC has been largely ineffective in mitigating tensions among nations, particularly between India and Pakistan, and mistrust and suspicion towards each other make South Asia one of the least economically integrated regions (Paul, 2020). Consequently, some countries have taken the initiative to form alternative multilateral associations with their regional allies (Nayak, 2024). While New Delhi has shown a preference for the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, Islamabad has opted to strengthen its economic ties with Beijing through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a significant component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Additionally, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN) have endeavoured to enhance road connectivity and facilitate electricity trade in recent years.

It is notable that South Asian nations have not coalesced to strengthen SAARC. One can see the limited success of inclusive regional institutions in South Asia as indicative of underlying hostilities among nations. Furthermore, these states have failed to alleviate tensions between India and Pakistan, which is a primary factor contributing to instability in the region (Mamchur and Vanda, 2022). This situation has created an opportunity for external powers to exert influence over their internal affairs.

South Asian international politics and weak states
Amidst the Cold War epoch
During the Cold War era, the pervasive involvement of global powers in South Asian numerous affairs is undeniable. Since then, the two superpowers, the U.S. and the Soviet Union, endeavoured to enlist the support of the regional heavyweights, India and Pakistan, for their respective causes (Loftus, 2023). In most cases, India aligned with Soviet Russia, while Pakistan maintained a closer relationship with the U.S. Both superpowers attempted to involve the two in international affairs, but encountered challenges when it came to resolving conflicts between them. Similarly, both rivals repeatedly exploited the global bipolar competition to advance their own interests (Rajagopalan, 2022). Notable examples include the 1954 U.S.-Pakistan mutual defence agreement, the 1962 Sino-Indian war, the 1965 India-Pakistan war, and the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war. In each of these conflicts, the U.S. and Soviet Union stood at opposing ends, offering support to either Islamabad or New Delhi. During the birth of Bangladesh, both global powers diverged in their support, with the U.S. backing Pakistan and the Soviet Union favouring Bangladesh (and India).

The Post-Cold War era
In the post-Cold War period, the U.S. emerged as the sole global superpower, prompting both India and Pakistan to vie for its favour. Nevertheless, the influence of New Delhi and Islamabad across the region remained apparent, largely due to the U.S.'s policy of viewing South Asia through the lens of India and Pakistan. Consequently, both local powers,

particularly India, wielded greater influence over weak states and regional forums, thereby effectively safeguarding their own interests. However, China's expanded presence in the region through its Belt and Road initiative has fundamentally transformed the dynamics of regional and international politics in South Asia (Raju and Srinivasan, 2024). China's ascent as an economic powerhouse has led to heightened engagements in infrastructure development, connectivity, trade, and investments with regional countries, particularly with weak states through its connectivity investment policy.

China's remarkable ascent poses formidable challenges not only to the U.S.'s global leadership but also to India's dominance in South Asia (Sumit *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, Washington seeks collaboration with New Delhi, while India requires support from the U.S. and its allies to counterbalance China's growing presence.

New emerging powers and greater attention to weak states
The ascendance of new regional powers around the world and their engagement with weak nations are shaping the geopolitical dynamics of the post-Cold War era. Amid these power dynamics, it is critical to shift attention toward Asia's two emerging powers, China and India, and their relationships with smaller and less powerful states that lack material capacity. Beijing's effective engagement in weak countries in South Asia has compelled other regional and global powers to reassess their strategies and policies in order to gain the favour of these states. Ambassador Kelly Keiderling, the U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state overseeing South and Central Asia, has confirmed that the Biden administration has modified their foreign policy approach, with a special focus on individual countries, towards South Asia (Molla, 2023). Notably, high-level visits to several South Asian countries underscore this shift in the U.S. foreign policy paradigm.

It is anticipated that a new systematic bipolar or multipolar competition will scrutinise these weak nations more closely. Paul (2019) has already noted a trend in this direction. China has demonstrated a keen interest in engaging with weaker South Asian states, as evidenced by its recent involvement in the domestic politics and economy of the region. Notably, China's bilateral agreement with Bangladesh, amounting to over 26 billion US dollars, represents the highest level of financial engagement between Bangladesh and any foreign country.

While China's ascent presents both opportunities and challenges for all states in the international system, its growing power and sway have significant implications for the weak states. China's expanding influence is reshaping the regional geopolitical landscape and creating a new order in South Asia, prompting some weaker states to view this shift with opportunities, challenges, scepticism, and fear.

Dilemmas towards Bangladesh as a weak state
Security concerns
Bangladesh, despite being a South Asian nation, serves as a natural link between South and Southeast Asia and holds a significant position at the Bay of Bengal, a crucial path for regional and international trade (Houda, 2020). Consequently, both regional and global powers are keen on bolstering their presence in Bangladesh. Due to its multi-dimensional bilateral and multilateral relationships with great powers, Dhaka is focusing on hedging its foreign policy towards them. However, Bangladesh has not been immune to foreign interference in its domestic and foreign policymaking affairs.

Bangladesh faces security challenges from both internal and external sources (Karim and Uddin, 2016). The country shares borders with India and Myanmar, which have historically been sources of tension and conflict. This vulnerability exposes Bangladesh to cross-border killings, terrorism, illegal trafficking, and other security threats. While border killings have

significantly decreased in recent years, unresolved water-sharing disputes between Bangladesh and India have had a detrimental impact on Bangladesh's economy. Similarly, the Myanmar army's genocide against the Rohingyas has heightened tensions along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, driving millions to flee to Bangladesh (Trapa, 2023). Currently, the country hosts over a million Rohingya refugees, with no signs of their return to Myanmar despite the ICC's verdict. In a recent interview, Nasir Uddin, a prominent migration and refugee expert and professor at the Department of Anthropology at Chittagong University, Bangladesh, noted that illegal drug trade, cross-border terrorism, and human trafficking through the borders have become common issues, ensnaring Bangladesh in a multi-dimensional security trap.

The roles of great powers in addressing the Rohingya crisis remain a perplexing puzzle (Datta, 2021). While each power assures Dhaka of assistance in resolving the issue, most notably two regional giants, China and India, are not visibly exerting enough pressure on the Myanmar authorities (Nuruzzaman, 2023). This raises questions about how Myanmar, a smaller state, can evade the ICC's verdict. Nasir Uddin claimed that insufficient pressure from regional and global powers allows this, as their strong bilateral ties with Myanmar hinder action against it. During an interview, Ali Riaz, a distinguished professor at the Department of Politics and Government at Illinois State University, the U.S., highlighted that India, China, and Russia's interests in Myanmar and the Bay of Bengal hinder their active engagement in resolving the Rohingya crisis.

Several recent literatures on migration studies indicates that China's interests in Myanmar are much greater than in Bangladesh, considering its access to the Bay of Bengal, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and broader Indian Ocean access through the country (Mishra, 2022; Shahriar and Luong, 2023; Nuruzzaman, 2023; Halim, 2023). On the other hand, India sees no alternative but to draw closer to Myanmar to undermine Chinese influence and continues to collaborate on various projects, such as the Kaladan project with Naypyidaw (Kuchhal, 2022). Russia, the Cold War power, has maintained deep military cooperation with Myanmar for years and has been one of Naypyidaw's largest suppliers of weapons and military equipment.

Political instability

Bangladesh has a turbulent political history characterised by frequent government changes and deep polarisation (Rahman and Rashid, 2018). In the last one and a half decade, it has faced unprecedented political turmoil, with key public sectors like the judiciary and intelligence becoming increasingly politicised. Experts, including Ali Riaz, argue that influential global powers have exacerbated political polarisation by openly supporting specific factions. Former ambassador Humayun Kabir highlights the clear evidence of both direct and indirect foreign intervention in national elections, a sentiment echoed by many in the political and international community.

According to Nurul Kabir, editor of "New Age", Bangladesh has experienced its most severe political upheaval to date, with foreign powers attempting to mediate among parties while simultaneously deepening the crisis through partisan support. The last few elections, coupled with external influences, raised concerns about the likelihood of a peaceful democratic process in the near future.

This ongoing political instability has severely impacted Bangladesh's economy (Jahangir, 2016). Prominent economist Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya points out that uncertainty has deterred investors and hindered economic progress. The World Bank has projected lower-than-expected growth for 2024, and dwindling foreign reserves may further discourage investment. Abu Saeed Khan, advisory editor of "Samakal" warns that if the political crisis remains unresolved, particularly regarding economic issues, Bangladesh's future could be at risk.

Regional power dynamics

The shifting power dynamics in South Asia have significantly impacted weaker states, particularly Bangladesh (Hussain and Khan, 2023). Historically, India dominated the region, but China's growing influence has altered this balance. Sumit *et al.* (2023) noted a widening power gap between Beijing and New Delhi, prompting Indian policymakers to view China as their primary rival, while Beijing perceives Washington as a greater threat than New Delhi. This has led Indian elites to express concerns about China's presence in the region.

As emerging Asian powers compete for influence, Bangladesh is pressured to align with one or the other, resulting in an unstable equilibrium rather than regional solidarity (Bhatta, 2018). Bangladesh's ongoing economic growth has increased its need for significant foreign investments, with China being the only country willing to meet those demands. As a result, Dhaka is compelled to strengthen ties with Beijing to fund large-scale development projects, as noted by former foreign secretary of Bangladesh, Towhid Hossen. However, this engagement raises concerns for India, which views it as a threat due to Bangladesh's strategic location and ongoing tensions related to China's support for groups in India's Northeast. This situation sends a clear message to Bangladesh, "While we may not meet your needs, you cannot turn to our rivals", as stated by Dr. Md Saidul Islam, Associate Professor at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Consequently, Bangladesh faces complex challenges in managing its relationships with both regional giants, India and China.

Foreign relations

Non-alignment has been a cornerstone of Bangladesh foreign policy since its inception (Yasmin, 2022). Additionally, Dhaka is committed to fostering cooperative and amicable relationships with all nations worldwide, as stated by Kamal Hossen, the former foreign minister of Bangladesh, at the United Nations general assembly on September 17, 1974, on the occasion of its first entry to the United Nations. Over time, Bangladesh's foreign policy has evolved through three key phases: diplomacy of recognition, economic diplomacy, and hedging relations. However, as Ali Riaz notes, Dhaka has struggled to maintain its non-alignment stance due to domestic political crises, fragile external relations, and the challenges of managing various situations.

The intricate geopolitical landscape in the region has necessitated Bangladesh to pursue a hedging foreign policy in recent years. Despite striving to uphold balanced external relations with dominant global powers, New Delhi continues to exert considerable influence over Dhaka's decision-making processes (Riaz, 2022). Bangladesh demonstrated this by abstaining from a 2016 SAARC summit in Pakistan, aligning itself with India's stance amidst the latter's strained relations with Islamabad (Hossain and Islam, 2021). Another example was Bangladesh's acquisition of two Chinese submarines, which raised eyebrows among Indian leaders and experts, prompting questions about the necessity of such military assets for Bangladesh. Furthermore, Dhaka's withdrawal from the Chinese-funded Matarbari project in response to objections from New Delhi underscores the significant impact of regional dynamics on Bangladesh's foreign policy.

Bangladesh's delicate handling of geopolitical alliances further accentuates the complexities of its external relations. For instance, when the U.S. and its allies, including India, asked Bangladesh to join the QUAD, the Chinese ambassador in Bangladesh openly suggested that Dhaka should not join the so-called 'anti-Chinese' bloc, as doing so would deteriorate the relationship between Dhaka and Beijing (Hasan, 2024). Similarly, Bangladesh's refusal to allow a Russian ship to dock in its port, prompted by objections from the U.S. in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, led to a temporary chill in relations between Bangladesh and Russia.

While the 12th general election in Bangladesh, along with the involvement of major powers, was set to significantly influence its future foreign relations (Muhammad, 2024), the role of the current interim government will be crucial in shaping these relationships. Bangladesh faces economic challenges, as 70 percent of its exports go to Western nations, with only 20 percent directed to the U.S. Additionally, a significant trade deficit persists due to reliance on imports from regional powers like China and India. Under the Hasina regime, Bangladesh has moved towards autocratic governance and strained ties with the West (Riaz, 2024). The interim government's actions will be pivotal in restoring democratic norms, and stability in relationships with nations that supported Hasina's government remains uncertain, as noted by Dr. M. Sakhawat Hossain, a former election commissioner.

In light of the above, it is obvious that Bangladesh's foreign relations have faced significant obstacles in recent times. These challenges stem from domestic political uncertainty, self-serving political tendencies, and its geostrategic importance, which invites interference from major powers in both internal and external affairs.

Findings

The analysis of South Asian regional and international politics, particularly concerning weak states like Bangladesh, has led to several key findings:

First, the South Asian region is characterised by intense rivalries, conflicts, and competition, marked by significant asymmetries in geography, resources, and material power among its nations. The longstanding tensions between India and Pakistan contribute to South Asia being one of the least economically integrated and cooperative regions globally. Additionally, the enduring influence of Cold War powers, namely the U.S. and Russia, continues to shape South Asian politics.

Second, weak states have inherent material and structural disadvantages that significantly influence their behaviour in both regional and international contexts. Due to their military and economic vulnerabilities, these states often seek a peaceful environment and meaningful security assurances at both regional and global levels. However, their limited domestic capacities to balance or compete with dominant powers have resulted in increased foreign influence over their internal affairs.

Third, although many view India as a regional power, a closer examination reveals that China has established a more advantageous position in various aspects. Many South Asian countries resonate with China's economic appeal, prompting regional and extra-regional powers to engage with these weaker states by offering similar opportunities. Nevertheless, no single power can effectively counter China's ascent in the region, leading to the formation of alliances such as the India-US-led QUAD. The weak states of South Asia are increasingly concerned that the intensifying competition among major powers may compel them to align with one side or the other, creating an unstable equilibrium marked by uneasy coexistence.

Finally, Bangladesh finds itself in a particularly vulnerable position due to its geographical location and strategic importance to major powers. Hegemonic influences have consistently shaped its domestic politics, economy, and security landscape, impeding policymakers' efforts to pursue an independent and sustainable foreign policy. This situation undermines Bangladesh's ability to effectively leverage its position in order to safeguard its national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and interests on both regional and global stages.

Conclusion

The intricate dynamics of South Asia pose significant challenges to achieving stability, peace, and cooperation among nations, where weak states often find themselves compelled to prioritise their national interests and territorial integrity at the expense of broader regional collaboration.

The strategic significance of South Asia's geography to both regional and extra-regional powers has further complicated the situation, leaving these nations struggling to navigate conflicts effectively. This study reveals the pervasive influence exerted on weaker nations, particularly Bangladesh, by both local and global hegemonic forces. As a result, Bangladesh has become increasingly reliant on major powers in political, financial, and security matters.

The shifting geopolitical landscape presents unique obstacles for Bangladesh as it seeks to assert its autonomy amidst powerful external influences. While its strategic importance has grown, its capacity to maintain a non-aligned foreign policy is increasingly challenged by external pressures and internal weaknesses, such as political instability and corruption. The findings underscore that these interrelated factors not only threaten Bangladesh's sovereignty but also highlight a broader regional concern: the fragility of institutions and the lack of cooperation among South Asian states.

To navigate these complexities effectively, it is essential for Bangladesh to cultivate strong diplomatic relationships with its nearest neighbours and other regional and global powers. While this approach may provide short-term benefits, the rapidly changing political landscape suggests that such a strategy may not be sustainable in the long run. Therefore, there is an urgent need for greater unity and collaboration among South Asian states. By strengthening ties and enhancing regional integration, these weak nations can collectively confront their challenges, paving the way for a more stable and prosperous future in South Asia.

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Public Administration and Policy

329

Strong presidents
and grand corruption scandals
in the Philippines

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper provides evidence from the Philippines that strong presidents (termed here as hyper-presidents) have failed to address systemic corruption despite their anti-corruption rhetoric and promises.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper uses a case study methodology to review how "strong presidents" have dealt with the problem of corruption in the Philippines and to examine their handling of grand corruption scandals. Data were collected from court decisions, congressional reports, news reports, journal articles, and other academic publications.

Findings – The paper has two major findings. First, none of the strong presidents were able to build the social and political foundations for anti-corruption reform. Second, in dealing with corruption scandals, the strong presidents observed selective persecution and particularistic concealment (cover-ups) instead of allowing the rule of law to prevail. These findings dismiss the idea of the sufficiency of strong presidents, some of whom project the possession of the political will necessary to combat corruption in the country.

Originality/value – While the need for strong leaders has been emphasized in the anti-corruption literature, this paper argues that such leaders do not necessarily add to the political commitment needed to fight systemic corruption or even lay the political, institutional, and social foundations for reform. Strong presidents in the weak Philippine state are powerless against the institutions and culture that encourage and tolerate grand corruption.

Keywords Strong presidents, Hyper-presidentialism, Corruption scandals, Particularistic politics, Rule of law

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

How have strong Philippine presidents dealt with the problem of entrenched corruption and handled the grand corruption scandals during their term of office? There is a popular notion that strong presidents and autocrats are necessary for governments to succeed in the fight against entrenched corruption. This notion is not entirely wrong, but the record shows a mix of successes and failures. Authoritarian regimes that have succeeded in cleaning up government were also high-performing in terms of their governance and economic performance (Carothers, 2022). However, there are also failure cases, such as the Marcos and Suharto dictatorships in the Philippines and Indonesia, respectively.

Despite the failure of authoritarianism in the Philippines, many Filipinos still believe in strong leaders (Table 1). In waves of the World Values Survey from 2001-19, the results showed that most respondents overwhelmingly favor a democratic political system. However, the results also suggest the prevalence of values supporting delegative democracy

Item	Very Good	Fairly Good	Fairly Bad	Very Bad	Very Good + Fairly Good	Fairly Bad + Very Bad
I. Having a strong leader who does not bother with parliament and elections						
2019	22.7	52.4	18.2	6.6	**75.1**	**24.8**
2012	19.2	39.9	20.3	19.4	**59.1**	**39.7**
2001	16.9	44.9	30.0	7.1	**61.8**	**37.1**
II. Having a democratic political system						
2019	20.8	52.9	21.0	5.0	**73.7**	**26.0**
2012	33.9	40.9	17.5	6.5	**74.8**	**24.0**
2001	27.9	53.8	15.3	2.2	**81.7**	**17.5**

Source: Compiled by the author from Waves 4, 6 and 7 of the World Values Survey, Inglehart *et al.* (2020).

Table 1.
What Filipinos think of
strong leaders and
democracy

and hyper-presidentialism. Citizen support for strong leaders (as described in Item 1 of Table 1) is indicative of their delegative democratic attitude (Pernia and Panao, 2023).

Delegative democracy (DD) is a type of democracy in which citizens delegate vast powers to the president, who in turn "governs as he sees fit" and is only constrained by "the existing power relations and by a constitutionally limited term of office" (O'Donnell, 1994, p. 59). Horizontal accountability (or institutional checks and balances) is absent or lacking (O'Donnell, 1998). Some scholars have treated the Philippines as a DD based on characteristic features of executive hegemony and weak horizontal accountability (Ronas, 2011; Thompson, 2018; Pernia and Panao, 2023). The exercise of the president's vast legislative and non-legislative powers, both constitutionally expressed and implied, are inadequately checked by Congress and the judiciary (Wufel, 1988; Bolongaita, 1995).

DD provides the background for the presidents' excessive intrusions into the powers of other branches of government and constitutionally independent bodies. Other authors have used terms such as "executive aggrandizement" (Bermeo, 2016) and "hyper-presidentialism" (Nino, 1992; Rose-Ackerman *et al.*, 2011) to describe such intrusions. Hyper-presidentialism shall be used in this paper referring to the regime of "strong presidents" in the Philippines.

From 2001 to 2022, the Philippines experienced a period of hyper-presidentialism (Rose-Ackerman *et al.*, 2011; Balisacan, 2015; Thompson, 2022; Dressel and Susilo, 2023). The period is represented by presidents Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Benigno Aquino III, and Rodrigo Duterte. These are the "strong presidents" of the post-authoritarian Philippines. The other previous post-authoritarian presidents — Corazon Aquino, Fidel Ramos, and Joseph Estrada — were not known for the characteristic abuse of executive powers.

Figures 1 and 2 show that regardless of administration, whether hyper-presidential or not, popular or not, corruption control estimates and corruption perceptions in the Philippines have barely changed. In addition, the Social Weather Stations (SWS) Survey of Enterprises on Corruption, indicates that for several years, most people believed that there was a lot of corruption in the public sector. The surveys since 2000 have also consistently shown the Office of the President's negative net sincerity ratings in fighting corruption (SWS, 2016).

This paper maintains that the election of strong presidents (or hyper-presidents) is not a sufficient condition for the effective control of corruption in the Philippine context. This proposition is drawn from case studies of how strong or hyper-presidents dealt with the problem of corruption and their handling of grand corruption scandals. The next sections of the paper: 1) discuss a framework to assess presidents as agents of political change, especially targeting corruption, and 2) examine how hyper-presidential administrations have dealt with the problem of corruption and the political scandals they confronted.
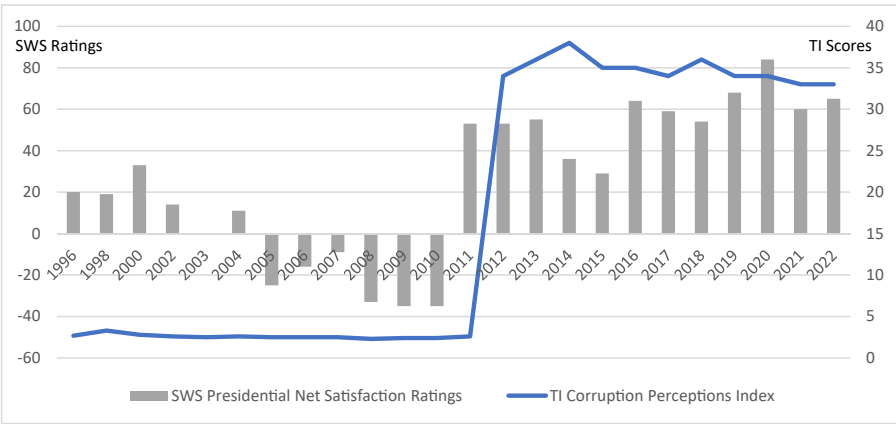
Note: Transparency International's (TI) Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) scoring
methodology changed in 2012. Previous scores were based on a scale of 0 (highly
corrupt) to 10 (very clean). In 2012, the methodology changed based on a scale of 0
(highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). The chart above shows the sudden change in the
CPI's slope in 2012. However, there is no difference in relative performance as a high
corruption country.
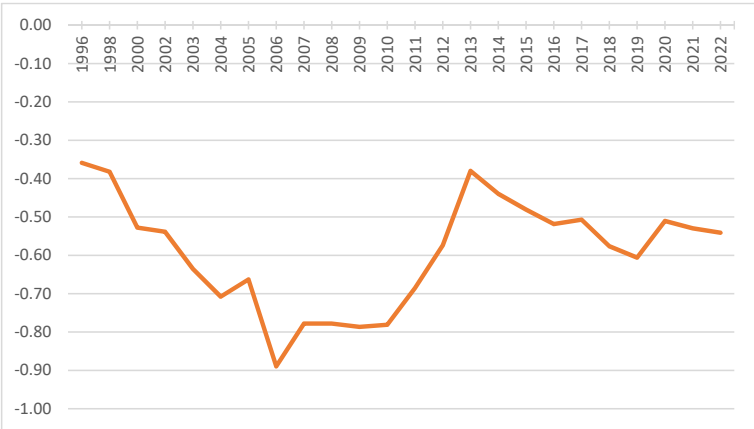
Note: The Control of Corruption (CC) estimate is part of the World Governance Indicators
(WGI). A country's score ranges from -2.5 to +2.5. The CC estimates for the Philippines have
been consistently negative since 1996, ranging from -0.4 to -0.9.

Corruption and presidential leadership in political time

Typically, presidential leadership and performance are evaluated based on public approval
ratings, character assessments, leadership styles, or as dispensers of patronage (Buchanan,
2016; Thompson, 2018). Often, public ratings are used. However, such ratings should not
serve as the primary basis for assessing presidential performance.

An alternative way of evaluating presidents is provided by Skowronek (2011), who argues that presidential leadership should be situated in a country's political development, i.e., his or her place in "political time" (or political context). He proposes that presidents whether affiliated or opposed to a particular regime, should be assessed as agents of political change. This therefore raises the need to examine the president's political agency based on the existing political circumstances and exigencies. Teehankee (2016) and Thompson (2018) have applied Skowronek's framework in their studies of Philippine presidents and regimes.

This paper builds on Skowronek's proposition of evaluating presidents as change agents. Tusalem (2016) suggests that the approval ratings of presidents in a delegative democracy are sensitive to their ability to maintain clientelist relations and satisfy pressing citizen demands. This suggests a strong potential motive for presidents to be involved directly or indirectly in corrupt acts leading to scandal. This paper therefore proposes that Philippine presidents, as change agents, should also be assessed in terms of how they dealt with the problem (and the causes) of systemic corruption. In this regard, it is necessary to examine how they handled the grand corruption scandals during their term of office.

Scandals and high levels of corruption reflect the country's transitional level of political development. As such, presidents in the service of change must aim their guns at the problem of corruption. Numerous studies since the 1970s have established institutionalized corruption patterns afflicting local government units, the military, business, media, the judiciary, and bureaucratic agencies such as the Bureau of Customs, Bureau of Internal Revenue, the Department of Public Works and Highways, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the Department of Education, to name a few (Amorado, 2007; Magtulis-Briones, 1979; Parayno, 2013; Co, 2007; Barbo, 2002; Chua, 1999). Not surprisingly, public perceptions of high corruption in government have not dramatically improved in decades.

Systemic corruption in the Philippines draws largely from the personalistic character of its politics and the micro-particularistic patronage systems that dominate the weak state (Hutchcroft, 2014). Similarly, weak state institutions combined with a liberalized political and economic environment provide massive opportunities for corruption perpetrated by powerful political and economic forces. The pattern of corruption that evolves in this setting has been called the 'Oligarchs and Clans' syndrome (Johnston, 2008).

To address entrenched corruption under this pattern in the Philippines, Johnston (2010) recommends laying down the political and social foundations for reform backed by sustained political support. Successful interventions in areas like education (including an anti-corruption curriculum), judicial efficiency and effectiveness, poverty alleviation, and public service delivery are critical to drumming up political support from various sectors. He also recommends the consolidation of anti-corruption responsibilities that continue to be spread out to various anti-corruption agencies (ACAs).

Following Johnston (2010), Quah (2018, p. 67) likewise recommends the establishment of a single, well-resourced ACA with sufficient police and prosecutorial powers to overcome perennial problems of "lack of coordination, overlapping functions, and competition for recognition and resources" among several ACAs. He also prescribed that the ACA should be minimally involved in donor-driven projects.

Though necessary, the establishment of such an ACA is not sufficient to control entrenched corruption. In his studies of corruption in Asian countries since the 1980s, Quah (1999) has stressed the importance of: 1) the leaders' political commitment; and 2) the adequacy of anti-corruption measures, an important part of which is attacking the causes of corruption in a particular country. In a recent analysis of Philippine corruption, he identified four major causes of Philippine corruption, namely: 1) the low salaries of civil servants and political leaders; 2) red tape; 3) the low probability of detection and punishment of corrupt offenders; 4) cultural factors; and 5) weak political will (Quah, 2018).

Arguably, anti-corruption reform will remain ineffective, if not hopeless, if the major causes of corruption remain unaddressed. Systematically attacking its major causes is essential. Likewise, effective interventions should go beyond the usual moral and legal prescriptions for deviance and should cover the systemic factors that reinforce the institutions and culture of corruption. The succeeding section provides a discussion of grand corruption scandals during the country's hyper-presidential era (2001-2022).

Hyper-presidentialism and grand corruption scandals in the Philippines (2001-2022)

The country's hyper-presidential era after the Marcos dictatorship began with the Arroyo administration (2001-10) and as of this writing ended with the Duterte presidency (2016-22). The three presidencies immediately following the dictatorship — Aquino, Ramos, and Estrada — were not known for excessive abuse albeit they had their share of corruption scandals. The scandal cases during the terms of the hyper-presidents discussed below were either unsatisfactorily resolved or unresolved. Unsatisfactory because of the political particularism and cover-ups applied by the country's leaders in resolving the scandals. This suggests the official toleration of corruption, which gives the public a signal about the seriousness of the government's anti-corruption efforts.

Before the courts handle a case, a political resolution of the scandal usually takes place. Political resolutions typically involve selective prosecution and particularistic concealment (or cover-ups). Related practices include the suppression of evidence (using executive privilege, the disappearance/flight of witnesses, the replacement of officials), the suspension or cancellation of programs and contracts, and whitewashing investigations. The cases of grand corruption scandals presented in the following discussion of each presidential administration show this pattern of selective prosecution and particularistic concealment.

The Arroyo administration (2001-2010)

Arroyo's hyper-presidentialism stemmed from the desire to extend her presidency. However, her victory in the 2004 elections was tarnished by election-related scandals ("Hello Garci" and the Fertilizer Fund Scam). These scandals raised serious questions about her administration's legitimacy and threatened her political survival. The breakup of her alliance with former president Corazon Aquino at the height of the Hello Garci scandal further displaced her from the regime that previously nurtured her rise to political power. Consequently, her presidency was beleaguered by incessant destabilization attempts. Despite anti-corruption reform efforts, she was reviled by regime supporters for her administration's corruption and bad governance. Yet, Arroyo survived impeachment and coup attempts and through "budgetary tools" successfully bought the support of police and military generals, religious leaders, legislators, and local politicians to avert threats to her presidency (Quimpo, 2007; Holmes, 2019; Hutchcroft, 2008).

Of the three hyper-presidential administrations, the Arroyo presidency was the most active in anti-corruption reform. Key reforms included among others: 1) the government procurement reform of 2003, which also established the electronic procurement system; 2) the Anti-money Laundering Act of 2003; 3) the Anti-Red Tape Act of 2007 which sought transparency in transaction procedures as well as the adoption of service standards among government agencies; 4) the conduct of corruption vulnerability assessments in the executive branch; 5) increased civil society engagement in anti-corruption; and 6) enhancing the capacity of the Ombudsman as well as other anti-graft and corruption bodies (Oyamada, 2005; Quah, 2010). She even hired Tony Kwok, an anti-corruption expert from Hong Kong, as

consultant to her government. Despite such measures, the president has been embroiled in several political corruption scandals. This somehow brought down her net satisfaction ratings at the SWS polls, which reached all-time lows (Figure 1).

The NBN-ZTE Deal

The NBN-ZTE scandal erupted following a media exposé in April 2007 alleging overpricing, kickbacks, and bribery in procuring the country's digital communications infrastructure. The project was awarded to the Chinese state-controlled firm, Zhongxing Telecommunications Equipment (ZTE) Company for US$343 million and was financed by a loan as part of China's Official Development Assistance (ODA) to the Philippines. President Arroyo signed the contract with ZTE on 17 April 2007 during her visit to China.

The expose appeared to have been instigated by the project's losing bidder, Jose de Venecia III, son of then-House Speaker Jose de Venecia, Jr. (Senate of the Philippines, 2009). Soon after the contract signing, De Venecia III through the media hurled corruption allegations. He accused Commission on Elections (COMELEC) Chair Benjamin Abalos of offering him a US$10 million bribe to withdraw from the project bidding. Likewise, he accused Abalos of bribing NEDA Secretary Romulo Neri and his technical consultant, then chief executive officer of the government-owned Philippine Forest Corporation, Rodolfo "Jun" Lozada, each for PhP200 million. The bribes to Neri and Lozada would ensure project continuity. Further, De Venecia claimed that the project was overpriced by US$130 million to cover kickbacks.

The exposé prompted the opposition-dominated Senate to launch an investigation In September 2007. The Senate Blue Ribbon Committee's (SBRC) public hearings on the issue lasted for 7 months, and its report was filed in November 2009. Before the SBRC could begin its full-blown investigation in 2007, Arroyo suspended the NBN-ZTE project. She also transferred NEDA Secretary Neri as head of the Commission on Higher Education. Then, on 2 October 2007, she completely canceled the deal with the Chinese firm. On the following day, Abalos resigned from the COMELEC.

During the Senate's initial investigation, Neri testified that indeed there was a bribe, which he did not accept. He reported the bribe incident to Arroyo, who advised non-acceptance. However, when asked by the Senate why the president still approved of the NBN-ZTE deal even if she knew of the irregularities, Neri invoked executive privilege.

The use of executive privilege based on Executive Order No. (E.O.) 464 which Arroyo issued in September 2005 became a useful tool of the executive branch to respond to congressional witch-hunting activities (Batalla, 2020a). E.O. 464, as affirmed and modified by the Supreme Court, required all heads of departments from the executive branch, the Armed Forces, and the police, as well as those under the National Security Adviser to secure the President's prior consent before appearing in congressional inquiries.

In early 2008, arrest warrants were issued against Neri and Lozada after the two ignored the Senate's summons. On 31 January, Lozada flew to Hong Kong to evade the arrest. However, for still unknown reasons, he decided to return in early February. After claiming to have been kidnapped at the airport, he agreed to testify. His testimony revealed that his involvement started with his introduction to Abalos by Neri during a golf course meeting. He confirmed the participation of Abalos and the First Gentleman, Mike Arroyo, in the deal.

In November 2009, more than a year after completing the public hearings, the SBRC issued its report. It recommended the filing of charges against President Arroyo, her husband Jose Miguel Arroyo, former COMELEC Chair Benjamin Abalos, Jose de Venecia III, former Speaker Jose de Venecia Jr., officials of the Department of Transportation and Communication, Engineer Rodolfo Lozada, former NEDA Secretary Romulo Neri, and Environmental Secretary Jose Atienza Jr. and former Deputy Executive Secretary Manuel Gaite.

The SBRC recommendations contrasted those of the Ombudsman's resolution. In February 2008, the Office of the Ombudsman launched its investigation following criminal complaints filed by citizens and Lower House representatives. Ombudsman Merceditas Gutierrez inhibited herself from the investigation because of her close relations with First Gentleman Arroyo. In acting on the complaints, the Ombudsman investigative panel "limited its inquiry" to the participation of Abalos, Neri, De Venecia III, and Lozada (*Roque vs. Office of the Ombudsman*, 2023). President Arroyo was dropped as a respondent based on the presidential privilege of immunity from suit.

On 29 April 2009, the Ombudsman issued its decision. It recommended: 1) the filing of charges against Abalos and Neri for violations of corruption laws and 2) the dropping of criminal charges against Jose Miguel Arroyo, Former Speaker de Venecia, his son de Venecia III, and others for lack of probable cause. The Ombudsman panel did not indict Lozada in the NBN-ZTE case but later found him guilty of graft in a different case during his stint as the head of a government corporation.

Because of the perceived selective prosecution, complaints were subsequently filed by dissatisfied citizens against the Ombudsman for grave abuse of discretion. For lack of evidence, these petitions were dismissed with finality by the Supreme Court in 2023 (*Roque vs. Office of the Ombudsman*, 2023). In 2016, the Sandiganbayan, the country's anti-graft court, likewise exonerated the Arroyo spouses, Abalos, and Transportation and Communications Secretary Leandro Mendoza for lack of evidence (*People of the Philippines vs. Gloria Macapagal Arroyo*, 2016).

The one held accountable for the ZTE-NBN scandal was former Secretary Neri. In its 2021 decision, the Supreme Court reversed a Court of Appeals decision that found Neri guilty of simple misconduct. The Supreme Court reaffirmed the Ombudsman's 2009 ruling of grave misconduct. In addition, the High Court ordered the imposition of accessory penalties, including the cancelation of civil service eligibility, forfeiture of leave credits and retirement benefits, and perpetual disqualification from reemployment in the government service (*Neri vs. Office of the Ombudsmanl*, 2021).

Aquino III Presidency (2010-2016)

Benigno Aquino III's hyper-presidentialism arose from his unrelenting pursuit of a "truth and justice" agenda, which received the support of the liberal reformist regime. As Baviera (2012, p. 254) noted, the Aquino III administration "pushed the envelope in terms of what the executive can demand from the legislature and the judiciary for its single-minded pursuit of a political promise to curb corruption in the political system." However, Aquino's anti-corruption initiatives though in the name of "truth and justice" were primarily targeted against his predecessor, Gloria Arroyo, her allies, and former officials. His first executive order established a Truth Commission to determine graft and corruption in the previous administration. The constitutionality of this executive decree was later rejected by the Supreme Court The administration's quest for "justice" led to: 1) a prolonged executive-judicial collision; 2) excessive intrusions into judicial and legislative functions (e.g., authorizing the Justice Secretary to issue hold departure and watchlist orders, which is a power delegated to the courts); and 3) buying congressional support for the impeachment of the Chief Justice and the Ombudsman (Holmes, 2019; Batalla *et al.*, 2018).

Certainly, the governance environment during the Aquino III administration was an improvement over the previous presidency. However, in the absence of significant political and institutional anti-corruption reforms, the promise of a clean government was weak.

Beginning in 2013, the media exposed several political corruption scandals. Among these were 1) the use of executive and congressional slush funds to secure congressional support for the ouster of the Ombudsman and the Supreme Court Chief Justice, 2) the unraveling of

pork barrel syndicates (PDAF scandal) involving legislators, government executives, and criminal organizations, 3) the use of executive slush funds (DAP scandal) to buy off or reward senators and state auditors during the Chief Justice's impeachment, 4) procurement scandals at the Department of Transportation and Communication, Philippine National Police, and the Land Transportation Office, 5) the Mamasapano massacre, 6) the "*laglag-bala*" (or bullet drop) scam at the international airports, and 7) the alleged drug trade at the National Penitentiary. These scandals during the second half of Aquino III's term gradually eroded public trust and approval in the administration even if the president represented the post-Marcos Sr. reformist regime.

PDAF scandal

A July 2013 exposé from the Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI) revealed a conspiracy based on an ongoing investigation by the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI). The scandal, also known as the PDAF scam, concerned the systematic diversion of congressional pork barrel funds to bogus non-government organizations (NGOs) and ghost projects. It was pointed out that the scheme defrauded the government of an estimated PhP10 billion for a period of 10 years.

The PDAF scam involved legislators, executive agencies related to budget release and implementation, and a criminal syndicate running fake NGOs. Legislators received 40-60 percent rebates from PDAF funds obtained by the syndicate (Carvajal, 2013). The PDI exposé framed the scam as a decade-long affair involving only the criminal syndicate led by Janet Lim-Napoles as well as 12 opposition legislators including Senators Juan Ponce Enrile, Ramon Revilla, Jr., Jinggoy Estrada, Gringo Honasan, and Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. The NBI probe likewise focused on the Napoles syndicate.

The revelation of the scandal would have signified an achievement of good governance for the Aquino III administration. However, the events that unfolded afterward would suggest otherwise — it became a case of selective justice. Following the PDI exposé, separate investigations were launched by the DOJ, the Ombudsman, and the Senate. In August 2013, the Commission on Audit (COA) released its special audit report on the PDAF for the period 2007-2009 during the Arroyo administration.

The DOJ and Ombudsman investigations focused on the Napoles case, thereby limiting its list of suspects. In 2013, the DOJ filed complaints of plunder and corruption against Napoles, four opposition senators (Juan Ponce-Enrile, Jinggoy Estrada, Ramon Revilla, Jr., and Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.), and 20 former and incumbent members of the House of Representatives. The third batch of complaints, which involved administration allies such as TESDA director-general Joel Villanueva as well as Representatives Rufus Rodriguez and Rachel Arenas, were delayed for more than a year. In April 2014, the Ombudsman indicted Napoles, Ponce-Enrile, Estrada, and Revilla for plunder, graft and corruption. The three senators were later convicted and jailed.

In contrast to the DOJ's short list, the COA report identified 188 legislators in highly irregular PDAF projects (Parreño, 2015). Several of them were key allies and members of Aquino III's Liberal Party-led coalition. Also, state auditors identified 82 NGOs, of which only 8 were linked to Napoles and involved in the PhP6.1 billion PDAF funds diversion from 2017 to 2019. The Napoles NGOs received only PhP1.74 billion while the other NGOs got the remainder. This meant that there were more syndicates involved other than that of Napoles. The difference in treatment of the DOJ and COA in the case led legal experts to accuse the government of selective justice and persecution (San Juan, 2015).

The Duterte Presidency (2016-2022)

Rodrigo Duterte's election as President in 2016 followed a campaign promise of ridding the country of crime, corruption, and drugs. Arguably, the most hyper-presidential of them all,

Duterte was a long-term mayor of Davao City, a subnational authoritarian who endured this position through alliances and the extrajudicial punishment of criminals (Sidel, 2018; Thompson, 2022). As a presidential candidate, he openly rejected the post-Marcos liberal reformist regime and promised his audience "real change" (*tunay na pagbabago*). The capture of the presidency quickly saw the application of the Davao formula, signaling a national drug war that ended in thousands of extrajudicial killings.

Anti-corruption efforts were traditional — the creation of the Presidential Anti-Corruption Commission (PACC) and the dismissal of dispensable officials and civil servants. However, Duterte's projection as a strong man did not prevent political corruption scandals from occurring. Just like his predecessors, his was a scandal-laden presidency.

The Duterte administration received its first shock in October 2016 with the murder and kidnapping for ransom by the police of a South Korean businessman, Joo Ick-Jee. The incident led Duterte to rant about corruption at the core of the police (Batalla, 2020b). In 2017-8, two drug smuggling cases worth about PhP17.4 billion (or about US$380 million) were uncovered. Then in 2019, the abuse of the prison term reduction law (Good Conduct and Time Allowance or GCTA) by the Bureau of Corrections was discovered after a well-known criminal convicted of rape and murder was freed. The GCTA for sale scheme led to the questionable release of nearly 2,000 heinous crime convicts (Corrales, 2019). In 2019, another scandal hit the government's Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (Philhealth) for ghost kidney treatments.

In January 2020, acting on a tip by a whistleblower, Senator Risa Hontiveros exposed a modus operandi at the Bureau of Immigration (BI). The modus, also known as the *pastillas* scheme, allowed for the seamless entry of Chinese nationals into the Philippines, each in exchange for PhP10,000. The scheme was so-called because the bribe money was rolled in a white paper that resembled *pastillas*, a local pastry.

The government's prolonged lockdown policy response to the Covid-19 pandemic served as an opportunity for massive corruption. Duterte's Presidential Anti-Corruption Commission received over 7,600 complaints in the distribution of cash aid ("*ayuda*") worth PhP200 billion to households. The distribution did not proceed smoothly causing allegations of corruption at the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and local government units.

Continuing troubles at PhilHealth exposed the weaknesses of the leadership in preventing systemic corruption in government. A whistleblower bared the anomalous procurement of information technology equipment and the fraudulent use of the cash advance fund for hospitals during emergencies. It was later discovered that billions of pesos in funds were released to hospitals that did not treat COVID-19 patients.

Pharmally scandal
The case of Pharmally Pharmaceuticals represents a syndicated effort to defraud the government of billions of pesos at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Established in September 2019 with a capitalization of only PhP625,000, from 2020 to 2021, Pharmally was able to secure supply contracts worth PhP10.8 billion of imported surgical masks, personal protective equipment, and test kits. The conspiracy was accidentally uncovered in August 2021 while the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee was investigating an audit report of deficiencies in the transfer of PhP42 billion from the Department of Health to the Procurement Service of the Department of Budget and Management (PS-DBM). The latter handled the large-scale procurements for the government. The House of Representatives' Committee on Good Government and Public Accountability reacted by launching a parallel investigation.

Key personalities implicated in the hearings were close Duterte supporters including Health Secretary Francisco Duque III, DBM Undersecretary Christopher Lao, and presidential economic adviser Michael Yang (a Chinese citizen). Undersecretary Lao was temporarily appointed as executive director of PS-DBM in 2020. After signing the April 2020 contracts worth PhP8.6 billion, he resigned from his position. He was afterward reassigned to the DBM liaison office while his subordinate and procurement director, Warren Rex Liong, successfully joined the Ombudsman.

Duterte reacted to the Senate hearings with a staunch defense of the three. Treating the SBRC hearings as hostile and the Lower House hearings as fair, Duterte issued an order invoking executive privilege and mandating members of the executive branch to ignore the summons from the Senate. Executive branch members were however allowed to attend Lower House hearings.

President Duterte's clout both in the Senate and the Lower House soon became evident. The SBRC report on the Pharmally issue failed to get the required number of signatures. However, SBRC Chair Richard Gordon and Senator Risa Hontiveros filed before the Ombudsman administrative complaints against 33 officials of the PS-DBM and DOH. On the other hand, the House committee report recommended the filing of criminal charges against a list of Pharmally executives and minor PS-DBM officials but excluded Yang, Duque, and Lao.

In March 2023, Ombudsman Samuel Martirez, acting on the administrative complaints of Gordon and Hontiveros, issued a six-month suspension order on 33 DOH and PS-DBM officials. Then in August, finding probable cause, he recommended the filing of graft charges against Pharmally executives and several PS-DBM procurement officials, including Lao, Liong, and procurement management officer Paul Jasper de Guzman. There is yet to be a final judicial resolution to the case.

Conclusion
This paper reviewed three hyper-presidential administrations in the Philippines and examined how they dealt with the problem of corruption and grand corruption scandals. There were at least two major findings. First, none of the three hyper-presidents were able to build the foundations for anti-corruption reform as discussed earlier. There were only selective cleanups and minor structural changes made in government such as the revival of the Inter-Agency Anti-Graft Coordinating Council (IAAGCC) during Aquino III and the creation of the PACC during Duterte. These exemplify traditional reform approaches that reinforce the particularistic and personalistic character of Philippine politics and the toleration of corruption. In contrast, Arroyo's tenure was marked by remarkable anti-corruption initiatives although these were overshadowed by the president's lack of popularity as well as presidential scandals and strong perceptions of corruption. Still, the reforms were inadequate to address the major causes of corruption in the country.

Second, a common pattern can be gleaned from how the hyper-presidents dealt with corruption scandals. This involves selective persecution (political particularism) and cover-ups. This response pattern tends to generate further doubts about the sincerity of Philippine presidents, including strong ones, to address the problem of corruption.

The findings dismiss the idea of the sufficiency of strong presidents, some of whom project the possession of the political will necessary to fight corruption. However, the role of presidents cannot be understated. Following Skowronek (2011), they can serve as change agents in effectively controlling corruption. High levels of corruption, which reflect a stage in a country's political development, undermine democracy and effective government (Kubbe and Engelbert, 2018; Rose-Ackerman and Palifka, 1999) and therefore require executive action.

However, it would do well for the Philippine electorate to consider programmatic political parties with serious anti-corruption platforms rather than rely on the mere promises of presidential candidates. Unfortunately, it has been difficult for programmatic political parties to be organized and institutionalized in the country because of 1) the long history and continuing repression and persecution of leaders and supporters of non-elite constituencies; 2) poor voter identification with political parties that represent particular societal interests and constituencies; and 3) the strong grip of oligarchic political families/dynasties on electoral contests in the legislature and local governments (Rivera, 2016; Hicken, 2018).

Grand corruption scandals provide citizens with a way of assessing presidential performance. However, there is an argument in the literature that they have a minimal effect on public approvals of presidents. For instance, Tusalem (2016, p. 519) maintains that presidential scandals have "no discernable effect on a president's approval ratings if the president maintains client-patron relations and heeds the immediate pressing demands of citizens." Instead, he argues that presidential approval ratings are more sensitive to public perceptions of poverty. Indeed, the effects of corruption scandals on public approval ratings in the Philippines have been inconsistent during the hyper-presidential period, with President Duterte enjoying high approval ratings amid his government's scandals. This invites the need for more studies on the empirical relationship between presidential approval ratings and corruption scandals.

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Essential lessons from an unpromising source: what reformers can learn from the Philippines on corruption control

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Abstract

Purpose – Corruption control in the Republic of the Philippines (RP) has hardly failed, but it is not (yet) a success story either. Dramatic "people power" episodes have occurred, but populism has also, at times, led to repression. Still, essential reform lessons are available.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a conceptual reassessment of corruption control. Central concerns include the types of corruption experienced in the country, incentives that might sustain collective action, the need to measure both corruption and reform, and linking reform to citizens' quality of life.

Findings – Top-down, whole-country approaches to reform often treat corruption as if it were the same everywhere, thereby emphasizing "best practices". However, that can be misleading: a best practice in one society might be irrelevant, impossible, or harmful in another. Contemporary reformers must carefully examine the historical, social, economic, and political contexts, as well as the consequences of corruption. Groups and activities seemingly unrelated to corruption control can prove essential. Reformers must fight corruption with people, not for them.

Originality/value – The ultimate goal of reform must be justice: redressing imbalances of power while building social and political trust.

Keywords Philippines, Corruption, Justice, Civil society, Government performance, People power, Political trust, Social trust

Paper type Research paper

The continuing struggle

Few countries have suffered as much from corruption as the Republic of the Philippines (hereafter, "RP") (Quah, 2021; Quah, 2020; Batalla, 2020). Few have seen anti-corruption efforts as numerous, prolonged, and dramatic – consider the massive street demonstrations that helped oust Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 and Joseph "Erap" Estrada in 2001. At the same time, few have witnessed the sorts of abuses in the name of anti-corruption and drug control that the RP experienced under the administration of Rodrigo Duterte (Arugay and Baquisal, 2023). The harm done by corruption to so many citizens, to the national and regional economies, and to the RP's international standing make it difficult to claim significant and lasting reform progress. What can we learn from those experiences?

By all rights the RP should be an economic and political powerhouse. Its population of 114 million, scattered across 7,700 islands, is young and possesses formidable social energy. Most speak English with some degree of proficiency – an asset in the world economy. For better and worse, the nation has received extensive development aid and good-governance assistance. Again for better and worse, its links to the United States and other market

democracies remain strong. In the mid-1960s a casual observer, challenged to place economic bets upon South Korea or the RP, might well have chosen the latter.

But the country continues to struggle economically, with corruption and perceptions of corruption being important causes. GDP per capita has increased more than threefold since the year 2000, yet the RP remains a lower-middle income country (The World Bank, 2023). Inequalities among and within localities can be significant. The well-known Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (TI-CPI), while not a measure of corruption as such, is closely-watched in the RP; its changes – from 33 points out of 100 in 2022, ranking 116th out of 180 countries, to 34 and 115th in 2023 (Transparency International, 2023) – are if anything over-analyzed (Politiko, 2024a; Politiko, 2024b) for what they might show. Overall, the TI figures outline a corruption situation that is not perceived as changing markedly in at least a generation.

An indifferent track record for reform, however, is far from unique to the RP. The international anti-corruption industry, while far larger and better-resourced than a generation ago, has few whole-country reform stories to tell. Claims of success at local levels and in specific institutions appear frequently, but their lasting impact and the extent to which they travel well to other places are unclear. Compared to the anti-corruption industry's self-image the RP's record, both despite and because of its uneven nature, may hold more valuable lessons for reformers.

Given the sheer diversity of the RP's experiences with corruption, and of its responses over the years, the discussion to come will not apply equally to all reform efforts in the country – much less to those of its neighbors in the region. But I suggest that we can learn more from the sorts of mixed-to-negative outcomes that arise in most reform experiences, particularly as they highlight variables and dilemmas we need to anticipate, than by cherry-picking "best practices" that may reflect favorable circumstances unlikely to be found elsewhere. At the very least, the challenges and risks of reform in the RP, and any opportunities for *better* practices, are what the country's "essential lessons" are all about.

Lessons from the Philippines

It would be inaccurate to claim that the RP has failed outright in checking corruption, if only because it is impossible to say what the present would be like if reforms had not been tried. Moreover, corruption is not a unified national trait, even at the level of perceptions, but rather can vary markedly among levels of society and government, sectors of policy and the economy, and type of community. After all, we lack a consensual definition of corruption, and our numerical indices are proxies at best for exceedingly complex realities. Lessons from the RP will not add up to a new corruption-control cookbook. They may, however, help us replace tired concepts and empty language (Johnston, 2023) with fresh approaches and adjust our views regarding the myriad social connections and institutional niches where corruption can take root.

Think big – and think small

One way to begin is to look beyond the notion of corruption as a problem of law enforcement and punishment, and to view it instead as a symptom of power imbalances enabling the few to abuse the many (Johnston and Fritzen, 2021). In that connection we should take seriously the notion of the RP as a "flawed democracy" (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024) – a rating it shares with the United States – and Freedom House's classification of the nation as only "partly free" (Freedom House, 2024). The question then becomes how and why powerful figures in both the public and private sectors can act with so few constraints, and how citizens respond or adapt to the power situations in which they and their communities are

immersed. Teehankee and Calimbahin (2020), for example, highlight the incoherence and ineffectiveness of democratic institutions in the face of longstanding oligarchical and family-based power, clientelism, and systems of obligation.

Those power relationships normally serve the interests of deeply entrenched elites and can be stronger and more durable than formal democratic frameworks. They are unlikely to be dislodged by short-lived, externally funded "good governance" projects, by sporadic legal crackdowns on individual or small-group miscreants, or by an exclusive focus upon improving administrative processes, worthy as that goal is in itself. No more, unfortunately, will fundamental imbalances of power melt away in the face of short-lived episodes of "people power". Those upheavals do at least point to the scope and depth of change that real reform requires, but sustaining popular pressure for justice is a continuing challenge. None of this is to suggest that law enforcement or mass mobilizations are unimportant – far from it. But enacting and enforcing sound laws, updating penalties, and fully funding the *Sandiganbayan* and other anti-corruption institutions are likely to encounter entrenched elite resistance so long as underlying imbalances of power remain in place.

Reform is stressful

Nearly everyone likes "reform" – so much so, in fact, that the word is often used to make unpopular ideas more politically palatable. In the United States, for example, cutbacks on Social Security benefits and legislation making it more difficult for citizens to seek damages from large corporations have both been termed "reforms". Reform can be a powerful appeal. but not everything called a reform is necessarily a good idea, and not all such proposals will necessarily lead to less, or to less harmful, corruption.

Those are familiar notions. Less so is the fact that in a "fragile state" (Bondoc, 2024) reforms, and the political push on which they depend, can place immense stress upon institutions, elite alignments, and citizens' connections with leaders and each other. Indeed, if reform is to be effective it could hardly *not* be stressful, as it will entail challenging entrenched interests and disrupting the ways elites influence or neutralize citizen preferences. Difficult as the corrupt *status quo* might be, many citizens improvise coping strategies – at times, corrupt – that ease some challenges of day-to-day life. New controls might thus make things worse for society's have-nots for some time before any benefits become apparent. Those sorts of concerns could be critical in a society like the RP with its extensive poverty.

What are the specific lessons of such stresses for reformers? One is that attempts at significant change must be backed up by sound social, institutional, and financial support – often, requiring precisely the sorts of assets that have been misappropriated by corrupt figures. The credibility of reform ideas, and their connections to the quality of everyday life, are also critical: citizens must be able to believe they stand to benefit from anti-corruption efforts, and that those changes have a chance to last. Corrupt institutions and the bad old ways of doing things must be replaced by something better, lest corrupt networks reassert themselves and misplaced nostalgia set in among citizens. Citizens and businesses must be offered incentives (Johnston and Kpundeh, 2004) other than public purposes: "better government for all" is a noble idea but vulnerable to collective action problems and "reform fatigue.". Finally, corruption control will never "arrive" at some finish line beyond which society somehow reverts to a happy equilibrium. Ousted interests will not give up their privileges gladly, and new opportunities for corruption can develop faster than our ability to recognize and respond to them.

History matters

Reform never takes place on a clean slate. The effects of past events and the incentives, relationships, and expectations shaping contemporary corruption can become deeply

embedded in a society. In the former instance, for example, You (2015) has shown that agrarian land reform, generally successful in post-war South Korea but blocked in the RP for ideological reasons by the United States, significantly influenced Korean and Filipino experiences of corruption. More generally, Lorenzana (2024) sees the prevalence of "dysfunctional" American-style conceptions of politics as a major reason why reform momentum growing out of the ouster of Ferdinand Marcos dissipated as quickly as it did. Insistence that the Cory Aquino government seek an electoral mandate little more than a year after Marcos fell left a fledgling government with only shallow social roots facing entrenched family networks throughout the country. To that we might add Fukuyama's (2013) argument that American conceptions of governance often overemphasize checking and dividing power, rather than enabling its effective use.

History matters in more general ways too. Attempts to produce systemic change must take longstanding social values into account: local systems of status and obligation cannot be arbitrarily swept away. Indeed, attempts to do so can be stymied by the ways people understand leadership, cooperation, and trust in their own communities. Davis *et al.* (2024) show the enduring power of the RP's dynastic families as reflected in data on public procurement, finding that dynastic dominance in a province undermines formal checks and balances and is associated with heightened risks of corruption and poor governance (Jimenez, 2024), Similarly, Thompson (2020) comparing Thailand and the RP argues that even after six years of reform effort by the Noy Aquino administration, local power relations and in-group loyalties still helped usher in Duterte's illiberal and violent presidency.

At least three further implications of these dynamics are worth noting. One is that while corruption is a critical problem as analysts and reformers view it, it is not always the most important issue for citizens. Poverty, hunger, illness, social division, and injustices may well be linked to corruption and exacerbated by it, but for desperate communities appeals to "good governance" or "public integrity" may seem to miss the point. Indeed, citizen expectations that corrupt elites can be sources of help (even if erroneous) can undercut such appeals. Reformers may need to present a track record of fighting poverty and delivering benefits before they can take on corruption as a public issue.

Second, language and metaphors matter too: describing corruption as a disease or form of deviance that has destroyed some preferable past situation can distract us from the many ways in which it may be deeply embedded in social relationships, institutions, and economies. For many citizens those factors may not appear to be problems to be solved, but rather to be facts of life with uses and significance of their own (for vote-buying, Canare *et al.*, 2018; Schaffer, 2005), This is not to say that such corruption is beneficial in any sense, but rather that reformers' worldviews will not always appeal to everyone. Seeking to end corruption without putting new and usable arrangements in its place is likely to prove futile.

Third, just as history matters it can also vary in a multitude of ways between, and within, societies. A "best practice" in Country A may, for longstanding reasons, be impossible, irrelevant, or downright harmful elsewhere. Moreover, today's circumstances that make a case seem ripe for some best practice can distract us from deeper, but critical, historical contrasts. It is commonly observed that "one size fits all" reforms are a bad idea, but history can reveal key reasons why that is true.

Reform requires trust

If we think of corruption control as more than making and enforcing rules, the importance of trust becomes apparent. Accountability and compliance – as opposed to sheer coercion – cannot be sustained without workable levels of trust. In a democracy trust, both in government and among citizens, is most sustainable when it is pragmatic and conditional (Lane, 1962), rather than taking the form of blind faith.

Corruption undermines trust in institutions, officials, and fellow citizens, but in reciprocal ways; indeed, levels of trust may be a stronger influence upon perceptions of officials' performance and character (Xiao *et al.*, 2024). Further, trust is needed in order to overcome the alienation, resignation and sense of injustice that can result from abuses of power but also to implement reforms that have a chance to succeed (those connections are explored in Dincer and Johnston, 2025), Persson *et al.* (2013) argue that corruption control requires effective, sustained collective action; that, in turn, is more difficult where citizens do not trust each other (Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005). Merchants asked to join a no-bribes pledge are less likely to stand by such commitments if they do not trust each other to honor their pledges; citizens asked to forego corrupt officials' petty benefits need to trust reformers' claims that doing so will bring benefits.

When it comes to trust, the RP faces an uphill climb. While communal ties can be deep and lasting, some social linkages may be patron-client relationships with officials or local potentates – what Springborg (1979, p. 261) calls "lopsided friendships" – solidifying elite control more than helping most citizens. In-group trust, in turn, does not necessarily extend to broader segments of society.

Among the survey items frequently used to assess countries' levels of social trust are those asking (in various ways) whether respondents think "most people can be trusted", or that "you need to be very careful" (a history of such questions and important *caveats* appear in Reeskens, 2013; for a defense see Uslaner, 2015). Such questions leave much to be desired: many might say that both statements are true simultaneously. In any event that sort of question has been used for a long time mostly because it has been used for a long time, and thus offers an extensive comparative baseline. Still, World Values Survey data from 2019 suggest that compared to twenty-three other countries, the RP suffers from a trust deficit: Norwegians were most likely to say that most people can be trusted (72 percent), followed by respondents in China (64 percent) and Sweden (63 percent). Australia came fourth at 49 percent, the United States ninth (37 percent), and South Korea eleventh (33 percent). The RP, by contrast, tied with Indonesia at the bottom with only five percent saying most people can be trusted (Policy Institute, 2023). Similar data from 2022 estimated trust in the RP at 5.3 percent (Our World in Data, 2023). Whatever reservations one might have regarding such findings, low levels of trust seem an important reason why corruption control in the RP has been an uphill climb.

Reformers are thus confronted with a paradox: higher quality government might help build social trust, but a lack of trust makes reform more difficult. There are ways out of that dilemma: Ostrom (1998) offers classic propositions about building collective action on foundations of reciprocity, reputation, and trust. Rothstein (2011) argues that universalistic policies to which all citizens contribute, and from which all stand to benefit in reliable ways, can also build trust. Uslaner (2017) presents intriguing findings that the quality and accessibility of a country's public education *in 1870* remains a robust predictor of apparent levels of corruption today – a result that might reflect not only the extended benefits of education, but also of equitable and dependable delivery of public services. In any event, selecting corruption controls out of an international reform playbook without careful regard to the RP's social values is likely to waste resources and scarce reform opportunities.

All corruption is not alike

For many reasons – the ease of plugging whole-country scores on one-dimensional corruption indices into equations, a tendency to conceive of corruption simply as bribery, or the temptation to understand its causes and effects solely in terms of development – we often tend to overlook the ways in which corruption qualitatively changes across space and time. Some varieties are closely linked to violence while others may create alternatives to it. Sometimes corruption enables elites to build mass followings while elsewhere it facilitates authoritarianism, and in other cases corruption makes it unclear whether anyone can govern

at all. Most corruption occurs at the expense of sustained economic growth, but other kinds can foster *de facto* predictability that investors find attractive (on these and other contrasts see Johnston, 2014). Many varieties are clearly illegal; others occur within, or even with the protection of, laws and legitimate institutions (Lessig, 2013; Thompson, 2018).

There is no authoritative typology of forms of corruption. Some listings focus only on techniques (e.g., bribery vs. extortion) without digging into deeper historical, social, institutional, and economic contrasts. Adding to the problem is the tendency to treat corruption as a whole-country attribute rather than emphasizing internal contrasts (comparisons among the American states appear in Dincer and Johnston, 2025). My attempt at a comparative framework (Johnston, 2014) proposes four contrasting "syndromes of corruption": *Influence Markets* (strong institutions, open and competitive markets and politics); *Elite Cartels* (only moderately strong institutions, with markets and politics dominated by elite alliances solidified by corrupt collusion, often in regimes that are reforming after periods of authoritarian rule or violence); *Oligarchs and Clans* (very weak institutions and rapidly expanding political and economic opportunities contended over – at times, violently – by a variety of "strongmen" and their personal followings); and *Official Moguls* (very weak official institutions with wealth and power dominated by a dictator, junta, or family). Weak institutions and extensive corruption may make Oligarchs and Clans seem similar to Official Moguls. But while in the latter there is little doubt who holds power, the Oligarchs and Clans category emphasizes intense contention among leaders and their factions over wealth and power.

The RP lands in the Oligarchs and Clans category, with many of the "clans" being literal families. That syndrome is also notable for the ways it can disrupt civil society, economies, and politics as violence and contention among Oligarchs create, and feed upon, profound insecurity. In such settings, investors are likely to seek quick returns and to keep their assets as mobile as possible – or simply invest elsewhere – while citizens may find it prudent to keep their heads down.

In no way is this typology definitive. More attention is needed to the ways contrasting syndromes coexist in a society – particularly one as large and complex as the RP (although because of the contrasting institutional, political, and economic conditions that define them, syndromes are unlikely to "blend"). Just as Filipino corruption is not merely the same problem that Denmark or Cameroon experience, varying only by amount, contrasts between, say, Maguindanao and Metro Manila need further analysis. The value of any such scheme, however, lies in the way it might help us understand the origins and impact of corruption in a given time and place and, therefore, what can be done to deal with it. A sound typology will never lead to simple reforms, but it may help us avoid serious mistakes: for example, western efforts to promote privatization in post-1991 Russia arguably poured petrol on a corruption fire. As for the RP, Oligarchs-and-Clans corruption dominated by powerful families means that direct challenges to entrenched interests will encounter powerful opposition – and could place citizens at significant risk. It would be better, in this view, to work over time to create safe and valued political and economic space beyond the control of those oligarchs, and to encourage the emergence of citizen voices pursuing a range of demands – not just corruption – advocating their own lasting interests. Another priority might be to develop locally focused, yet widely accessible, indicators and benchmarks of government performance relating to citizens' grievances. Such evidence could help identify corruption hot spots, demonstrate and reward effective leadership, and show would-be bad actors that the rewards of corruption are being reduced in specific areas and sectors.

Be careful what you wish for
"People power" and "political will" are popular concepts among reformers, and both have their attractions. As for "People power", massive public demonstrations are dramatic and

sometimes can sweep aside old corrupt regimes (Beyerle, 2014): the 1986 EDSA I demonstrations that ousted Ferdinand Marcos, for example, inspired people around the world. Where such action can be channeled into prolonged civil resistance it can exert significant force for accountability (Chenoweth, 2014; Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011). But if the idea is that corruption can be checked in sustained ways by ousting abusive leaders from time to time, the prospects are not favorable.

Massive people power events are difficult to sustain in part because of the demands they place upon citizens, institutions, and the locales in which they occur. Moreover, they can place citizens at great risk: the anti-Marcos demonstrations could well have culminated in a slaughter. Incentives and interests perpetuating corrupt dealings may be embedded in power structures and can reassert themselves with a vengeance. Too often, "people power" energy is unfocused, short-lived – particularly after top figures are deposed – and vulnerable to collective action problems.

Calls for "political will" (Buendia, 2022; Senate of the Philippines, 2006) are a popular staple of reform discussions, and well-conceived reforms may well benefit from top-level backing. But sound corruption controls and imposing a leader's will upon complex and changing situations can be very different things. Political will can protect corruption and abuses of power – indeed, has often been used that way. Calls for "political will" can amount to little more than an empty slogan – a hope that someone will come along to make reform ideas work, regardless of their quality. When reform fails it is easy – and, for reformers, can be self-serving – to claim that proposed controls were sound, but leaders just lacked sufficient political will. But "will", after all, is a matter of intentions and dispositions, unknowable other than by what we see as its effects. As Brinkerhoff (2000) rightly argues, we can only assess the strength of political will *post hoc* and in its full context. Indeed, arguments from political will can become an exercise in blaming the victims of corruption because of their supposedly insufficient backing for reform (Johnston, 2018). Worse yet, in any democratic or democratizing society reducing corruption control to "political will" distracts us from a critical question confronting citizens: how best to demand, encourage, and sustain official support for effective reform. Perhaps the most important political will is generated from the grassroots upward.

Both issues bear considerable relevance to the RP, not just *via* historical events but because they point to important anti-corruption risks. Popular anger can back reformers, but it can also be mobilized by demagogues to amass personal power and punish opponents. Rodrigo Duterte, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, and Donald J. Trump had no shortage of political will – and both Trump and Bolsonaro showed they could mobilize "people power" in the streets on their own. Duterte made great political capital out of pledges to fight corruption, drugs, and crime, and to remedy the shortcomings of democracy. While he failed on all counts, he still accumulated formidable personal power and inflicted violence upon poor communities (de Jesus, 2021). Garrido (2022, p. 673) suggests that "repeated failures to reform democracy have resulted in ... increasing openness to certain authoritarian forms of government" in the RP, and that "[t]hese attitudes manifest on the ground as calls for 'disciplining' democracy" (Teehankee, 2022; Bautista, 2020). Reform advocates should call for "political will" only with caution, if at all, keeping its risks front and center while refraining from using it to obscure the weaknesses of poorly devised controls.

The grievances fueling the rise of Duterte, Bolsonaro, and Trump are no less significant for having been distorted, manipulated, and misdirected to support those leaders' personal agendas. I emphatically do not suggest, thereby, that such leaders had the best interests of their followers at heart. But large numbers of people around the world – many of them in established democracies – feel left out when important decisions affecting their lives are being made. Indeed, Warren (2004) argues that such "duplicitous exclusion" is the essence of corruption in a democracy. In some cases, the exclusion comes because of bribery, collusion,

and outright lawbreaking. But in others, as witness the discussion of institutional corruption above, the activities involved are fully legal – indeed, constitutionally protected in some countries. Many citizens of those societies believe their fundamental rights have been taken away, and they are angry. Demagogues and pseudo-populists, possessed of little policy insight but endowed with strong political will – are adept at capitalizing upon that anger.

But opponents of corruption have been fighting the same kinds of collusion, unfair advantages, and duplicitous exclusion for a long time, and must reclaim the issues that gave rise to the anti-corruption movement in the first place (Johnston, 2020), They must do so not only to fight corruption more effectively, but also to prevent demagogues and anti-system movements from undermining the democratic processes upon which lasting reform depends (della Porta and Portos, 2024).

What do we do now?

There are numerous general principles and ideas reformers can learn by examining the RP case. But how might we apply them? What follows is derived from a discussion developed in 2010 – in many ways a less-fraught time in the nation's politics (Johnston, 2012). These ideas do not apply solely to the RP, nor are they derived from a broad critique of "Asian values" (Wirawan, 2023). Rather, they are aimed at two challenges confronting reformers everywhere: addressing imbalances of power and building sustained popular demand for reform. They will, for that reason, not necessarily seem new to reformers. But they do emphasize political accountability and sustained reductions in poverty – in effect, enhancing citizens' ability and opportunities to defend their interests and wellbeing by political means (Johnston, 2014).

Here are three basic principles, a set of shorter-term priorities, and some long-term chances too: *Reform should aim for fundamental changes in relationships between government and society at the grassroots.* This does not mean that the national democratic framework should be ignored: it is, after all, the oldest in Southeast Asia (Teehankee and Calimbahin, 2020). But in important respects it continues to rest atop political alignments shaped by longstanding family machines and interests. Leaders need to be able to win authority *and govern* through democratic institutions, rather than by negotiating the shifting and uncertain links between government and the old elite networks. There is no easy way to produce such changes; longstanding ways of doing things cannot, and should not, be abruptly swept away, for confronting them in hasty fashion might well invite repression. But they should instead face strong competition from, and in time be supplanted by, political linkages and accountability based on citizen services, accountability, employing the indicators and benchmarks proposed above.

It is time to rethink what we mean by "civil society". Civil Society in the RP, broadly speaking, has immense potential strength. Reformers, however, have too often envisioned civil society primarily as formal, dedicated organizations depended upon support from above and without and, therefore, vulnerable to cooptation and collective action problems. A better approach might be to make common cause with, and build upon, existing social networks people use to cope with life's challenges, even when those groups do not have explicit anti-corruption goals. Social capital can be versatile and diverse in form; improving local utility services, schools, or policing – causes that likely enjoy popular support and thus may be less vulnerable to collective action problems – could produce anti-corruption benefits too, Moreover, they could win support from local and regional elites by creating opportunities to claim credit for improvements in the quality of life.

A final suggestion is to develop *better metrics for assessing corruption, the quality of government performance, justice, and the impact of reforms.* Lin and Yu (2014) have shown that in thirteen East and Southeast Asian societies the perceptions shaping international

policy and indices can differ significantly from corruption as people experience it. Whole-country index scores can hide simultaneous deterioration and improvements. Worse yet, they give little indication as to where to attack, what to do, and what effects, if any, we might have. The indicators-and-benchmarks approach is no solution to all those difficulties, but it might tie both corruption and reform more closely to credible evidence of the quality of life. Local elites and citizen networks can tell us a great deal about corruption as people experience it, and an indicators-and-benchmarks system incorporating local networks and leadership can make it clear where and when, reform is needed – and what makes it real for citizens. Some short-term recommendations are made as follows:

- Relentlessly frame corruption control in terms of fighting poverty and improving citizens' quality of life; build trust through the effective provision of services and facilities (e.g., schools, public utilities, policing, taxation) in which large parts of the population share an interest.

- Consolidate anti-corruption responsibilities that have historically been scattered among several offices and agencies. A consolidated anti-corruption office possessing sufficient staffing and resources should also have arrest and subpoena powers and prosecute cases on its own authority.

- Recruit an Eminent Persons Group from many segments of society to advise on and oversee evaluation of reforms, report to the public, and evaluate the consolidated anti-corruption agency.

- Speed up the Sandiganbayan by providing full staffing and resources. Cases placed on the docket should move ahead in an expeditious manner.

- Establish a Citizen Advocate within each Cabinet-level public service department to serve as a focus for citizens' and civil society groups' service and corruption concerns.

- Publicly cite and reward officials responsible for improved performance on benchmarks; require unsuccessful officials to account for results.

- Allocate resources to reward agencies and jurisdictions showing improvement on benchmarks.

- Support reform-minded bureaucrats with bonuses, recognition, whistleblower protections, and promotions. When corrupt officials are dismissed, roll their salaries over into higher pay for those who remain.

Over the longer term, some suggestions are made as follows:

- Launch, sustain, and refine an anti-corruption curriculum in the schools.

- Elect Senators by districts (an action requiring constitutional amendment).

- Enhance the professionalism, political independence, and credibility of the judiciary, emphasizing protection of human rights and property rights.

Few if any of these proposals are wholly new ideas, and some have at times been given a reform push. None will be "silver bullet" remedies; the legacies of the Duterte era, and continuing challenges ranging from poverty to the influence of powerful families mean that the time will never be entirely right for reform, and violent populism will remain a very real risk. Instead, these ideas are intended to illustrate how the RP's experiences can point to broader anti-corruption efforts in which the strongest anti-corruption force in society will be the Filipino people themselves.

Conclusion

I make no claim to have touched upon all corruption problems or reform initiatives in the RP. The argument, instead, is that an international reform movement that produces numerous glossy reports and websites, yet has few major success stories to recount, can benefit from looking at a tough case – one where smart, hard-working, and courageous people have taken steps forward but also suffered reverses. That is the real world in which corruption control must find a way forward. To do so the international reform industry must become more political and less self-protective (Johnston and Johnsøn, 2014) and fight corruption *with* people rather than *for* them. That, together with the energy and resources that have bolstered the cause of reform in the years since the end of the Cold War, may enable corruption fighters in the RP to tell the world some very different stories in the future.

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Contents

Editorial