

Civic Trust and Governance in Armenia

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Abstract: Trust is the solid ground for stable development of the government and society. The author reflects on historical research and then presents a study conducted in Armenia in the format of a survey as an attempt to reveal the level of public trust in authorities in Armenia.

Keywords: bribery, corruption, democracy, development, honesty, social capital

“Trust is the key for productive economy and business.”

—Tigran Sargsyan, Chairman of the Central Bank of Armenia¹

“Honesty is more important than oil. If Armenia’s judiciary system is not corrupted and it takes equitable solutions then this will certainly promote [the] country’s economic growth.”

—Steven Ekvovich, American University of Paris²

Why do people not trust their government? Nye and his colleagues³ raised this key question in their diagnosis of what is wrong with American political institutions. Miller⁴ warned of increasing political cynicism and distrust among citizens in the early 1970s. Lipset and Schneider⁵ analyzed historical trends of declining political trust, comparing business, labor, and government; they maintained that a “confidence gap” existed across diverse institutional sectors in America and that the gap began widening in the 1960s. According to Nye and his colleagues, only one-fourth of Americans trusted the government at the end of the 1990s, whereas in the mid-1960s, three-fourths of Americans trusted the government. Concerns about declining public confidence in both political and civil institutions begin with the assumption that support and trust are essential

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for functional institutions in a democratic society. Currently, the United States is not the only country concerned with declining public confidence in institutions. In their edited volume comparing public attitudes concerning democracy in the United States, European countries, and Japan, Pharr and Putnam⁶ reported that declining institutional confidence plagued almost all the aforementioned countries. They summarize this situation as “disaffected democracies.” It is ironic that democracies face a strong internal threat in decreasing confidence among their citizens.

The situation is even worse for the countries that democratized recently. South Korea provides another case of rapid decline in public confidence in political and civil institutions.⁷ According to the World Value Survey results, Koreans’ confidence in their Parliament declined from 70 to 15 percent between 1981 and 2001, while confidence in the courts and civil servants declined from 80 to 45 percent during the same period. Survey results show that Korean “democracy in the aftermath of democratization”⁸ shows symptoms of general crises.⁹

Recent studies show that postcommunist societies suffer from a lack of public confidence in all institutions, and particularly in political institutions.¹⁰ In Poland, for example, peoples’ confidence in the Parliament and the government, which had previously shown a high level of 85 and 65 percent between 1989 and 1993, respectively, fell to a low of 20 percent within five years.¹¹

This article concentrates on Armenia, a country that gained its independence only fifteen years ago. Armenia, which is in the South Caucasus, neighbors Georgia, Turkey, and Iran. Political stability of the countries situated in this region is vital for the region and for oil-dependent countries. Lack of trust toward the newly established democratic institutions impedes their development, hindering overall development.

Survey Methodology

The Institute for Honesty and Integrity conducted the survey between February 2004 and March 2005 in the following six cities: Yerevan, Berd, Yeghvard, Gyumri, Gavar, and Vanadzor and surveyed a total of one thousand respondents. The margin error of is 3.2 percent with a confidence level of 95 percent.

All of the aforementioned cities, except Yerevan, were randomly selected. Yerevan was manually selected because it is the capital, as well as the largest city in Armenia. The total number of questionnaires was proportionately distributed, taking into consideration the official data on de jure urban population.

The questionnaires, which were written in Armenian, included close-ended, single, and multiple-choice questions. The fifty-one questions were technically designed to minimize confusion. The respondents were selected randomly; in most cases, questionnaires were delivered to their houses. There was no restriction as to which member of the family should fill in the questionnaire.

Results

Armenians realize the positive influence and the concernment of trust for Armenia’s future. Of those surveyed, 79.1 percent agreed that “An honest country promises a better future.” Taking this into consideration, 69.5 percent of those surveyed believe that “a higher level of honesty will promote tourism development in the country,” which is a cornerstone of economic development. Armenians also realize that the lack of trust in the country has

negative consequences. Of those surveyed, 74.4 percent agreed that “a low level of honesty decreases the amount of foreign investment in our country.”

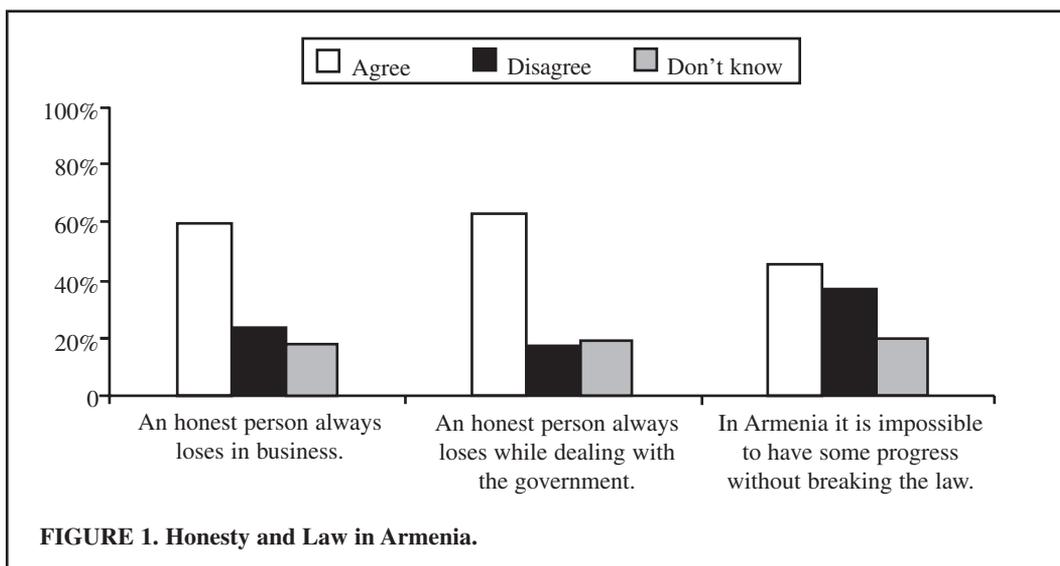
Although the majority of the respondents realize that trust and honesty are positive phenomenon, it is far from Armenian reality. Thus, 45.7 percent of the respondents agree that “In Armenia it is impossible to have some progress without breaking the law,” 63.4 percent believe that “An honest person always loses while dealing with the Government,” and 59.4 percent think that “An honest person always loses in business” (see figure 1).

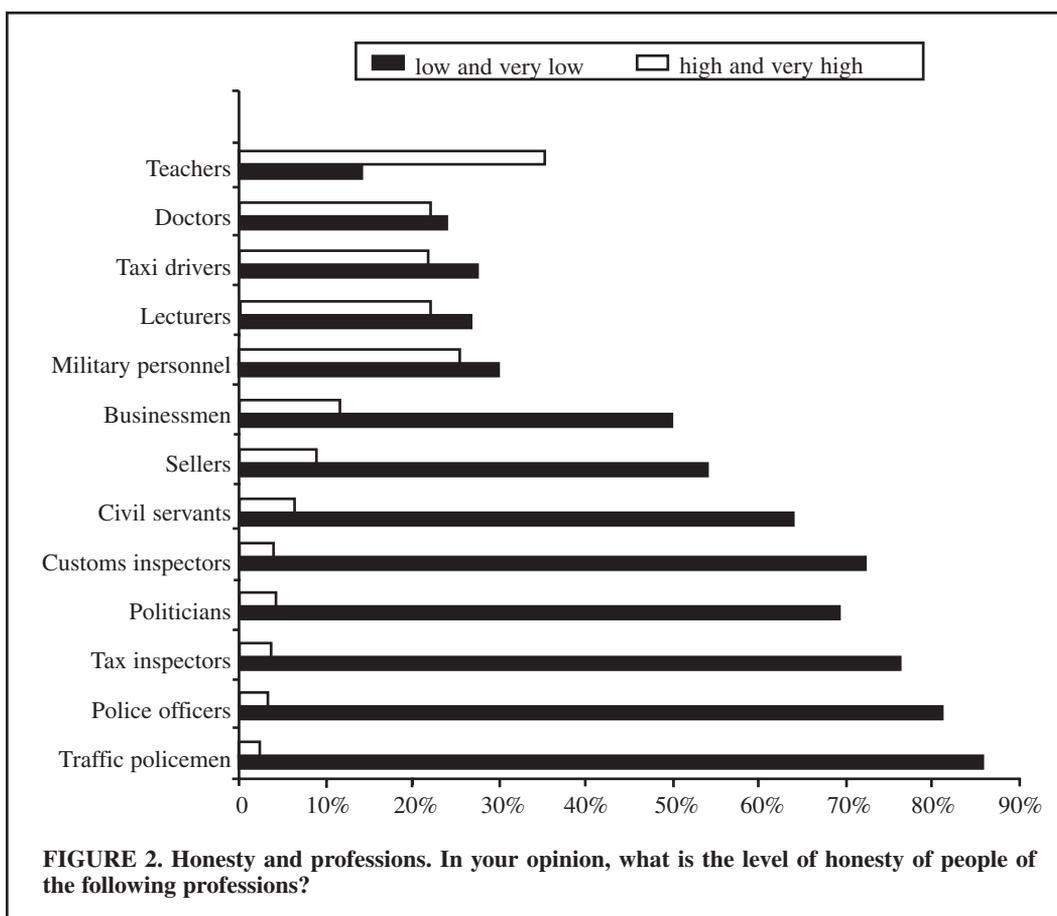
The general public’s level of trust (or lack thereof) in various professions is most interesting. The lowest indications of trust were given to the civil servants and other authorities representing the government. This explains phenomena such as why there is a low index of participation in the elections.

Negative views of government are pervasive. Some 85.7 percent of the respondents described the level of honesty of the traffic police as “low” or “very low,” 56.8 percent of which described the level of honesty of the traffic police as “very low.” Only 3 percent of the respondents believe that the level of honesty of the police officers is “high.” The vast majority of the respondents (72 percent) believe that customs inspectors are dishonest and only 3.9 percent consider them to be honest. Concerning tax inspectors, the estimates are 76.2 percent and 3.5 percent, respectively.

Armenians do not trust people involved in politics (see figure 2). Approximately 68.9 percent of respondents consider the level of honesty of politicians to be either “low” or “very low.” This did not change much when we replaced the word “politician” with “civil servant,” whom 63.8 percent of respondents consider to be dishonest.

Armenians’ perception of military personnel is not as negative as their perception of civil servants and politicians. Some 25.3 percent of respondents estimate the level of honesty of military personnel as “high” or “very high,” and 45.2 percent gave an average estimate and 29.5 percent estimated the level of honesty as “low” or “very low.” Only 9.4 percent of respondents stated the level of military personnel’s honesty is “very low.” The same index for police officers is 49.7 percent. However, for a country such as Armenia,





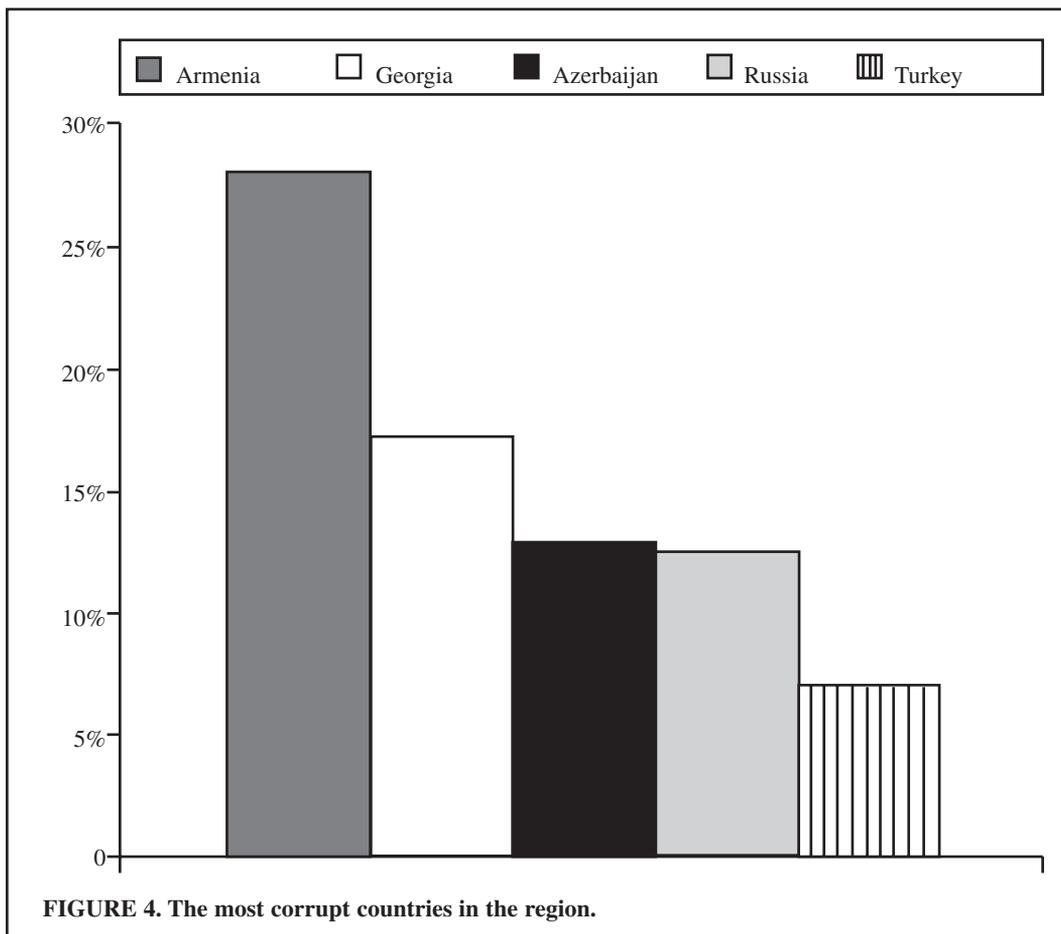
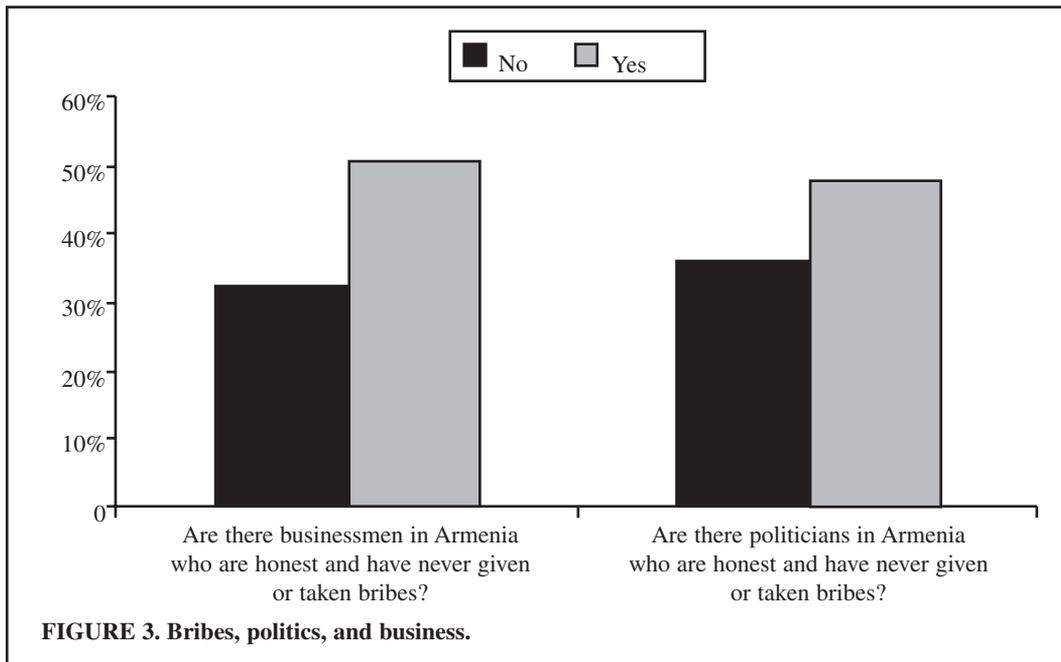
which has serious security issues, the trust of only one-quarter of Armenians is cause for concern.

Figure 3 supports the previous statement concerning businessmen and politicians. Approximately half of the respondents (50.4 percent) agree that there are no businessmen or politicians (47.7 percent) who have never dealt with bribery. This is also concordant with the opinion of 45.7 percent of respondents that it is impossible to have any progress in Armenia without breaking the law.

It is encouraging that the general public (35 percent) still trusts teachers. About half of Armenians (51.1 percent) believe teachers have an average level of honesty. Armenian teachers, to some extent, have kept their image of being trustworthy, despite numerous individual accounts regarding wide-spread bribery and corruption in schools.

When the respondents were asked to answer the following question “Please mention the country which has the highest level of corruption” it became evident that Armenians have a very negative attitude toward their own country. According to figure 4, Armenians believe their country is the most corrupt country in the world.

It is very interesting to compare the opinion of the Armenian society with the comparatively objective results in Transparency International’s 2005 corruption index. According to the 2005 corruption index, Armenia is on the 88–96 least corrupt country in the world, Russia is 126–29, Georgia is 130–36, Azerbaijan is 137–43, and Turkey is 65–69. Thus, the



opinion of those surveyed somewhat diverges from the Transparency International index.

It may be useful to compare our results with the results of other research realized by a different organization. The results of the survey carried out in Armenia by the Caucasus Research Resource Center, which is a branch of the Eurasia Foundation, indicates lack of trust toward state institutions as indicated in figure 5.

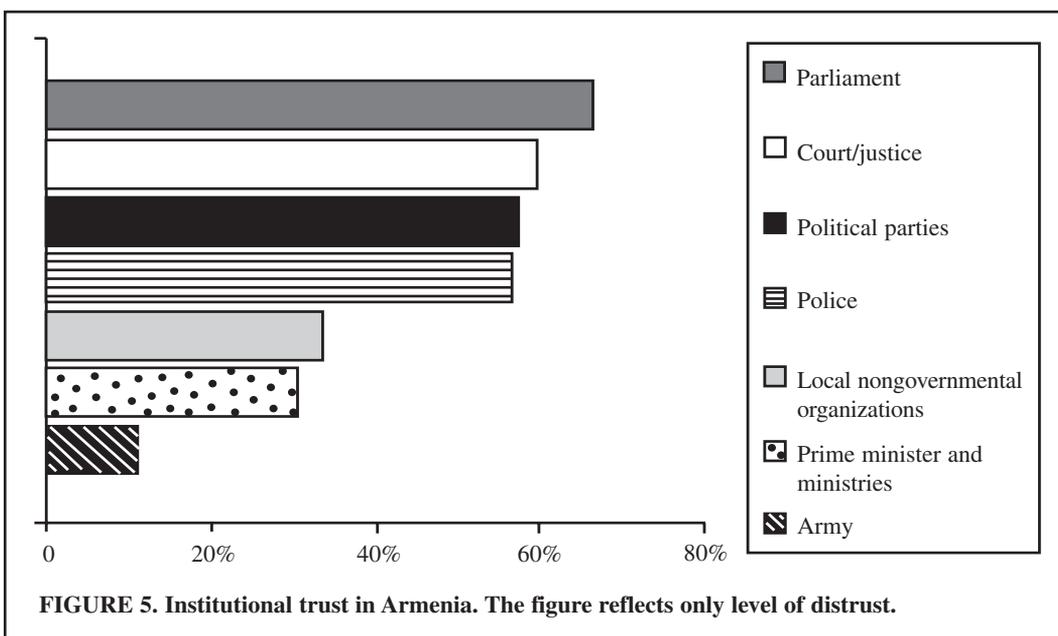
Again, the distrust of the citizens is true not only for the conceptions traditionally connected with authorities such as police, the prime minister and cabinet/government, and court (though it is supposed to be independent), but also for the political parties in general. The low level of distrust toward the Armenian army is convincing and it coincides with the results of our survey.

Conclusion

Trust is one of the most important factors in the development of the government and society, which is called social capital by some specialists (Francis Fukuyama). In countries where there is a low level of trust, interfamily and interclan relationships are dominant, and civil society's potential is very low. In the economic sphere, these countries cannot afford more than small- and medium-size business development.

The lack of trust toward the authorities causes serious questions concerning their legitimacy. What kind of government is it, after all, where everybody relies only on themselves and their families?

Armenians distrust not only the current authorities, but also politicians in general. The lack of trust and honesty in Armenia is one of the main reasons for citizens' political apathy, as well as a perfect harbor for perpetuating corruption. The low level of trust in Armenia generates crises, which in turn can bring to a recession and overall decline of democratization.



NOTES

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