

# Transforming Asia: Realizing the Asian Century through Good Governance<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

As developing Asia seeks to cement the gains from a decades-long economic boom and sustain its growth momentum, it will need to take bold action to address the plethora of governance challenges facing the region. Failure to address these challenges will lead to widened governance deficit in government, businesses and institutions.

Policy prescriptions for good governance abound, but true change will need to come from within the region. There is no short-cut to building good governance. We believe that endogenous factors—changing demographics, increasing urbanization, an expanding middle class—will drive demand for good governance in the region. It is hoped that the new aspirations accompanying the prospect of realizing the Asian Century and attaining higher living standards as well quality of life will transform governance across the region.

## Keywords

Governance, globalization, state, private sector, civil society, values and cultural norms

## Introduction

Asia's impressive rise in the last four decades has strengthened the notion that the region's ascendancy in the global economy is a given. By the middle of this century, Asia could account for over 50 per cent of global output and enjoy widespread affluence. The transformation underway has the potential to generate per capita income levels in Asia similar to those found in Europe today, with around three billion additional Asians affluent by 2050 based on current standards (Kohli et al., 2011). The region's global influence is set to continue increasing; prompting many to say that the twenty-first century belongs to Asia.

While the realization of this promising outcome—the Asian Century—is conceivable, the region's continued rise is by no means preordained. Asia must deal with multi-generational development challenges and formulate strategies to sustain its growth momentum, improve the welfare of its residents and foster inclusive growth. In the march toward shared prosperity and sustainable growth, Asia will need to tackle inequities within and across borders, avoid the middle income trap, manage finite natural resources

and the impact of climate change, and mitigate conflicts between and among countries. A critical factor that will drive the success of any endeavours aimed at addressing these challenges is good governance. Good governance is an overarching concern in the region and a necessary but not sufficient condition for sustaining Asia's growth trajectory. If left unaddressed, it could derail the region's progress and jeopardize prospects for realizing the Asian Century.

The waves of economic and political transformation over the last four decades, as exemplified by the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of globalization, have brought significant changes in the governance landscape across the globe. Certainly, Asia was not spared from this transformation. The next 40 years are expected to see further evolution in Asian's needs, demands, and expectations for governance reforms, especially in light of anticipated trends with respect to demographics, urbanization, an expanding middle class and rapid technological innovations.

This article reviews the long-term outlook for governance in Asia as it will be shaped by these key drivers. Focus

is given to the tensions between the push for reform and the pull of the status quo, analyzed through the lens of key actors—the state, private sector and civil society—while also taking into account embedded values and cultural norms. These factors are of particular importance given the contradictory pressures they are expected to exert on governance reform; while it is anticipated that trends related to demographics, urbanization, an expanding middle class and communication technology will create new demands for reform by changing the dynamic among key actors, successful implementation of and compliance with reforms will depend on whether there is a strong foundation of core values and cultural norms that truly support these demands for change.

The article is structured as follows. The next section provides a literature review on shifting roles among key actors in governance amid globalization and the impact of values and cultural norms on the transformation process. The third section discusses the governance outlook in Asia in the light of globalization. The fourth section identifies the critical drivers that will shape governance in Asia over the next four decades and assesses the coming wave of transformation in the region along with its implications for key actors in governance.

## Globalization and Governance

Before delving deeper into how the aforementioned drivers will shape governance in Asia over the next 40 years, it will be useful to review how globalization—the defining factor driving debates over governance in the past two decades—has affected the governance agenda across the globe. A discussion of the specific impacts of globalization on Asian countries will offer insight into how the transformation of governance can be expected to unfold in the coming decades.

### Key Actors

The rapid expansion of global production with the onset of globalization in the 1980s and 1990s undermined the notion that public affairs and the realm of governance were co-terminous with the state. One side of the debate is the argument that globalization has led to the ‘retreat of the state’ (Strange, 1996) as the pace, scope and complexity of global transactions challenges the political authority and capacities of domestic governments. Discourse on good

governance calls for the establishment of markets free of government interference by supporting reforms focused on limiting the state’s role to the establishment of a secure legal and institutional environment in which markets can flourish (Beeson, 2001). An empowered private sector (particularly multinational corporations) and a growing civil society have joined the state to form the new global domain: ‘an increasingly institutionalized transnational arena of discourse, contestation, and action concerning the production of global public goods’ (Ruggie, 2004, p. 8). International organizations have also begun to take on a bigger role in managing global public goods. The case of the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPS Agreement, Florini, 2003) and the international campaign to ban land mines (Sending & Neumann, 2006) are two examples that illustrate how the private sector, civil society and international organizations have formed transnational policy networks and driven governance outcomes that had traditionally been the sole discretion of the state.

On the other hand, while the rising influence of non-state actors is not disputed, arguments pointing to the waning power and relevance of the state in global governance have been questioned. The assumption of a zero-sum relationship in global governance is negated by the possibility of synergies between the state, private sector and civil society (Evans, 1996, 1997; Huff et al., 2001; Sending & Neumann, 2006). These synergies create opportunities for enhanced capacity, efficiency and legitimacy; however, it would be premature to conclude that it necessarily leads to increased pluralism. Different non-state actors may also largely be extensions of state interests. Hence, it is not clear that the functional role of the state has changed much even after the effects of globalization. Instead, greater focus should be placed on how different actors should organize their work and manage relationships with each other in increasingly dense and complex global policy networks.

### Values and Cultural Norms

The socio-cultural aspect of globalization theories commonly hold that cultural particularities associated with specific territories and histories will eventually give way to convergence, particularly with respect to material and cultural consumption. In the context of governance, widely held expectations of the inevitable spread of democracy and economic liberalism were typical features of the good governance discourse during the 1990s. However, such a view disregards how specific national and institutional

contexts mediate the effects of globalization to create significantly different outcomes (Beeson, 2001; Boyer, 1996). Patterns of economic coordination and state–society relationships with deep social and cultural roots that have become institutionalized and been accorded a degree of legitimacy by the public are likely to prove resistant to change.

A study by Lich et al. (2003) explores how a country's cultural orientation fosters and facilitates the emergence and perpetuation of particular norms of governance, focusing on the rule of law, curbing corruption and accountability. Results suggest that the cultural profiles of countries—identified in the study as the value dimensions of embeddedness–authority, hierarchy–egalitarianism, and mastery–harmony—can predict perceived differences in adherence to governance norms, even after economic and historical (for example, colonial) factors are taken into consideration. Hence, the persistence of cultural orientations may impede reform and induce path dependence in governance norms. The acceptance and prevalence of such norms hinge on their compatibility with general cultural values. Consequently, '[t]his compatibility provides the norms with the legitimacy signal that triggers social incentive mechanisms for rewarding compliant behavior, and vice versa' (Lich et al., 2003, p. 7).

### *The Asian Experience*

Has Asia conformed to the general paradigm of good governance as espoused in the tenets of democratization and economic liberalism? Evidence of the massive impact of globalization is manifest throughout Asia. The most obvious effects are seen in how economic liberalization changed market structures and production processes across the region; in terms of governance, best practices from developed countries, including those related to privatization and decentralization, were promoted for implementation in different countries in the region, especially in the aftermath of the 1997/98 Asian financial crisis. However, this effort never resulted in any convergence of governance structures. Instead, examples show that Asian countries were not passive objects of the process of globalization. In fact, globalization has had varied implications throughout the region. While globalization brought increased pressure for a standard model of governance reform, Asian countries managed to adapt selected reform strategies depending on their normative appeal and suitability to national needs and political demands (Cheung, 2005).

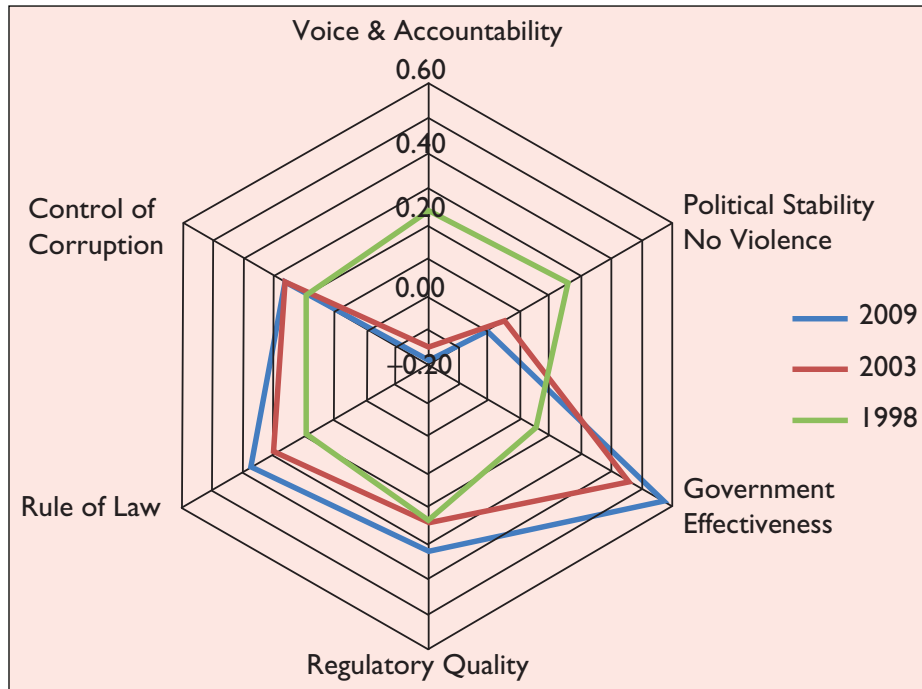
### **The Governance Outlook in Asia**

A quick look at Asia's governance record between 1998 and 2009 reveals that there were no significant changes in the region's overall performance based on the average of individual country scores from the 2009 Worldwide Governance Indicators published by the World Bank Institute. These indicators consist of a composite of six core governance dimensions: (a) voice (of the people) and accountability (of the government); (b) political stability and the absence of violence; (c) government effectiveness; (d) regulatory quality; (e) rule of law; and (f) control of corruption. Evaluating Asia's performance in each indicator indicates a slight deterioration in voice and accountability with a minor improvement in the political stability component (Figure 1). Once the country scores are weighted by gross domestic product (GDP), the scores suggest a strong correlation between good governance and economic growth. The Asia-7, a group of countries identified as the main engines driving economic growth in the region, outperforms the rest of the region in all dimensions.<sup>2</sup> When comparisons are drawn between the Asia-7 and the rest of the world, the Asia-7, with lower scores across all governance dimensions, does not appear to fare well (Figure 2) (Katsu, 2011).

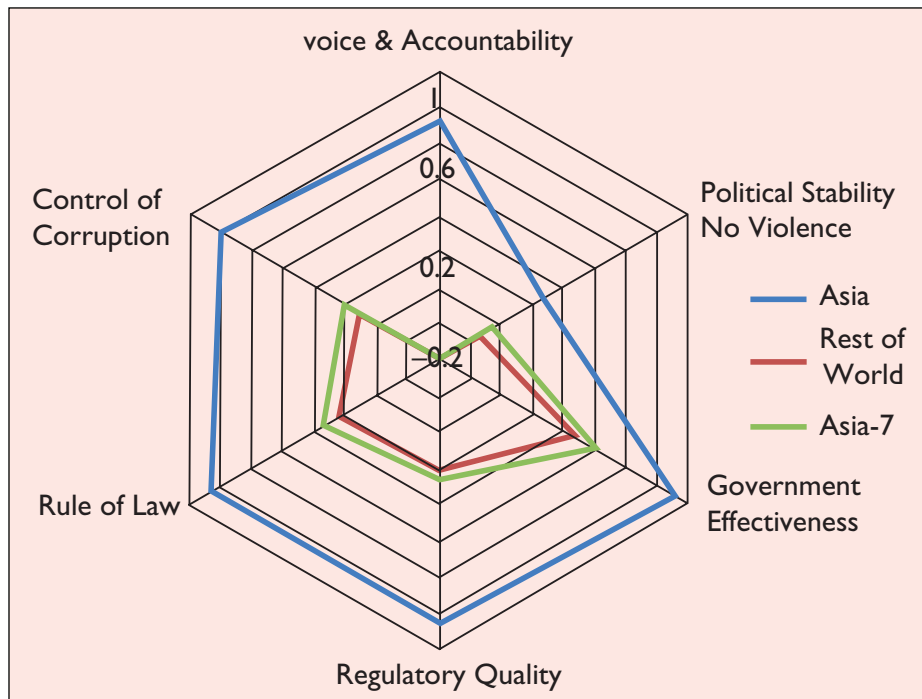
Focusing on corruption as an indicator of the quality and credibility of national political and economic institutions yields more distressing results. Figure 3 illustrates the glaring poor performance of Asia in controlling corruption relative to the rest of the world. Citizens in almost all Asian countries hold the general view that corruption has worsened over the past three years (Katsu, 2011). Failure to address persistent and pervasive corruption in Asia creates a binding constraint to efforts to maintain social and political stability and build legitimacy in the region.

With studies demonstrating a strong positive causal effect running from better governance to higher per capita incomes (Kaufmann & Kraay, 2002; Zhuang et al., 2010), these indicators imply that Asia needs to take action to improve governance if it hopes to sustain its growth momentum in the long run. If recent adverse trends in the quality of governance remain unchecked, the region's ability to realize the Asian Century will be seriously compromised.

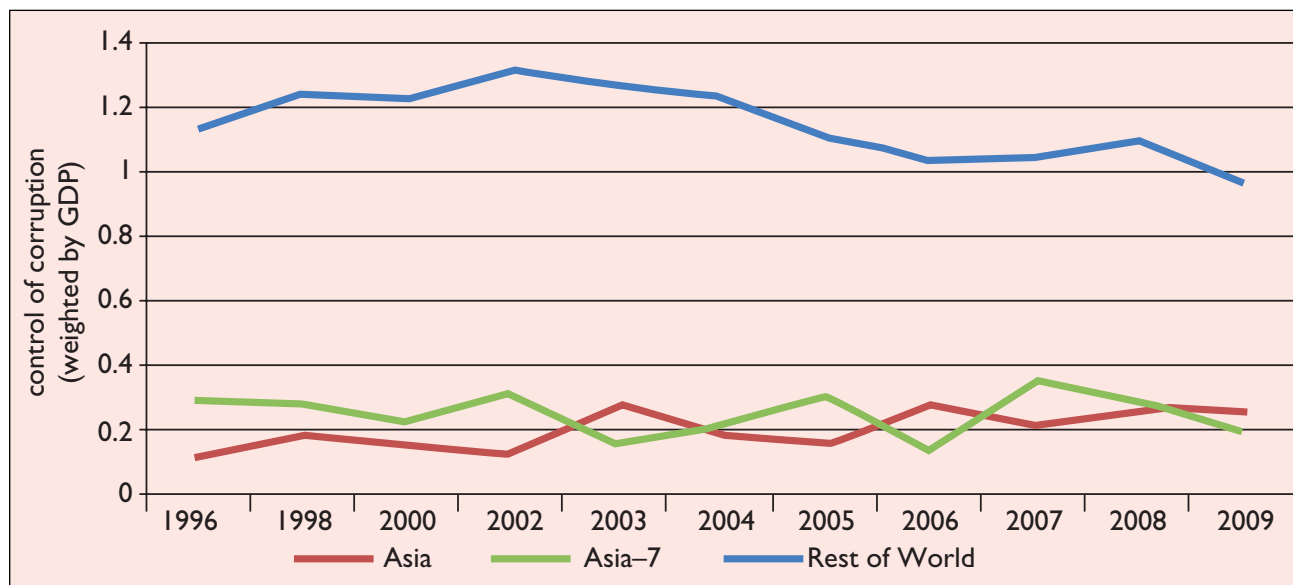
The following section discusses the status of governance in Asia, focusing on the role of key actors (for example, the state, private sector, civil society and the international community) and values and cultural norms in shaping governance reform.



**Figure 1.** Governance Indicators in Asia (weighted by GDP)  
 Source: Katsu (2011).



**Figure 2.** Governance in Asia versus the Rest of the World (weighted by GDP)  
 Source: Katsu (2011).



**Figure 3.** Corruption in Asia versus the Rest of the World, 1996–1997

Source: Katsu (2011).

## Key Actors

### State

Many Asian countries follow a state-led or state-dominated approach to economic development, whether in a capitalist or socialist setting. The developmental state model has been credited by many for helping East Asian economies achieve high growth rates, as first demonstrated by Japan and later followed by the newly industrialized economies (NIEs) including the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Chinese Taipei. Despite running contrary to the standard good governance discourse advocating a limited role for the state, strong bureaucracies and a comprehensive interventionist industrial policy were instrumental to the success of these economies (Cheung, 2005). However, extensive state regulation of industry can lead to cumbersome business processes and other market inefficiencies. Close government–business links—to the extent they facilitate crony capitalism and weaken checks and balances in public–private relations—can also lead to problems.

As long as this political structure serves the entrenched interests of the business and political elite, which are usually one and the same, state dominance in Asia is likely to prevail. Opposition from the public will only emerge if the developmental state loses the legitimacy it earned by delivering strong economic growth, as in the case of the NIEs of East Asia.

### Private Sector

Although many Asian countries undertook the privatization of state-owned enterprises in the 1980s and 1990s, the culture of political clientelism—fostered by relationship-based links between the state and the private sector (Beeson, 2001)—meant that privatization was often adopted not for the purpose of limiting the role and influence of the state, but rather to bolster state capacity in other ways. Coalitions of interlocking economic and political interests make it extremely difficult to demand and implement meaningful governance reforms (Cheung, 2005).

While industries across region reaped significant gains from the process of economic liberalization, globalization also brought with it additional expectations and responsibilities for the private sector. Global production and competition among MNCs led to the demand for global operating rules standards, such as those involving intellectual property rights and ISO certification. The private sector also had to contend with various social responsibilities including environmental and labour standards, facing strong pressure particularly from CSOs. Local companies found it difficult to rise to these new expectations and responsibilities especially in developing countries as their existing technologies and capacities were not designed for such demands. Furthermore, many companies felt that the imposition of such global standards did not agree with the



prevailing local corporate culture or mindset. However, failure to adhere to the new global markets might mean significant losses in a global market which has grown to expect the private sector to incorporate social responsibility in their own operations.

#### *Civil Society*

The dominance of the state and its close links with the private sector in many Asian countries could have produced political environments at the national level that 'render meaningless the notion of civil society as an autonomous sphere of organization by non-state and non-market group' (Nesadurai, 2010, p. 2). However, the significant rise of the number of civil society organizations (CSOs) operating in Asia since the late-1980s suggests this has not been the case. Granted, not all CSOs in the region campaign unequivocally for progressive political and social change. Some have even assisted authoritarian regimes and encouraged religious and ethnic discrimination, while others are mere extensions of the state apparatus and rely on the government for financial and political support. Nevertheless, a burgeoning civil society in Asia has created a valuable space for political engagement and transformation in the region (Nesadurai, 2010).

#### *International Community*

Donor organizations heightened their engagement in governance reform in the aftermath of the 1997/98 Asian financial crisis, with policy prescriptions that imposed best practices with little regard for the specific political and institutional contexts of individual nations. While blanket adoption of these policy blueprints did not occur in the region, the international community continues to exert its influence on domestic governance reform by leading and shaping the discourse on what constitutes good governance.

#### *Values and Cultural Norms Reflected in Governance*

As globalization gained strength in the 1990s, this period also bore witness to the emergence of the concept of common 'Asian values'. The region's dynamic growth was attributed to principles supposedly distinct from that of the West, including respect for authority, hard work, frugality, discipline, social harmony and the primacy of the group over the individual. However, the foundation of this characterization was widely criticized. In addition to the difficulties inherent in attempting to identify a blanket

set of Asian values as a unifying feature of a region as heterogeneous as Asia, advocates of the 'Asian values' thesis have insisted on an unfounded dichotomy between Eastern and Western values. With respect to the defence of authoritarianism in Asia, Amartya Sen (1997) provides historical support to counter the 'Asian values' hypothesis and finds that proponents of particularism base their claims on a very selective and limited analysis of traditional text. The defence of order and discipline is reflected not only just in Asian texts but in Western classics as well; we cannot categorically say that Confucius is any more authoritarian than Plato or Augustine (Sen, 1997). The argument is further weakened by the fact that the region's economic success (which was then actually limited to East Asia) was partly a product of its ability to learn and adopt practices widely applied in the West, such as technological innovation and trade liberalization (Mahbubani, 2008). As a result, we should not use local values and cultural norms as an excuse for path dependency.

## **Transforming Governance in Asia**

### *Drivers of Governance*

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) recently commissioned a study, entitled *Asia 2050: Realizing the Asian Century*, to develop plausible scenarios of where the region could be in 40 years; identify drivers of change and available policy choices; and design national, regional, and global agendas. With respect to governance, the book identifies three key drivers of the expected transformation of governance and institutions in Asia over the next 40 years (Katsu, 2011). The required actions and attendant risks are summarized in Table 1.

### *Demographics*

The demographic outlook in Asia will influence each country's policy agenda differently depending on whether aging or relatively young populations will dominate society. Countries with aging populations will need to cater to a growing citizenry more inclined to support a conservative economic and political reform agenda. The elderly can be expected to call for a governance approach highlighting stability and certainty. Such countries will also require adjusting health care and pensions to meet the specific needs of an aging population. Management of limited fiscal resources will be a concern as pension and security payments will increasingly crowd out existing fiscal space. On

**Table 1.** Pressures for Governance and Institutional Transformation

Issue	Developments	Actions	Risks
Demographics	Northeast Asia is aging, South and Southeast Asia are young	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aging countries should reform institutions</li> <li>• Young countries should improve public services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No precedent in Asia for reforming institutions in response to aging</li> <li>• Non-delivery of public services can lead to unrest</li> </ul>
Urbanization	Urban population growth will be significant through 2050	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Governance and institutional reforms should account for growing urban populations</li> <li>• Decentralization policies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Urban growth could lead to tensions between national and local governments</li> <li>• Urban–rural income gap will likely widen</li> </ul>
Expanding middle class	Expanding middle class will lead to demands for higher quality of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government must keep up with rising expectations and demands for governance and institutional reforms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demand for a greater voice puts strain on societies</li> <li>• The distance between the state and citizens will be affected</li> </ul>

**Source:** Katsu (2011).

the other hand, countries with a substantial young population will call for greater reform, increased citizen participation, and improved service delivery, particularly in job creation and education. Governments in this group will be pressed to deliver economic growth and undertake greater political reform to ensure their continued legitimacy among the public.

#### *Urbanization*

Asia's urban population is projected to double by 2050. Increased urbanization will accelerate the trend of decentralization as demands for more efficient services and facilities, and better government officials will grow at the local level. An important challenge in this regard will be achieving the right balance with respect to centre versus local relations, with the appropriate mix dependent upon the unique needs and capabilities of different Asian countries.

#### *Middle Class*

Another factor driving change in governance and institutions in Asia is the emergence of an expanding middle class. This group is expected to seek a stronger voice in governance through increased citizen participation that calls for the transparent allocation of resources, greater accountability for results and equality under the rule of law. The quality of communications between the public and government officials will be of critical importance. India's Right to Information Act 2005 is a landmark event and a giant step forward in ushering transparency and enhancing governance in the country.

Improved and cheaper access to new communication technologies may also facilitate people participation in public affairs and accelerate the demand for greater transparency and accountability in management of public affairs. Events in the Middle East have illustrated the power of communication technologies.

A simple but yet powerful and successful application of technology to enhance governance can be found in Pakistan's 'The Punjab Model'—that empowers common people to provide feedback to authorities about corruption in delivery of basic services (see Box 1) (Callen & Hasanian, 2011).

### *Implications for Key Actors*

#### *Demographics*

The members of Northeast Asia's aging generation are those who took part in the massive transformations of their respective economies, including the reconstruction after the destruction of World War II in the case of Japan and the emergence of the Asian NIEs in the case of the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Chinese Taipei. Having witnessed the success of the developmental state in achieving economic success, it is likely that they will continue to support state dominance in economic development. On the other hand, countries with younger populations will demand increased citizen participation and bolder reform measures. It is difficult to comment on whether this will lead to actual reform since this will depend on the convergence of their demands with that of an expanding middle class.

**Box I. The Punjab Model**

The Punjab Model applies information communications technology (ICT) to engage citizens and reduce corruption in public service delivery. The program has three objectives: (a) deter corruption by monitoring petty officials; (b) promote direct citizen engagement; and (c) signal the government's commitment to service provision.

The Punjab Model collects data on bureaucrats engaged in bribery while administrating basic services (for example, property registration, licensing of drivers). Government offices record service beneficiaries' mobile phone numbers, collect transaction details, and transmit these to a central database (in some cases using a novel SMS-to-web technology). Subsequently, numbers are called and enquiries about corruption made. Data are aggregated and analyzed for patterns of corruption. Offending offices and officials face a warning, suspension, or dismissal.

The Punjab Model requires a call centre operation to contact a reasonable percentage of beneficiaries. This would not be necessary for smaller scale operations. Instead, a mass SMS message could solicit initial feedback and a screening process could facilitate needed follow-up.

**Source:** Callen & Hasanian (2011).

*Urbanization*

The growing trend toward decentralization resulting from increased urbanization will lead to empowered local citizenry and greater civic activism. However, without proper safeguards against regulatory capture and corruption, decentralization might create more opportunities for political clientelism and collusion, given the arms-length relationship between local officials and their constituents.

*Expanding Middle Class*

Asia has a history of reform movements backed by the middle class (Thompson, 2004). With rising incomes and expanding middle class, demands for improved services and higher quality of life will emerge as a powerful driver of institutional change. And as wealth accumulates in the hands of the middle class, it will demand for more efficient financial intermediation, institutions and instruments (Katsu, 2011; Sheng, 2011). An expanding middle class will also strengthen civil society while the state will have to contend with an increasingly vocal citizenry demanding greater transparency and accountability in governance.

**Conclusion**

As the region seeks to cement the gains from a decades-long economic boom and sustain its growth momentum, Asia will need to take bold action to address the plethora of governance challenges facing the region. Prominent among these challenges is the scourge of rising corruption in many economies that has widened governance deficit in government, businesses and institutions. While corruption is not a new phenomenon nor it is just confined to the region, but if left unchecked it will weaken institutions,

corrode the fabric of governance and unravel the hard-won gains of Asian economies.

Policy prescriptions for good governance abound, but true change will need to come from within the region. There is no short-cut to building good governance. We believe that endogenous factors—changing demographics, increasing urbanization, an expanding middle class—will drive demand for good governance in the region. These drivers are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, can reinforce each other in accelerating the demand for reform. It is hoped that the new aspirations accompanying the prospect of realizing the Asian Century and attaining higher living standards as well quality of life will transform governance across the region.

There is a general consensus that good governance is the bedrock of sustainable, broad-based development and there is no dearth of policies supporting reforms for more effective, transparent, and accountable governance. However, enforcing of rules and compliance with reforms is not the sole responsibility of the state—full observance of good governance will rest with the general public in the everyday choices that they make to either support or undermine effective reform.

Asia needs a bolder approach for the next 40 years and beyond if a transformation in governance is to take root. An approach that steers clear of narrow ideologies and emphasizes the importance of building upon a foundation of core values such as freedom, justice, integrity and equal opportunity for all. These values are not derived from any specific culture or religion but are shared by all who support basic human welfare. It is these values that will guide the transformation of legal frameworks and institutions to effect genuine governance reform across Asia in the decades ahead.



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The Asian Development Bank does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this publication and accepts no responsibility for any consequence of their use.

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## Note

1. The Asia-7 comprises the People's Republic of China, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia and Thailand (Kohli et al., 2011).

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