

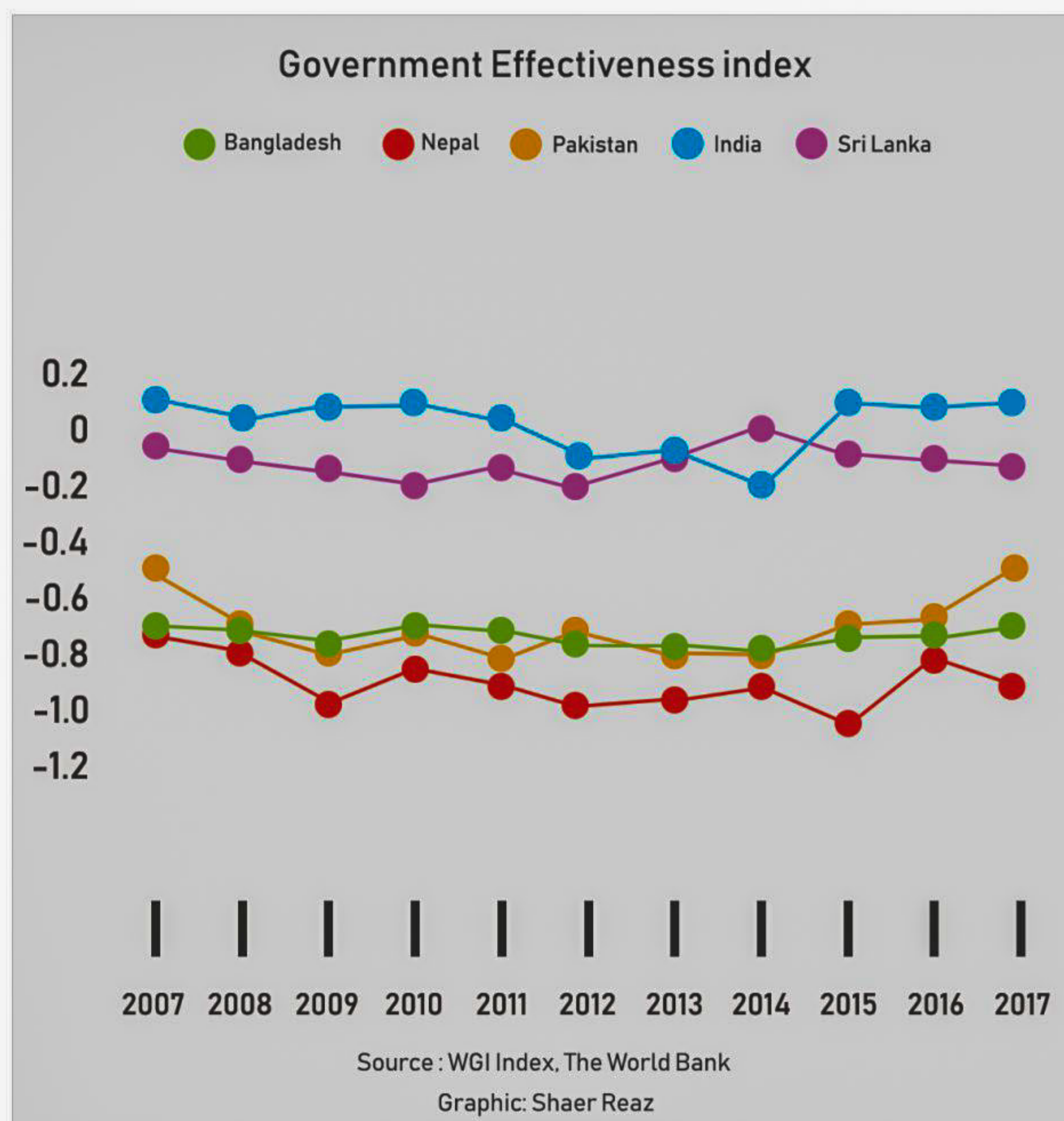
Four Challenges to Governance in South Asia

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Although there is no universally accepted definition of the term governance, it has become a buzzword since the 1980s. Policymakers and academics seem to agree that governance is fundamental to both economic and social development and that it cannot be left to governments alone. Over the past decades, the concept of governance has undergone significant transformation, its scope has been broadened to include various actors— the state, market and civil society. The debate on the definition, scope and nature of governance notwithstanding, an instrumentalist understanding of governance has become dominant in common parlance. In this understanding, governance means proficient and impartial delivery of public services and the efficient implementation of socio-economic programmes. Around the world, absence of these have contributed to political malaise such as political instability, violence, the emergence of extremist groups, and declining citizen's trust in government, to name a few. From this instrumentalist point of view and measured by various related indicators, the state of governance in South Asia is considered very poor. The World Governance Indicators (WGI) of the World Bank have documented poor governance for years.

What are the fundamental challenges to governance in South Asia? I argue that governance in South Asia faces four vital challenges and a combination of these forestalls any major change. These challenges are—contesting sources of state legitimacy, lack of inclusivity in governance and politics, the absence of the rule of law, and neo-patrimonialism. Any effort to improve the state of governance in South Asia and chart the way forward warrant addressing these challenges in earnest.

The Nation-state, even in its rudimentary form, is based on impersonalised institutions. Since its inception in the 19th century in Europe and replication all around the world, (often through colonialism), nationalism and the nation-state presupposed that individuals' loyalty to the nation will supersede all other loyalties such as clan, tribe, family and ethnicity. Nation-states in South Asia, a colonial construct, were meant to follow the same pathway, and power was meant to be derived from modern formal institutions rather than traditional informal relationships. Despite the presence of institutional edifice and implementation of codified laws, informal institutions have not completely disappeared. The demise of monarchy in Nepal and relinquishing



of many monarchical powers of the Bhutanese king, in recent years, provide an impression that formal sources of legitimation of power in South Asia is ascendance. But, in countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, beneath the formal institutions, longstanding traditional social practices and hierarchy still wield enormous power and often conflict with the states. For example, *qwam*, or rural, tribal, and familial tie, is considered the primary building block of Afghan life—both social and political. Thomas Barfield, in his seminal work, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, writes, "People's primary loyalty is, respectively, to their own kin, village, tribe, or ethnic group, generally glossed as *qwam*." In Pakistan's tribal areas, assertive '*jirga*', acts parallel to the formal state and often is the primary source of legitimation of power. India's caste system may not be officially recognised, but its influence cannot be ignored either. It determines who holds power. In Bangladesh, while the influence of *samaj* has diminished as capitalist development has penetrated the rural areas and weakened the traditional patron-client relationship, it hasn't completely disappeared. In many instances, a new form of informal relationships and new actors of intermediation have emerged. Equally

important is the role of religious leaders in the social arena—irrespective of religion and country. The most important aspect in South Asian governance is the relationship between formal state power and informal relationship. Despite the presence of formal power structures and institutions, real power is located in the informal personal relationship. In South Asia, they are often fused together. According to British political economist Mick Moore, except for collapsed states, there are four kinds of political systems/states—personalised rule, minimally institutionalised states, institutionalised non-competitive states, and institutionalised competitive states. Each of these states has different capacities and their degree of legitimacy varies. According to Moore, personalised rules are the systems where governance is based on personalities and personal connections. Institutional ability of the state is highly dependent on personal control of power, and rules of the game emphasise power of elites and personal connections to elites. This kind of system has very low legitimacy. Minimally institutionalised states are characterised by an unstable mixture of personal and impersonal rule, where political parties are based partly on personalities, and state legitimacy is low to modest.