



Thieves of State – Sarah Chayes

[00:00:06] Today, I'm speaking with Sarah Chayes, a senior fellow in Carnegie's Democracy and Rule of Law Program. Prior to joining Carnegie, Sarah spent a lot of time in Afghanistan in a number of different roles. She covered the fall of the Taliban for NPR and then remained to help rebuild the country, settling in Kandahar. In 2005, Sarah founded a co-operative, employing both men and women side by side, to produce skincare products. The company was designed to promote sustainable development while developing alternatives to the then-booming opium business. Sarah later served as special assistant to then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen. And much of her experience of the region is woven through her second book, "Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security." She's focused now on how severe corruption can fuel terrorism, which is what we'll be discussing today. Thank you for joining me, Sarah.

[00:01:00] A pleasure.

[00:01:01] Why don't you start by describing your interest in the region and what took you there, and then what compelled you to stay?

[00:01:09] It was so obviously historical juncture, one of those times when the fate of the planet seems maybe to be on a pivot. And that the fulcrum, if you will, was there, at least that's what it felt like at the time, and it just seemed like if you were going to try to impact the way this shocking event of 9/11 was going to, you know, what its ramifications would be, then Afghanistan was the place to try to do it.

[00:01:48] You went there. You spoke the language.

[00:01:50] I didn't actually speak when I got there. I learned it on the fly. I did speak Arabic which is a grammatically completely different language. It helped learn. There's a lot of shared vocabulary so it helped me at least understand some of the words and things like that. I'm glad you mentioned that because I cannot express strongly enough how important it is, if a person wants to work on or in a country, how important it is to learn language because Pashto's pretty unusual. I only met one other Westerner who spoke it the way I did. It's also a language, like all of them, that has its particular accents in different parts of the country. So I would go up to Kabul where Pashto is also spoken along with Dari, which is the other main language. Language is a very political issue in Afghanistan and, you know, people would recognize my accent as being from the south. It was such an important vehicle for being able to interact with people to gain their, I don't want to just say respect, but a kind of friendliness.

[00:03:08] It is so important. I lived in Syria for about a year and I never mastered the language at all. I was there in a business capacity and you didn't really have to and it's really such a regret in many respects because you just don't get the entree to so many of the most interesting conversations. And given that you ultimately ended up staying there and developing a business as an entrepreneur, that must have been just critically important to the success.

[00:03:36] And to be able to not just, you know, function as an entrepreneur but to then become a focal point for Afghans who had something to say to the Americans. And that's where it was really critical

because I had no guards and I spoke the language, so I was the only American that ordinary Afghans could reach, without any intermediary, without a filter, to say exactly what they thought about what was going on. And I remember once I had a conversation with General McChrystal who was the Commander of the international forces at the time and I was making, I can't remember my precise argument, but I suspect it had something to do with corruption and security with why it was that the corruption of the Afghan government was driving people into the arms of the Taliban, although from our perspective the Taliban may have looked just as corrupt or abusive as the Afghan government was. And I remember General McChrystal saying, "Why is it that everybody else who talks to me is saying this and you are saying that?" And my answer was, "Does anyone else you're talking to have unfiltered access to ordinary Afghans?" I mean, that to me was the difference.

[00:04:57] That's clearly the case and a huge part of why you were so effective in the role. Before we come back to that more formal role, can you describe your personal experience of corruption as a person growing a business there, first as a reporter, frankly, and then as a business person. Was it rampant and constant, or was it, did it change with the nature of each relationship?

[00:05:22] We didn't truck with it in our business. I think there was one case when I wasn't there when something was paid but it was an absolutely pervasive element of people's lives that they had to function and navigate all the time. For example, when we first shipped in a small piece of equipment it was a hand crank seed oil press, so we had to pick it up the customs in Kabul and I watched a guy collect. So this is really interesting. It wasn't just that people were taking bribes. It was that someone was coming around to collect the proportion of those bribes that was being paid up the kind of hierarchy to a superior, to the person who got them their jobs in the customs administration or something like that. So there you can see quite practically the vertical integration of this kind of corrupt system whereby the people shaking folks down on the streets, be it police officers, be it clerks in different administrations, be it teachers or doctors, they weren't just putting that money in their own pocket. So you can't kind of hive off petty corruption as just happening on the street level, it's actually part of what increasingly over time became a fairly well integrated and sophisticated system. So you would get shaken down. We tried to register as a cooperative. And I insisted on not doing that procedure myself, on sending my finance officer, my local Afghan finance officer.

[00:07:17] He spent nine months trying to get that registration done. Every single time he would go they would be out of paper. The person wasn't there. You know there wasn't any ink. It was one thing or another which was all designed to make you pay but we weren't going to pay. So then he brings me, and we got to the very last stage where you had to deposit some money in a bank account as the cooperative's money and the banker was not accepting the deposit without a bribe. So I actually found myself sitting on the guy's desk and I said, "Fine don't register us but I'm sitting here until you do. So if it takes a week, if it takes however long you want, I am not moving off of your desk." Well, that had never happened before, like a fully grown American female sitting cross-legged on top of his desk in the middle of all of his papers. So, he got into a flurry and he eventually does it. But what I realized in that little incident was that I had solved my own problem. But I was an exception and if I pushed hard enough to not participate in bribery and corruption, I could not. I could avoid it. But that didn't affect the way that ordinary Afghans were treated.

[00:08:39] There's two things there that I find really fascinating. First is you highlighting the pyramid scheme, you know, the apologists for petty bribery; you referred to it as tips and just helping out the local economy always avoid the discussion of how far up the chain it goes. And it always does. Somebody

is paying off the person above them for the privilege of being able to shake down people. But the second point is really fascinating. You were crossing back and forth between that invisible membrane between the local community and the international community. And I wonder how different you found the nature of corruption on both sides of that. Very often we'll talk to companies that go in country and say we never have to pay bribes because they won't ask us. This is not all countries, but mid-level corruption countries will ask your local representative but won't ask the foreigner because it's either too risky or embarrassing or something else. But you are crossing back and forth between those two worlds. How did they differ?

[00:09:41] When I was there I could not pay the bribe so it's similar to what you're saying about company executives who, you know, Western company executives who are not asked for the bribe.

[00:09:54] You could avoid paying it.

[00:09:55] I could avoid paying it. And I think again it's interesting to me to hear from you, your parallel, what you've been hearing from folks that is parallel, because I had thought that it was specific to the Afghan situation where they could intimidate and even do things to Afghans that they might have been afraid to do to Americans, particularly given the amount of physical force that was present. They just would never know what might happen to them if they looked at me the wrong way. But it's a really interesting case where foreigners working in a country like this actually can use that relative impunity to affect the social environment for corruption. And I have in mind another example. I was going to see a friend of mine in Nigeria and he is the Emir of Kano, which is a pretty important traditional leadership role in northern Nigeria. And I went to his palace and I couldn't, I had gone once before, but I couldn't quite remember where the door to the audience chamber was. There was a police officer on guard and I asked him and then I came back out and as I passed him he said we're hungry out here. And, you know, I kind of laughed and walked past them and I realized, wow, was that a wasted opportunity, because that guy was not going to put me in jail. That guy knew that I was on a first name basis with the Emir of Kano and he did not have the power to do anything to me. And so I could have used that moment to stop and say rather loudly "Excuse me, did I just hear you asking for a bribe inside the Emir's?" You know, I could have made it into a public shaming moment, and I didn't.

[00:11:55] And so, I did something I tried to bear in mind to remember that, when we do have these somewhat privileged, and you have to judge it well because there are other places where being a foreigner is the opposite of giving you security and safety from retaliation, but where you think you have it, it's useful to place that shield that you have around yourself, place it on the side of the ordinary people of that country who are being shaken down on a daily basis.

[00:12:29] Absolutely. And you've pointed this out. It makes both of our heads spin around when people talk about corruption being a cultural issue. Of course it's not a cultural issue. No culture celebrates theft, but it is this sense of the foreigner being shaken down last because they have more distance and protective coloration of the international community, perhaps their embassy and that sort of thing, whereas the locals don't have that after the rest of us leave. They still have to live there and get their kids medical care and education. So whenever anybody from the outside can take that opportunity to shine a light on how awful the practice is, it, I think, does a favor for those who are living there. At the same time we have to remain conscious that none of our communities are corruption free.

[00:13:20] It really depends on how you phrase it and frame it, and on whose behalf you are speaking, and if you can place yourself on the side of the local victims of corruption rather than an apparent

mouthpiece for some sanctimonious foreign view of things, that would be the way to go. There's one other point I want to raise about "street level" or petty corruption that I think really often gets overlooked, and that's that, you know, when a police officer is shaking you down or has taken a crate of your onions that you're trying to bring to market because they happen to have a checkpoint over the dirt road that's the only way you can get to market, you know, they're actually not doing it as fellow citizens. They could, for example, say "I really hate to do this to you but you know how terrible our salaries are. I'm trying to keep the peace here and I don't have the salary to put food on the table for my kids. Could I please have a crate of onions?" That's not how it goes, right?

[00:14:25] Right.

[00:14:26] It is insulting. It's condescending. It's sometimes physically violent and it's always humiliating and angering and that's an aspect of "petty corruption" that, because we have so little of those sort of street level shakedowns in Western countries, we really tend to overlook the emotional violation that is taking place simultaneous with the theft.

[00:14:55] Absolutely, the constant indignities. And that's actually a great segue to your research into how corruption and dissatisfaction with the government, as a result of that corruption, leads to security issues.

[00:15:14] As I said earlier, I was one of the few Americans that ordinary Afghans could access, like could see without, you know, having to run some kind of a security gauntlet, and who they could talk to in their own language without some interpreter who they didn't know running interference. And so I started actually hearing a lot about this kind of abusive corruption, these shakedowns that people were subjected to on a daily basis by anybody in government, be it police or doctor or teacher, who we don't always think of in the West as being government officials, but they are in Afghanistan. And simultaneously I started seeing, this is about sort of 2005, I started actually seeing some grudging rising toleration, again, for Taliban that frankly the people of Kandahar were the first to want to be rid of in 2001. That had been kind of the Taliban's de facto capital and the people of Kandahar hated these guys, hated living under them. They are religiously conservative but they did not like the Taliban in any way shape or form. So it was kind of strange to start to see around 2005, 2003 when the first attack happened the Taliban who committed it couldn't stay inside Afghanistan. They came across from Pakistan, committed the attack, and turned around went back because the people chased them out.

[00:16:48] By 2005, you know, they were able to spend a little bit more time. And this was as years of complaints about the corruption of the government had been building up. And what I started to realize is, wow, it's because of the way this government is treating people and in particular the psychologically and physically abusive shakedowns at street level, that was making people re-evaluate the Taliban and the Taliban were making an argument about corruption and people were remembering that under that Taliban government, OK, it was pretty oppressive and the punishments, you know, when people did commit or were seen to have committed crime, were horrific. But there was law and order. But people were remembering that there was a degree of justice, not just swift, not just harsh but Justice pure and simple. And I started seeing people around Kandahar turn to the Taliban to adjudicate disputes, in particular conflicts with people who were wired into the current political system. And people were saying we just cannot, justice is for sale under this government, whereas the Taliban were able to subpoena witnesses and they did not judge systematically in favor of the person who was richer or better connected. And then I gave a talk in Germany to a bunch of law enforcement and military officers

from, I don't know, 40 or 50 different countries and this was about narcotics, right. It wasn't about corruption. And I was giving my spiel about the narcotics economy in southern Afghanistan but I couldn't resist kind of showing a couple of diagrams of how I understood narcotics playing just a small part of what was, in fact, a systemic kleptocratic arrangement that by then, which was about 2010, had pretty well crystallized. And so narcotics, the opium economy, was one revenue stream into this sort of kleptocratic system. Petty bribes was another one and petty bribes, as you pointed out, it is all--what did you call it?

A pyramid scheme.

[00:19:15] A pyramid scheme. Exactly. Petty bribes is a pyramid scheme. It's also a very lucrative one. In Afghanistan it's estimated at between two and five billion U.S. dollars a year. And there are various other kind of revenue streams but the system is vertically and horizontally integrated. The People's money is being sucked upwards via these bribes into the system. So I showed and the people get mad. And so I showed these diagrams and, to my astonishment, I just thought they were wonky little things that I was assuaging my own interest in putting them up there. The room kind of blew up like the room, people loved it and people came down afterwards and said, "You just described my country" and what I found stunning was that every person there was a violent religious movement in that country. And it was Central Asian countries, and it was Nigeria, and even some Balkan countries, where there was a short lived but extremist religious reaction there in the 1990s. And so that's where I started thinking, wow there's actually a pattern to this.

[00:20:36] And what I have found is that, not only in the 21st century and in Islamic countries, but earlier and in Christian countries, there is a human tendency, it's not an exclusive tendency, but it is a frequent tendency to turn toward militant puritanical religion as an antidote to rampant systematized corruption. And part of it is just opportunity and that's part of what I was seeing in Kandahar is, after you get shaken down by a cop nastily a couple of times and you're a 19 or 20 year old Afghan man, or after your sister has to basically give herself to a judge in order for her case to be heard and you are her older brother in northern Nigeria, you want to shoot somebody. You want to shoot the judge, you want to shoot the cop and where there is an extremist movement in the area, you've got the opportunity, right? I mean, in downtown Kandahar in 2008, 2009, 2010, you had to try really hard not to join the Taliban. You get angry enough and you're going to say, "The hell with it, these people are right." And you're going to pick up a gun because there's nothing that Boko Haram or the Taliban want more than for young men to be shooting police officers and judges, right? So you've got the opportunity but you, more importantly, you have the argument. And the argument is, the reason this judge behaved in such a despicable corrupt fashion and corrupt in that context has all of the ambiguous broad meanings of the word corruption. The reason he's so corrupt is because he doesn't believe in God and if only our government were organized according to God's law, then it wouldn't be behaving this way. It wouldn't be so corrupt.

[00:22:41] The distinguishing feature, then, is the religious framework? I mean, it is always fascinating to me that all the great books religions touch on bribery and corruption: the Koran, the Bible, the Torah, all talk about it, and it is a fundamental in both religion, and frankly, literature back to Dante. But we have some frothing kleptocratic regimes around the world where it hasn't led to this kind of radicalization. So it does sound like it's the rampant corruption hand in hand with the framework, the availability, of religious leadership.

[00:23:16] Yes. So let me just play that out a little bit. As I suggested, this isn't the only form that reaction to systemically corrupt governance takes. But I do want to make clear that it's not only restricted to Islam. So in my book, "Thieves of State" I actually, and I didn't plan to do it this way, my argument was it's the lack of recourse that drives people to extremes. And what I had been thinking is, back in let's say the 17th century-ish, we removed God from his role ordering human societies or some people's idea of God. We, meaning basically the north, northern Europe and America, and replaced him with a contraption that was based in human reason, right, that derived from human reason and it was a pretty complicated contraption called the Constitution. And the point of a Constitution is to provide people with recourse on earth, right? The problem is, if that contraption of governance gets then captured by a criminal organization, meaning a kleptocratic government, and people have no recourse, that human reason based system doesn't provide recourse anymore, some of them are going to turn back to God. Right? You sort of go full circle.

[00:25:01] So that had been my initial way of thinking about this, so I started looking at the Enlightenment and that's where I actually found myself in the middle of the kind of Puritan revolution in Europe in the 16th and 17th century, so that took me back to Martin Luther and, by gum, I read Martin Luther, and I'm not trying to say that there was no religious doctrine in what he was doing with Christianity but, you read some of his early work, and it's all about corruption and just about every doctrinal thing that he changed was a place where the Catholic Church was operating a tollbooth. And I found that really mind blowing. And John Locke, who did talk about when people are deprived of recourse on earth, they will turn to the only remedy in such cases which is an appeal to heaven. He was a Puritan. You know, he was a Puritan. And that revolution in Europe was not a peaceful one. It was extremely bloody. What I'm trying to say is this isn't the only way that people's indignation of corruption goes, but it's one and it's not exclusive to Islam. There are other obvious security ramifications. We've been watching revolutions all over the world over corruption, and those have also, in a number of cases, devolved into genuine security crises, be it Libya or Syria as the most obvious ones. But I think the religious point, it's a certain type of religion. It is a kind of puritanical approach to religion that also sort of says the only way of getting integrity in the public sphere is by a strictly enforced code of moral practices in the private sphere. That's another kind of linkage of these two issues.

[00:27:05] It's almost impossible to ask you to do this, but if you are kind of forecasting the sort of country where this nexus, this kind of corruption and terrorism nexus is likely to take place, the connection will flourish. What do you see as the components for that then? There is a preexisting religious community, or is it the breakdown in others' institutions leaving people with a sense that they have no other recourse?

[00:27:36] I don't think institutions break down. I think they get broken down deliberately by these kleptocratic networks. I don't think that it was "weak governance" in a place like Afghanistan or Nigeria that caused them to be susceptible to these movements. I actually think it was abuse of kleptocratic governance, which includes the basically capturing of the judicial system almost always because, as we said before, these are pyramid schemes and that means there has to be a bargain for all the money that's moving up the chain. And so what goes down the chain is impunity and that means kleptocratic networks have to capture judiciaries. They also usually weaponize the police or security forces. So I think there are about 60 countries where I think those conditions prevail. Then there are other risk factors. I think you asked a really important question. I'm not trying to suggest that corruption in and of itself solely drives people to these types of extremes. When it is conjugated, if you will, with other factors, that's when it becomes most likely to generate some kind of security crisis, be it the rise of a terrorist

group or the implantation of a terrorist group or other very important security crises. And some of those factors include, for example, a deep identity rift.

[00:29:15] So, if you're in Iraq or Syria you're saying, "Oh, we Sunnis are being subjected to this more than anyone else" so it exacerbates your kind of group feeling, and that further inflames the indignation and anger. That's one. Another is economic downturn. In Nigeria, for example, which had been suffering corruption a lot, the price of oil went through the floor and that did not in that case lead to rising membership for Boko Haram. It actually led to a nonviolent revolution which was kicking out the previous president, you know, who was associated with the corruption in a really historic election in 2015.

[00:30:01] Yeah it's fascinating to me how every election in Nigeria is won on the basis of accusing the previous administration of corruption, not without cause, but that it seems to be a cycle that I hope we may finally see broken.

[00:30:15] This was the first time an incumbent had ever been defeated in Nigeria. So it really was a remarkable event and certainly that economic downturn had something to do with it. Serious environmental degradation is also a very significant factor that plays into these dynamics. So when you see kleptocratic networks making some of their money off of environmentally devastating projects like mines or hydroelectric dams or things like, that then you often get internal conflict, that's when things come to blows internally in places like Latin America, for example, or South Asia. But also the drought was believed to have played a role in Syria, in first pushing people from villages where they used to be able to farm, into the cities. And then, once there, they were in a place where they could both again suffer the corruption more even directly than they had before. And also where they could gather to revolt against it as they did in 2011.

[00:31:24] The environmental degradation, I think, is an excellent point because it makes visible the high levels of corruption when you see mining, for example, or the Niger Delta where there's this incredible devastation to the natural environment that keeps in front of people the fact that there has been looting of the resources from which they have benefited not at all. So it's a visibility, I think, very often of those projects. Just to wrap up, I'm curious, across the time that you were in Afghanistan, what you perceived to be the local view of the West with respect to corruption. Obviously there are a whole lot of different threads to tease out. But with respect to corruption, how was the West perceived and did that change over the time that you were there?

[00:32:16] That's a great question. What's so fascinating is very often when I speak in public about corruption, someone will chime in with, "But aren't you just imposing your Western norms on people who are from a different culture?" And I found the precise opposite to be the case, which is that, initially, being from the West, or from America, was something for which I gained respect, because America was associated not just with being a democratic country but with especially being a country of law and respect for law and equal application of the law.

[00:32:59] And so people gave us a while, they gave us two or three years, because they were sure there was some method to our madness. They couldn't understand why we were supporting and backing and promoting and enabling and facilitating the activities of the most repudiated, rapacious and violent warlords from the previous decades of Afghan history, and why we were basically allowing President Karzai to put all these people in his government and give them free reign over the country. They thought there was a plan, and by about 2005 they started realizing there wasn't any plan. And, I mean, it was no

surprise really to Afghans but by the time the newspaper story hit in whatever it was, 2010 or 2011, that the CIA had been just shoveling bags of cash at President Karzai, I remember asking a friend, you know, “Well, what did you think?” And he said. “Well, we just assume America wants the corruption. We have no other way of explaining, we're now eight or nine years into this, there's no other way of explaining how America has behaved itself over the last eight or nine years, except to say you're in favor of corruption.”

[00:34:21] Good grief. Yeah. It's always fascinating to me because we go to many of the same conferences and talk to corporations that are struggling to do business overseas without paying bribes, to good government companies. And over and over again the conversation focuses on the corruption that's out there and how are we going to defend ourselves from it. And it's just so rare that we get to talk about how we are perceived. And it's important to remember that it is, it's a transaction and somebody is paying and somebody is receiving and it is never a one party crime.

[00:34:55] Yes. And especially, I think what's so important for people to remember is it's not just the moment of the transaction. It's also how are you interacting with these people. Are you raising their stature? Are you having, you know, well-oiled dinners with them that they can then swagger off from or take pictures at, which they then show their kind of subordinates or whatever. There is a whole variety of ways that our interactions in these countries tend to raise the profile, raise the stature, and provide revenue and opportunities to the most corrupt and opportunistic members of those societies. And so what Afghans experienced was that, so far, from the United States bringing or imposing democracy and rule of law in Afghanistan, they felt that we were bringing and imposing the most unscrupulous, opportunistic, extractive, violent people, whom history had demonstrated were like that. Like it was no secret what these people were like and yet those were the ones that Afghans saw us repeatedly enabling, not just by protecting them when they became governors or whatever, but by doing our contracts with them, by having fancy well publicized meetings with them, by inviting them to the United States, and so on.

[00:36:29] Yeah, sort of celebrating a whole culture of corruption instead of what the original goal was. Very discouraging. We're going to end on a very discouraging note, Sarah. It's fascinating work that you're doing. Thank you for spending some time talking to me about it. It's just critically important that we better understand the consequences of high levels of corruption. I know we've come a long way from when people would talk about it as if it were a victimless crime and something that you just had to deal with if you were operating internationally. But hearing from you and the research you're doing about the nexus with unrest with global security, I think, brings an important urgency to the conversation. So, thank you.

[00:37:10] My pleasure.