

Linking Grand Corruption and Extremism: How Structural Abuse of Power Fuels Radical Narratives

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Article History	Abstract
Review Article	<i>Corruption is a global problem that undermines democracy, worsens inequality, and erodes governance. Among its forms, grand corruption—when high-level authorities misuse power for narrow interests—causes the most severe damage by weakening institutions and harming public trust. This article reviews literature and case studies, showing how grand corruption links to extremism. When citizens perceive systemic injustice, they are more likely to lose confidence in government and become vulnerable to radical ideologies. Extremist groups exploit dissatisfaction with corruption to recruit members, justify violence, and gain public sympathy. Recent events in Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines illustrate how structural abuse of power can fuel riots, social unrest, and extremist mobilization. Addressing grand corruption is therefore not only a matter of financial integrity or governance reform, but also a crucial step toward strengthening democracy, protecting human rights, and enhancing both national and international security against extremist threats.</i>
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Introduction

Corruption, the never ending 'contagion' in humans' history, is a deeply rooted issue that affects societies anywhere across the globe, ruins countries and democracy, distorts markets, and contributes to social and economic inequality. Defined broadly as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain (Transparency International, 2024), corruption manifests in many forms such as bribery, embezzlement, nepotism, and state capture. Despite global efforts to combat it, high-profile corruption cases continue to emerge (with more/increased prices and consequences), demonstrating the depth of institutional vulnerabilities and the need for stronger accountability mechanisms.

Among the most far-reaching corruption scandals in contemporary history is Brazil's Operation Car Wash (Lava Jato). Starting as a money laundering inquiry in 2014, what developed into a thorough investigation including government officials, industry leaders, and even former presidents. Petrobras, the state oil firm, was discovered to have overpaid on contracts, with surplus money directed into personal accounts and political campaigns. Executives of significant construction companies like Odebrecht acknowledged to spending billions in bribery throughout

Latin America (Watts, 2016). Though his conviction was eventually overturned, the scandal destroyed public confidence and resulted in the jailing of former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Phillips, 2021).

In Malaysia, the '1Malaysia Development Berhad' (1MDB) case shockingly exposed corruption at the highest levels of government. Developed in 2009 as a sovereign wealth fund, 1MDB was allegedly used by previous Prime Minister Najib Razak and his fellows to misuse over \$4.5 billion (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). Investigations revealed that funds were laundered through international banks and spent on luxury properties/assets, including real estate and even Hollywood film productions, i.e., *The Wolf of Wall Street*. Najib was eventually found guilty in 2020 and sentenced with 12 years of prison, 'marking' a rare instance of high-level accountability in Southeast Asia.

In South Africa, the phenomenon of state arrest was brought into the spotlight through the relationship between the Gupta family and President Jacob Zuma. The Guptas apparently influenced ministerial appointments and secured lucrative government contracts. A judicial investigation led

by Justice Raymond Zondo decided that state institutions were systematically weakened to benefit the family and their cronies (Zondo Commission, 2022). Jacob Zuma's resignation and continuing legal battles indicate the detrimental/corrosive impact of corruption on democratic governance.

Sadly, even developed countries are 'not immune' from the acts of corruption. In the United States, the 2019 college admissions scandal exposed how wealthy families bribed and disgracefully used fraudulent credentials to 'lock' spots for their children at top/elite universities. Over 50 individuals were outrageously charged, including celebrities and business leaders. Although not political corruption per se, the scandal highlighted how privilege can corrupt supposedly merit-based systems (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019).

The above 'mindboggling' cases appear to illustrate recurring patterns in the acts of corruption: a lack of transparency, weak institutional checks, and the complicity of both public and private actors; yet, they also highlight growing global efforts to expose and combat corruption. Luckily, investigative journalism, international legal cooperation, and civil society activism have played vital roles in bringing these cases to light.

This study investigates the relationship between grand corruption and the rise of extremism among populations, arguing that when governments are perceived as deeply corrupt, citizens may become disillusioned with democratic processes and seek radical alternatives. By reviewing literatures including global case studies, this paper examines the psychology of corruption (examining cognitive biases, moral disengagement, group dynamics, and personality traits that drive individuals to engage in unethical practices types of corruptions), stages of extremism, and how corruption contributes to extremist ideologies and actions. Understanding many issues related to corruption may enhance anti-corruption strategies by addressing not only external incentives but also internal justifications and rationalizations.

Understanding Corruption

Corruption is frequently identified as the abuse of entrusted power for private advantage (Transparency International, 2023). This common definition contains a widely range of behaviors from bribery and misuse to favoritism and extortion. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) emphasizes that corruption involves both public and private sector actors, including government (low to high) officials, business executives, and even individuals in civil society (UNODC, 2020).

The Psychology of Corruption: Understanding the Human Mind Behind Unethical Behavior

As mentioned earlier, corruption is a never-ending issue hurting good governance, a country's growth/development, and public trust. While institutional and structural factors are often emphasized in anti-corruption studies, the psychological underpinnings of 'corrupt behavior' are also crucial to comprehend this behavior.

1. Cognitive dissonance and rationalization

A central psychological mechanism in the behavior of corruption is cognitive dissonance, which is the discomfort experienced when one's actions conflict with their moral standards (see Festinger, 1957). To resolve this dissonance, individuals often rationalize/make excuses by thinking that corrupt actions is necessary, harmless, or socially acceptable due to several reasons such as everybody is doing it. For example, a civil servant or public official may justify taking bribes by claiming they are underpaid by the government or that "everyone else is doing the same" (Gino & Ariely, 2012). Such rationalizations cut internal moral conflict and enable individuals to keep maintaining a positive self-image while engaging in unethical behavior.

2. Moral disengagement

Bandura's (1999) well-known concept of moral disengagement explains how individuals can 'disable' their moral self-regulation, allowing them to behave unethically without the presence of guilty feelings. These mechanisms include diffusion of responsibility ("It's the system's fault"), displacement of responsibility ("I was just following orders"), moral justification (e.g., "sorry I'm helping my family", "yep, I am taking from the rich for the poor, just like Robbin Hood", "they are too lucky to have me"), and euphemistic labeling ('facilitation payment' instead of gratification). These mechanisms are commonly demonstrated or seen in governments' bureaucratic/hierarchical settings, where individuals may feel less personally accountable.

3. Social norms and group dynamics

Corruption often blooms in environments where corrupt behavior is normalized within social or professional atmospheres. According to Bicchieri (2006), people conform to what they believe others do (known as 'empirical expectations') and what they think others expect them to do (known as 'normative expectations'). A research by Köbis et al. (2015) found that when individuals perceive corruption as common in their organization or society (known as "business as usual" in Indonesia), they are more likely to engage in it themselves, proving the power of peer influence and conformity.

4. The role of power and entitlement

Psychological studies indicate that individuals in positions of power are more susceptible to corrupt behavior due to

increased feelings of entitlement, reduced empathy, and greater risk-taking (Lammers et al., 2010). Power might weaken moral judgment, especially when unhindered by accountability mechanisms. For example, A CEO involved in gratification may strongly believe that their actions are justified because of their contributions to the company or because they feel above the law.

5. Personality traits and corruption

Certain personality traits have sadly been linked to a greater probability for corrupt behavior. The so-called “Dark Triad” (Machiavellianism/high manipulateness and strategic deceit, narcissism/grandiose self-image and entitlement, and psychopathy/impulsivity and lack of remorse) in this case is relevant (Jones & Paulhus, 2017). The traits often associate with a higher tolerance for unethical behavior, specifically in competitive/high-stakes environments.

6. Environmental triggers and situational factors

On top of individual traits, other factors, situational cues play a critical role. Used a lot in Criminology field, the “fraud triangle” (see Cressey, 1953) suggests that corruption arises when three conditions are met which are 1) pressure (e.g., financial need), opportunity (e.g., weak oversight), and rationalization. This model shows how even ‘good’ individuals with no ‘criminal *mens rea*’ may engage in corruption under certain psychological burdens.

7. Behavioral ethics and bounded ethicality

Researches in behavioral ethics show that people often act unethically without full awareness (this concept is called ‘bounded ethicality’) (Chugh et al., 2005). In complex bureaucracies, decision-making process may be separated that leads individuals to be clueless/focus narrowly on certain tasks while ignoring the ethical implications. Further, the “slippery slope” effect or incrementalism means that small unethical decisions can slowly have a snowball effect or escalate into more serious corruption (Welsh et al., 2015).

Types of Corruption

There are types of corruptions as follow:

1. Petty Corruption

Petty corruption involves small-scale abuses of power by low- or mid-level public officials in their daily interactions with citizens. It often occurs where bureaucratic processes are slow and poorly regulated, such as when citizens pay bribes to obtain permits, driver’s licenses, or basic services (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). Though the individual sums involved may be small, petty corruption can have widespread effects, particularly on the poor, by increasing the cost and difficulty of accessing essential services.

2. Grand Corruption

Grand corruption involves high-level figures (e.g., politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen) who misuse their power and capability to extract massive amounts of money or gain political control. This type of corruption significantly distorts public policy and national agencies. Several notable examples include embezzlement of public funds, rigging of major government contracts, or manipulation of judicial systems (Kaufmann & Vicente, 2011). Different than petty corruption, which may involve small bribes or favors, grand corruption typically involves significant sums of money and can have devastating impacts on national development and trust in governance, for example, the US\$12 billion corruption scandal at Indonesian state-owned energy giant Pertamina which fueled anger of people of Indonesia (Yanuar, 2025).

3. Political Corruption

Political corruption is defined as the manipulation of policies, institutions, and procedures or rules for personal gain, which often involves elected bureaucrats. This dirty practice includes vote-buying, illegal campaign financing, and the abuse of legislative control and authority (Heywood, 2017). Political corruption weakens democratic processes, deteriorates the legitimacy of political institutions, and raises public distrust.

4. Administrative (or Bureaucratic) Corruption

Administrative corruption occurs within the implementation side of the government bureaucracy. It includes bribery, favoritism, and manipulation of government procedures by civil servants. For instance, public officials might demand bribes for speeding up services or for awarding public contracts (Tanzi, 1998). This type of corruption often flourishes in weak institutions with low accountability.

5. Systemic (or Institutional) Corruption

Systemic corruption happens when corruption is not seen as anomaly or becomes ‘normal’ which this institutionalized practice is embedded in the structures of governance. In such cases, corrupt practices are unfortunately pervasive and often go unpunished, with both public and private actors engaging in mutual/reciprocal favors, cronyism, and illegitimate networks (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). Systemic corruption is dangerous as it creates an environment where integrity and meritocracy are replaced by manipulation and greed and, of course, erodes public confidence.

Consequences and Impacts of Corruption

The consequences of corruption are beyond unthinkable. Economically, corruption diverts public funds from

essential posts such as people's health (in some countries such as Indonesia, it can even lead to children's stunting), education, and infrastructure. Politically, it undermines democratic institutions and fosters public disillusionment. Socially, it devastatingly creates inequality and disenfranchises the most vulnerable populations (Transparency International, 2023). Moreover, global corruption may weaken international cooperation and increases instability. When state institutions are captured by private interests, it becomes difficult to enforce laws, protect human rights, or ensure fair market competition.

Efforts to Combat Corruption

Civil society organizations, investigative journalists, and whistleblowers play a crucial role in exposing corruption, even though it comes with a high price such as death threat (in Indonesia for example, TEMPO's newsroom was terrorized by a package containing a pig's head and rat carcasses sent to their investigative journalists in 2025 after these journalists constantly uncovered cases of grand corruption) (Salma, 2025). International bodies such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Transparency International provide frameworks and pressure for accountability (UNODC, 2020). Technological innovations—such as open data platforms, blockchain, and digital procurement systems—are also being used to increase transparency and reduce opportunities for corruption. In countries like Estonia and Georgia, digital governance reforms have significantly reduced bureaucratic corruption (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015).

Understanding Extremism: Roots, Manifestations, and Implications

Extremism (not only religious ones) represents one of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century, affecting societies across ideological, political, and religious lines. Referred to as the advocacy of radical measures to achieve ideological goals (including non-religious ones), often through violent or undemocratic means, extremism undermines social cohesion, political stability, and human security.

Defining Extremism

Extremism is typically understood as the belief in and support for ideas that are far removed from the mainstream attitudes of a society, often accompanied by intolerance toward opposing viewpoints/'perceived enemies', and may lead to various acts of terrorism. Neumann (2013) distinguishes between violent extremism, which involves acts of terror or rebellion, and non-violent extremism, which may involve radical rhetoric, propaganda, or support for authoritarian ideologies. Furthermore, according to Schmid (2014), extremism often includes the rejection of democratic norms, pluralism, and the rule of law, favoring

instead the imposition of a single worldview, whether religious, ethnic, or ideological.

Root Causes of Extremism

Extremism is seldom caused by a single factor. Instead, it emerges from a complex interplay of political, economic, psychological, and social elements.

1. Political oppression and corruption. Repressive governance and lack of political inclusion often lead individuals to look for alternative forms of political expression. As Borum (2011) argues, political marginalization and perceived injustice can serve as catalysts for radicalization, adding 'gasoline' to any existing 'fire'/crisis. Government corruption corrodes trust and fuels anger, as seen in numerous Arab Spring uprisings (Bellin, 2012).
2. Economic disparity and unemployment. While poverty alone does not cause extremism, economic exclusion can amplify vulnerability to radical ideologies, especially among people with high-adrenaline (youth). Krueger and Malečková (2003) argue that relative deprivation, even more than absolute poverty, suggestively contributes to feelings of injustice that extremist groups exploit.
3. Psychological and social factors. Extremist recruitment frequently targets individuals experiencing personal crises, trauma, or a need for recognition. McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) stress the role of group dynamics and peer influence in radicalization, highlighting how social identity theory contributes to extremism.
4. Identity and cultural crisis. Many extremists are driven by a sense of identity loss or cultural dislocation. In multicultural societies, failure to integrate marginalized groups can lead to the emergence of extremist groupings (Gurr, 2000). Extremist ideologies often offer belonging, purpose, and a sense of superiority/control.

Types of Extremism

Extremism can take many forms, each driven by diverse ideologies. The types of extremism are as follow:

- Religious extremism, which is characterized by the belief in the exclusive truth of a certain religion, leading to intolerance or violence. This example includes Wahabi's or Jihadist terrorism (e.g., ISIS) and religiously motivated hate crimes.
- Far-right extremism, which is associated with nationalism, xenophobia, and white supremacy. This form has been seen in many parts of Europe and

North America (Mudde, 2019) and Singapore (Koh, 2025).

- Left-wing extremism, which is often linked to anti-capitalist, anarchist, or revolutionary ideologies. Groups like the FARC in Colombia or historical examples like the Red Army Faction in Germany exemplify this type.
- Ethno-nationalist extremism, which seeks autonomy or dominance for a particular ethnic group, often at the expense of others. The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and the Basque ETA in Spain illustrate this category.

Impact of Extremism

The consequences of extremism are vast, including:

- Violence and terrorism. Violent extremist groups are responsible for thousands of deaths annually. According to the Global Terrorism Index (2023), over 6,700 terrorism-related death tolls occurred worldwide in 2022.
- Erosion of civil liberties. In combating extremism, governments sometimes adopt authoritarian measures, threatening civil liberties and human rights (Ranstorp, 2010).
- Polarization and social fragmentation. Extremism appallingly deepens divisions within societies, marginalizes minorities, fosters intolerance and tensions, and discourages pluralism and democracy.
- Economic costs. Terrorist attacks and extremist violence certainly deter investment, reduce tourism, and increase military and policing expenses.

Countering Extremism

Efforts to counter extremism by many countries go from soft to hard approaches, such as education and promoting critical thinking (promoting inclusive education and media literacy can help inoculate individuals against extremist ideologies) (UNESCO, 2016), community engagement (villages/grassroots programs that involve local leaders, former extremists, and civil society can build resilience in vulnerable communities) (Neumann, 2013), and addressing structural inequality: Policies which reduce marginalization and promote inclusive, good governance remove some of the root causes of extremism.

The Steps of Extremism: Understanding the Pathway to Radicalization

Extremism, particularly in its violent forms, has a long process of emergence. Individuals typically undergo a gradual process known as 'radicalization' which transforms beliefs and behaviors over time. Understanding the steps

involved in this transformation is crucial for policymakers, educators, and community leaders seeking to prevent the spread of extremism.

Extremism is generally defined as holding views far outside the mainstream of society, especially those that reject democratic principles and advocate for violence or exclusion (Schmid, 2014). Radicalization refers to the process by which individuals come to adopt extremist ideologies, and in some cases, support or commit violence in pursuit of those beliefs (Neumann, 2013). Moreover, while radicalization models differ slightly in terminology, most frameworks agree on a sequence of psychological, ideological, and behavioral transformations. Below are the key steps commonly observed in the path to extremism.

1. Pre-radicalization (vulnerability phase)

In this initial phase, individuals may not yet show extremist behavior or beliefs but possess vulnerabilities that make them susceptible. These vulnerabilities often include social isolation, identity crises, personal trauma, discrimination, or economic hardship (Borum, 2011). Environments marked by political corruption, poor governance, or societal marginalization can intensify these vulnerabilities (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Example: Many individuals who later join extremist groups report feeling alienated or purposeless before radicalization (Sageman, 2004).

2. Self-identification

In this stage, the individual begins to explore alternative ideologies, often through online platforms, social groups, or influential figures. They may start to question mainstream narratives, seek out in-group identity, and identify perceived injustices (Wiktorowicz, 2005). This phase may involve: 1) increased religiosity or political activism, 2) consuming extremist media or propaganda, and 3) forming connections with like-minded individuals. For example, social media algorithms can lead users from moderate content to more extreme material through "echo chambers" (Vidino et al., 2017).

3. Indoctrination

At this point, the person adopts radical beliefs and aligns themselves with an extremist ideology. The individual may now see violence as justified or necessary. Indoctrination often involves: in-group vs. out-group thinking, acceptance of conspiracy theories or martyrdom, and intolerance of differing viewpoints. Furthermore, recruitment often happens during this phase, as radical groups provide belonging, purpose, and community (McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008). For instance, in ISIS, this stage is heavily manipulated through charismatic recruiters and emotional appeals to injustice/oppression against Muslims worldwide (Neumann, 2013).

4. Action (radicalization into violence)

This final phase marks the transition from belief to behavior. The individual may plan or participate in violent acts or offer logistical, financial, or moral support to violent groups. In some cases, they join terrorist cells or travel to conflict zones. For example, the 7/7 London bombers reportedly went through a gradual process of social isolation, online radicalization, and group reinforcement before committing attacks (Silber & Bhatt, 2007).

Radicalization is not linear or inevitable. Key ‘push and pull’ factors influence whether individuals continue or abandon the process. The push factors are grievances, marginalization, identity loss. The pull factors are ideological appeal, group solidarity, charismatic leadership. The triggers are specific incidents like war, discrimination, or police violence (Borum, 2011). Additionally, it is important to note that not all individuals who become radicalized engage in violence—many remain ideologically extreme without taking action (Schmid, 2014).

Interrupting the Radicalization Process

Research on radicalization prevention highlights interventions at various stages. Early interventions, including educational programs and community support, are crucial (Sjøen & Jore, 2019). Family and peer interventions are mostly effective in interrupting early-stage radicalization, as they are employed by trusted insiders and have fewer detrimental consequences (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2024). Mid-process interventions can target multiple domains, including family, school, community, and the internet (Siegel et al., 2019). Late-stage interventions involve law enforcement and deradicalization programs, though police interventions have shown mixed results (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2022). Integration programs for migrants, which can help prevent radicalization, have luckily demonstrated positive outcomes in reducing loneliness, depression, and aggression while increasing feelings of inclusion and self-esteem (Del Pino-Brunet et al., 2021). Furthermore, research suggests that prevention efforts should adopt humanistic, relational, and inclusive approaches, with consideration given to the potential negative impacts of “harder” prevention strategies on education (Sjøen & Jore, 2019).

The Correlation Between Grand Corruption and Public Distrust Toward Government

Trust in government is the basis of a stable and functioning democracy. When citizens believe that their leaders act in the public’s best interest, they are more likely to obey with laws, participate in civic life, and support democratic institutions. Nonetheless, grand corruption significantly undermines this trust.

Grand corruption typically involves senior public officials and large-scale embezzlement, bribery, or manipulation of public resources (Transparency International, 2023). Unlike petty corruption, which affects everyday services, grand corruption has systemic effects. Trust in government, on the other hand, refers to citizens’ belief in the competence, fairness, and integrity of public officials and institutions (Levi & Stoker, 2000).

Studies have consistently shown a strong inverse relationship between corruption and public trust. Citizens who perceive their governments as corrupt are less likely to trust state institutions, leading to reduced civic participation, increasing apathetic, and lower political legitimacy (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).

Empirical Evidence of the Correlation Between Corruption and Public Distrust

Research by Anderson and Tverdova (2003) prove that perceptions of corruption significantly reduce trust in political institutions across both developing and developed countries. Their analysis of public opinion data from multiple countries revealed that where corruption is perceived as widespread and unpunished, public trust in government is evidently lower. Similarly, data from the World Values Survey and Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) highpoint a constant pattern: countries with higher levels of perceived corruption tend to report lower levels of institutional trust (Inglehart et al., 2014). For example, countries such as Nigeria, Brazil, and Russia (often cited in grand corruption cases) consistently score low on both trust in government and corruption control. In short, grand corruption is not only a simple financial issue or governance problem, but can also be a powerful catalyst for social riots, violence and extremist mobilization, like what happened in Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines, and many other countries recently (Antara News, 2025, September 22; AP News, 2025, September 8; AP News, 2025, September 10; Asia Times, 2025, September 17; Deutsche Welle, 2025, September 15; Global Water Partnership, 2025, September; Reuters, 2025a, September 8; Reuters, 2025b, September 22).

Corruption and Erosion of Trust

Brazil’s Operation Car Wash (Lava Jato) scandal is a sad terrible example. This mega corruption investigation exposed collusion between top politicians and construction firms to siphon billions from the state oil company Petrobras. The scandal deeply damaged public trust in Brazil’s political elite, contributing to political polarization and the election of anti-establishment leaders (Hunter & Power, 2019).

In South Africa, the state capture under President Jacob Zuma, orchestrated in part by the Gupta family, led to a

'steep drop' of their citizens' trust. The Zondo Commission's findings showed how state institutions were 'dirty' as it compromised for private gain, leading to public massive anger and protests. The consequence was a long-term erosion of confidence in both the presidency and public institutions (Zondo Commission, 2022).

Even in advanced democracies, grand corruption affects trust. The Watergate scandal in the United States led to a significant drop in public trust in government—from 77% in 1964 to 36% in 1974 (Pew Research Center, 2019). Although not financial grand corruption, it involved abuse of power at the highest levels and demonstrated how elite misconduct can have lasting effects on institutional legitimacy.

Why Corruption Destroys Trust

The acts of corruption undermine trust for several reasons. Firstly, they violate public expectations, as citizens expect leaders to serve the public good. When elites exploit their positions, it violates this implicit contract (Tyler, 2006). Secondly, they show impunity and inequality. When grand corruption goes unpunished, it reinforces the belief that laws apply differently to the powerful, terribly deepening cynicism and apathy (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). Thirdly, they reduce government effectiveness. Corruption often leads to unfortunate, poor public services, which further decreases trust in the state's ability to fulfill its responsibilities to its people (World Bank, 2020).

The Correlation Between Government Grand Corruption and the Rise of Extremism

Grand corruption—the abuse of high-level public office for private gain—is not only a threat to good governance and development but also a potent driver of political and social instability. While it undermines trust in public institutions, it can also fuel more dangerous outcomes, such as political extremism, radicalization, and even violence.

Understanding the Link between Corruption and Extremism

At its core, extremism is a response to perceived injustice, inequality, or systemic failure. When people believe that traditional institutions are irredeemably corrupt, they may turn to radical ideologies that promise systemic change, even though violence (Krueger & Malečková, 2003). Grand corruption—characterized by large-scale theft, cronyism, and impunity—can delegitimize the state in the eyes of citizens, pushing them toward alternative belief systems that reject the status quo. According to Berman (2006), political extremism often flourishes in environments where citizens feel disenfranchised, particularly when elites are seen as looting national resources with no accountability. Corruption, especially at the highest levels, feeds narratives

of betrayal and injustice, which extremist groups use to recruit followers.

Research suggests a significant link between corruption and extremism. Corruption facilitates organized crime and extremist activities, influencing the formation of extremist thinking and behavior (Skulysh & Irkha, 2017). Political corruption within elite groups can lead to the selection of more extreme opposition leaders, while perceptions of elite rent extraction may have the opposite effect within majority groups (Gáspár et al., 2021). A rational choice model demonstrates a causal relationship between corruption and popular support for extremist movements (Righetto, 2017). Corruption has reached such levels in some countries that governments resemble criminal organizations, driving populations to extremes like revolution or militant puritanical religion (Chayes, 2015). This pattern is observed globally, with examples including Afghans returning to the Taliban and Nigerians embracing radical Christianity and Boko Haram. Addressing corruption is crucial for understanding and combating global extremism, as it is a cause, not merely a result, of global instability (Chayes, 2015).

Empirical Evidence: Corruption as a Root Cause of Radicalization

Research by Piazza (2011) finds that countries with high levels of perceived corruption are significantly more likely to experience domestic terrorism and violent extremism. The correlation remains strong even when controlling for other variables such as poverty or lack of education. Corruption undermines state legitimacy, leaving a vacuum that extremist groups can exploit. In a study of over 150 countries, Chene (2017) notes that corruption contributes to fragility and civil unrest, especially when linked to ethnic or religious exclusion. When grand corruption disproportionately benefits one group or elite class, it exacerbates grievances among marginalized communities, often leading to radicalization.

Case Studies: Corruption and Extremism in Practice

1. Nigeria – Boko Haram

In Nigeria, rampant corruption in the federal government, especially under previous administrations, is widely cited as one of the conditions that enabled the rise of Boko Haram. Mismanagement of public funds, particularly those intended for education and social services in the northeast, created a vacuum that the extremist group filled by offering alternative forms of governance and justice (Transparency International, 2016). In some areas, Boko Haram gained initial support not just through ideology but by capitalizing on local resentment toward a corrupt and absent state.

2. Tunisia and Egypt – Arab Spring

The Arab Spring revolutions of 2010–2011 were largely driven by public outrage against corrupt and autocratic regimes. In Tunisia, the kleptocratic rule of President Ben Ali and his family triggered mass protests that ultimately toppled the government. In Egypt, widespread corruption under President Hosni Mubarak fed resentment among youth and the poor, contributing to the radicalization of segments of the population (Bellin, 2012). The post-revolutionary environments in both countries saw the rise of Islamist political movements and, in some cases, violent extremism.

3. Afghanistan – Taliban Resurgence

The Afghan government, heavily supported by international aid, suffered from endemic corruption, with billions lost to mismanagement and embezzlement. The resulting loss of legitimacy created fertile ground for the Taliban, who presented themselves as a more moral and just alternative to the corrupt central government (Goodhand, 2005). Many rural communities turned to the Taliban not out of ideological conviction but out of frustration with government corruption and failure.

Mechanisms of Radicalization via Corruption

Corruption influences extremism through several interconnected mechanisms, described below:

- Delegitimization of the state. In this case, when citizens see that political elites act with impunity, they may no longer view the state and its government as legitimate authorities (Huntington, 1968).
- Economic inequality and resentment. Grand corruption often worsens inequality, especially when state resources are diverted from public services. Corruption tends to increase income inequality and poverty by reducing economic growth, tax progressivity, social spending effectiveness, and human capital formation (Gupta, 1998). It also perpetuates unequal asset ownership and access to education (Gupta, 1998). Natural resource dependence is associated with slower economic growth and greater income inequality across countries (Gylfason & Zoega, 2002).
- Weakening of democratic alternatives. In corrupt systems, legitimate political opposition is often suppressed or co-opted, leaving extremism as one of the few perceived routes to change. Research suggests that corruption in political systems can lead to the suppression or co-optation of legitimate opposition, potentially driving citizens towards extremism. In corrupt environments, opposition groups may select more extreme leaders as a response to political corruption (Gáspár et al., 2021). This can create a

cycle where corruption fuels extremism, which in turn threatens global security (Chayes, 2015). Authoritarian regimes may strategically allow controlled opposition to enhance legitimacy and channel dissent, effectively supporting the existing power structure (Albrecht, 2005). The ability of opposition parties to mobilize voters against corruption varies across different party systems, with ideologically polarized systems showing stronger links between opposition partisanship and corruption perceptions. However, political alienation due to corruption can lead to withdrawal from political involvement, weakening opposition parties' ability to effect change through electoral processes (Davis et al., 2004).

- Propaganda opportunities. Extremist groups use corruption scandals to reinforce their anti-establishment messages and recruit disaffected citizens. Research suggests that extremist groups can exploit corruption scandals to reinforce anti-establishment messages and recruit supporters. Corruption experiences diminish political trust, leading to increased support for radical right parties (Ziller & Schübel, 2015). These parties often contrast "the pure people" with "the corrupt elite" in their rhetoric. Terrorist and extremist groups may use social service provision and anti-corruption campaigns as costly signals to gain support, presenting themselves as better resource distributors than current regimes (Magouirk, 2008). Opposition groups are more likely to select extremist leaders when elites have greater ability to use political corruption (Gáspár et al., 2021). However, the effects of corruption on voter behavior can vary. While repeated corruption episodes generally increase abstentionism, independent voters are most likely to abstain in response to scandals. Core supporters of corrupt incumbents often fail to recognize corruption within their party, while opposition supporters report higher corruption perceptions (Costas-Pérez, 2014).

Conclusions

Corruption is a global phenomenon that cuts across continents and economic systems. From Brazil to South Africa, from Malaysia to South Korea, the abuse of power for private gain continues to challenge justice and equality. Yet, as the exposure of these scandals has shown, no one is truly untouchable. The psychology of corruption reveals that unethical behavior is not always driven by evil intent but often emerges from cognitive biases, moral disengagement, social influence, and systemic pressures. Corruption is a multifaceted problem that can take on various forms, from minor day-to-day bribery to large-scale

embezzlement involving high-ranking officials. Understanding its different types—petty, grand, political, administrative, and systemic—is essential for designing effective anti-corruption strategies. Addressing corruption requires not only strong institutions and legal enforcement but also a culture of integrity, transparency, and civic engagement.

Extremism is a multifaceted phenomenon rooted in complex social, political, and psychological dynamics. While it manifests in diverse ideologies and actions, its core danger lies in its rejection of tolerance, pluralism, and peaceful dialogue. Addressing extremism requires a holistic approach that combines security with education, social reform, and political inclusion. Only by addressing its root causes can societies hope to mitigate the threat of extremism and promote long-term peace and stability. Furthermore, the journey to extremism is rarely sudden or uniform. Instead, individuals follow a sequence of psychological and social steps—beginning with vulnerability and identity searching, progressing through indoctrination, and potentially ending in violent action. Recognizing these stages enables society to design effective interventions and support mechanisms. By addressing both the causes and catalysts of radicalization, we can help prevent the spread of extremist ideologies and foster more resilient, inclusive communities.

Grand corruption is not merely a legal or ethical issue—it is a profound threat to democratic legitimacy. As numerous studies and cases show, there is a clear and strong correlation between high-level corruption and declining public trust in government. To rebuild this trust, countries must enforce transparency, strengthen anti-corruption institutions, and ensure accountability, especially for political and economic elites. Only by confronting grand corruption head-on can governments hope to restore public confidence and rebuild the social contract.

Grand corruption in government does more than erode public trust—it creates conditions ripe for extremism. As case studies from Nigeria, the Middle East, and Afghanistan show, when governments enrich themselves at the expense of the population, they lose legitimacy, pushing individuals toward radical ideologies that promise justice, equality, or revenge. Combating extremism, therefore, requires not just military or security solutions but also systemic anti-corruption reforms that restore accountability, inclusion, and public trust. Transparency and good governance are essential not only for democracy but for national and international security.

Through stronger institutions, citizen engagement, and international cooperation, the global fight against corruption continues—and with it, the hope for more transparent and just societies. Effective anti-corruption

measures should therefore combine structural reforms with behavioral strategies, such as ethics training, norm-shifting campaigns, and mechanisms that reinforce moral accountability. By addressing the human element of corruption, societies can better design interventions that are both preventive and transformative.

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