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Citizens' trust in public institutions in the global South: empirical evidence from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Trust signals the effectiveness of governance by reflecting citizen confidence in public institutions. This article examines reported trust in civil service and local government, aggregated as public administration, across Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, using nationally representative Governance and Trust data from 2020–2021 ($n = 6240$; 2740 in Bangladesh; 2256 in Nepal, and 1244 in Sri Lanka). The findings reveal high levels of trust despite widespread perceptions of corruption, which challenges dominant Global North assumptions that corruption undermines trust. Although corruption remains endemic, regression analysis shows that it does not positively predict citizen trust. This paradox reflects the region's social orientation, characterised by an authoritarian culture that fosters obedience and loyalty. Citizens also face heavy administrative burdens, including onerous rules and processes. Additionally, given the oppressive governance context in these countries, citizens may overestimate the government's actions out of fear of harassment. Importantly, as the data predate Sri Lanka's 2022 and Bangladesh's 2024 uprisings, this article interprets such trust as conditional, fragile, and likely to collapse when fairness norms weaken or repression intensifies.

Introduction

Scholars have increasingly questioned citizen trust in government and its possible effects on countries' governance processes (Mizrahi et al., 2020). Citizens' trust in public administration functions as a central indicator of the performance of public services and government bureaucratic systems in both developing and developed countries (Van de Walle & Migchelbrink, 2022). Trust research examines the extent to which citizens believe public institutions meet their expectations (Wang, 2016). Citizens' trust in government reflects confidence that public institutions respond effectively to public demands (Miller, 1974).

Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka remain comparatively underexplored in research linking institutional trust to governance outcomes. Research by Jamil and Askvik (2013, 2015, 2016), Baniamin and Jamil (2022), Ramasamy and Baniamin (2022), and Jamil et al. (2023) identify key determinants of citizens' trust in institutions, such as the civil service, between Bangladesh and Nepal, and between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Only a few studies

(Baniamin, 2019; Baniamin et al., 2020) compare trust across all three countries, and these focus narrowly on civil service and anti-corruption agencies using 2014–2015 data. This article utilises 2020–2021 data to analyse citizens' trust in the civil service and local government, as well as their institutional and cultural origins, in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Because the Governance and Trust Survey occurred before major protest movements in Sri Lanka (2022) and Bangladesh (July-August 2024), the trust values reported in this study captured citizens' expressed confidence under authoritarian and semi-authoritarian conditions. This analysis integrated trust in two public institutions into a single dimension to explain broader institutional trust. Considering the scarcity of cross-national studies on political trust in Asia (Wang, 2016), research is needed to gain insight into the dynamics of citizen trust.

The main research puzzle in this study concerns the incongruity between citizens' trust in three South Asian countries and those institutions' weak performance and socio-cultural orientation. Jamil and Askvik (2015) found that corruption remains endemic in these three countries, yet citizen trust remains high. Despite public-service institutions often perform poorly, marked by limited economic and service competency, corruption, and low government quality, country-representative surveys still report elevated institutional trust. These countries have also experienced authoritarian governance (Chetri, 2018; DeVotta, 2021; Hossain, 2025; Riaz, 2021; V-Dem, 2023), including censorship and intimidation of journalists, and weakened oversight by intermediary watchdogs over the powerful. Thus, survey-based measures of trust reflect deference to authority or cautious expression rather than genuine endorsement.

Research from East Asia and South Asia suggests that cultural orientations, such as social capital and authoritarian governance, drive high trust in government. Do Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka sustain high institutional trust despite poor governance? Do citizens here positively consider social capital and authoritarian orientation when assessing their trust in public institutions? Is trust conditional, inflated, or brittle? This article aims to analyse the level of citizens' trust and explain its variations in three South Asian countries: Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

This article examined institutional trust and its determinants in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. It first reviews major theoretical models that explain how citizens develop trust in public-service institutions, then empirically analyzes citizens' trust across three countries. This article addresses three questions: Do normative expectations of public services shape institutional trust? How does government quality influence trust in institutions? Do social capital and authoritarian culture affect institutional trust?

Theoretical model of the study

This article builds on a conceptual understanding of trust in government. Two dominant thoughts illuminate the drivers of government trust and trustworthiness: the *performance approach* and the *sociological approach* (Baniamin et al., 2020; Christensen & Lægreid, 2005; Houston et al., 2016; Jamil & Askvik, 2015; Ma & Yang, 2014; Putnam, 2001).

Performance approach

Citizens form trust in public institutions based on their perceptions of reliability, accountability, competence, compassion, and transparency (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017).

The performance approach argues that effective institutional performance fosters trust, whereas poor performance undermines it (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Stoyan et al., 2016). However, scholars caution that trust depends not only on institutional outputs, but also on how citizens evaluate them (Berg & Hjerm, 2010; Hooghe & Zmerli, 2011). Evaluations involve perceptions of responsiveness, fairness, and social equity across government systems (Yang & Holzer, 2006). In fragile democracies, high trust may arise less from legitimacy than from limited alternatives or coercive mechanisms (Norris, 2022). Overall, trust reflects citizens' judgements about institutional performance, integrity, and officials' commitment to the public interest (Islam et al., 2024; Kaasa & Andriani, 2022). Thus, the performance approach links trust primarily to economic and public service competencies and the quality of government.

Economic and public service competency of government

Scholars widely agree that citizens' perceptions of government economic performance shape trust in government institutions (Espinal et al., 2006). Van de Walle and Migchelbrink (2022) emphasise macroeconomic outcomes, identifying government performance as a driver of trust in public agencies. Their findings show that economic well-being and hardship directly affect trust in public administration. Norris (2022) demonstrates that loss of trust in the government correlates with citizens' direct experience of living in poorer households, characterised by financial insecurity, limited savings, and declining living standards. Positive evaluations of institutional performance consistently increase trust. When citizens have positive experiences with services such as public roads, transportation, health, and education, they express higher levels of trust in public institutions (Espinal et al., 2006).

Based on the performance approach theory of trust, where economic and service performance of public institutions determines trust levels, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 1: *Higher citizen satisfaction with socio-economic services delivered by the public institutions leads to higher levels of trust in government.*

Quality of government

The quality of government hypothesis advanced by Rothstein and Teorell (2008) argues that institutions must exercise their authorised power impartially and with integrity in providing services to citizens. Rothstein (2009) further stresses that impartial public institutions and quality government underpin political legitimacy. Trust in the government is built on factors such as responsiveness, fairness, and competency within public institutions. Ma and Yang (2014) argued that democratic practices and adherence to standard operating procedures strengthen this trust. Research has highlighted that trust in government increases with good governance, including fairness, impartiality, and integrity (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012).

Although quality of government theory emphasises impartiality and rule adherence, citizens' experience with rules and procedures matters equally. In many developing contexts, rules designed to ensure impartiality instead impose high compliance costs, generating administrative burdens (Christensen et al., 2020; Moynihan et al., 2015). These burdens weaken trust by making institutions appear as obstacles, rather than gateways to

public goods. Hofstede et al. (2010) notion of uncertainty avoidance further explains why societies with strong aversion to ambiguity rely on rigid bureaucratic rules. In South Asia, where uncertainty avoidance is relatively high (Haque & Mohammad, 2013), expanding red tape and rigid procedures may paradoxically undermine the trust that quality of government theories expect to build.

Citizens are more likely to trust and support governments they perceive as acting with integrity and serving the public interest. However, in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, favouritism and discrimination often undermine public institutions and deprive citizens of basic services (Jamil & Askvik, 2016; Ramasamy, 2020). Meyer-Sahling et al. (2021) identified politicisation in civil service recruitment and promotion in Nepal and Bangladesh, while (Khan, 2006) highlighted the institutionalisation of corruption, including favouritism, patronage, and bribery. Such practices weaken trust in public institutions (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). In these countries, public services frequently benefit privileged groups, rather than adhering to universal justice principles. Trust increases when institutions follow established norms instead of serving specific interests (Jamil & Askvik, 2015).

Based on the extent to which public institutions in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka provide services impartially, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 2: *Greater citizen perceptions of high-quality governance in service provision increase trust; however, excessive or burdensome rules – especially in high uncertainty-avoidance contexts – diminish trust.*

Sociological approach

The sociological approach to institutional trust draws on cultural theory, which posits that trust arises from social relations and extends to public institutions (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Cultural theory views citizens' trust in public institutions as an extension of interpersonal trust rooted in cultural norms transmitted through socialisation. Early socialisation shapes trust by instilling shared cultural norms, values, and beliefs (Almond & Verba, 2019; Wang, 2016). Therefore, citizens evaluate government performance within culturally embedded contexts. This article applies the cultural theory perspective to two dimensions: social capital-based trust (Putnam, 1994) and authoritarian culture-based trust, as theorised by Ma and Yang (2014).

Social capital

The cultural perspective identifies "social capital" as a key factor shaping trust in government (Newton & Norris, 2000). Putnam (1994) defines social capital as involving social networks, norms, and trust that enhance societal efficiency through coordinated actions, describing it as "connections among individuals, which generate norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness" (2000). Social interactions generate generalised trust through relational experience (Rousseau et al., 1998). Social capital emphasises this "relational" aspect, through which citizens develop trust or distrust depending upon their interactions (Mahmud, 2021). As collectivist societies, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka exhibit strong loyalty towards political parties and relational networks, which foster trust in public institutions through

positive reciprocity within kinship and administrative networks (Jamil & Askvik, 2015; Ramasamy, 2020). These relationship-based networks reinforce positive reciprocity and strengthen trust in public institutions. Thus, based on the social-network and associational components of social capital, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 3: *Citizens engaged in social networks and associationism show higher trust in public-service institutions.*

Authoritarian cultural orientation

An authoritarian orientation strongly shapes citizens' trust in government, particularly in East Asian contexts (Ma & Yang, 2014). This governance-rooted culture also extends to South Asian societies, where paternalism and authoritarianism remain prevalent (Baniamin et al., 2020). In Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, patronage-based governance dominates over meritocratic or rights-based systems, making loyalty, obedience, and allegiance central to social order (Jamil & Baniamin, 2021). Scholars emphasise preference falsification as a key mechanism shaping reported trust in authoritarian contexts. Kuran (1987) theorised that individuals under repression conceal true preferences and express support for authorities to avoid retaliation. Consequently, this expressed trust often reflects a strategic adaptation to risk, rather than genuine legitimacy. In Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, where restrictions on free expression, media censorship, and surveillance are common, preference falsification allows high levels of reported trust to coexist with widespread private disaffection.

Ma and Yang (2014) suggest that pervasive hierarchical or authoritarian values foster institutional trust. In these countries, citizens perceive governments and political leaders as authority symbols, while psychological factors, such as authority submission and dependence, encourage unquestioning trust in them. Furthermore, this hierarchy also reduces expectations of government responsiveness, making citizens less likely to withdraw support even after unfavourable outcomes (Nathan & Chen, 2004). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 4: *Citizens with stronger authoritarian orientation will trust the government more.*

Methodology

Selection of cases and research design

This article used data from 2020–2021 Governance and Trust Survey, a nationally representative dataset from Bangladesh (*n* = 2,740), Nepal (*n* = 2,256), and Sri Lanka (*n* = 1,244). Conducted under the Policy and Governance Studies in South Asia initiative within Norway's capacity development programme, the survey marks the third wave following the 2008 and 2014–2015 rounds. The analyses rely solely on pre-uprising data (2020–-2021) and therefore capture reported institutional trust before mass protest movements that emerged after 2022.

The article selected these countries for scientific and practical reasons. They differ substantially in population, religion, ethnicity, language, and geography (Jamil & Baniamin, 2021), as well as in political stability, culture, and regime type. According to the V-Dem report (2023), Nepal and Sri Lanka show rising democratic scores, while Bangladesh shows a decline. Despite these differences, all three countries exhibit high institutional trust amid weak governance and poor performance by public institutions (Baniamin, 2019). Jamil and Askvik (2013), Lawoti (2005), and Riaz and Basu (2007) attribute this pattern to hierarchical cultural traits, including patron-client relationships, political exclusion, and centralisation of authority.

Democratic erosion has persisted in Bangladesh for several years, as current leaders actively push the country towards a single-party system (Grahn et al., 2021; Riaz, 2021). Sri Lanka's economic turmoil, expanding militarisation (DeVotta, 2021), and suppression of minority speech accelerates its shift towards authoritarian rule. Nepal's corruption, weak governance, and poor resource distribution reflect hybrid authoritarian tendencies (Chetri, 2018). Collectively, these patterns indicate authoritarian drift, with Bangladesh emerging as the most fragile case (Riaz, 2019). These shared dynamics justify examining citizens' trust in public institutions across these regions.

Measurement of variables of the study

Dependent variable: citizens' trust in public institutions

To represent citizens' trust in public institutions, the dataset included six public institutions: parliament, civil service, police, higher judiciary, lower judiciary, and local government units. To determine which institutions measured the same construct (i.e., trust in public institutions), this study conducted *principal component analysis* (Appendix 1). This analysis identified institutions that clustered along a single dimension, allowing the construction of correlated institutions, called principal components, for the dependent variable. Using an 80% to 95% variance threshold, the analysis showed that three institutions were interpreted to be similarly associated with the dependent variable, trust in public institutions.

The analysis results indicated that public administration, the parliament, and judiciary exhibited similar associations with trust. The civil service and local governments scaled together and can be aggregately termed *public administration*. Although the police represent an important public institution, their data did not converge with other institutions and were excluded from the analysis. The study also excluded Parliament and judiciary because this article focuses exclusively on institutions that deliver direct public services, such as civil services and local governments. While data for judiciary and Parliament were available, these institutions fell outside the study's scope. Judicial and political institutions differ fundamentally from administrative institutions, and future research should empirically examine whether similar mechanisms of trust apply across these domains.

Public administration forms the core branch of government and, through the civil service, directly implements policies and enforces laws. Effective performance strengthens public trust when institutions meet citizens' expectations. In Bangladesh, Nepal, and

Sri Lanka, citizens frequently interact with civil services and local governments, which operate under constant media scrutiny (Jamil & Askvik, 2015).

Previous studies identify "confidence" as a reliable indicator of trust in government institutions (Campbell, 2004; Jamil & Baniamin, 2021; Svedin, 2012). Conversely, other scholars distinguish between confidence and institutional trust (Kumagai & Iorio, 2020; Schnaudt, 2019). However, because standard survey data measure institutional trust through confidence, this analysis adopts confidence as its proxy. The study "measures" trust levels by mapping citizens' perceived confidence in public administration on a four-point scale: "*A great deal*" (coded as 4), "*Quite a lot*" (coded as 3), "*Not very much*" (coded as 2) and "*None at all*" (coded as 1).

Independent variables

Economic and public service competency of public institutions
We extracted three principal components (Appendix 2) to measure *economic competency, law and order, and health*. We assessed economic competency using a single-item construct: *"the degree of success in improving people's general economic situation"* rated on a five-point scale from 1 (*did not succeed at all)* to 5 (*succeeded very well*). We measured health competency with a single-item indicator capturing the "*development of the public healthcare system*," while we assessed law-and-order competency with a single-item measure of the "*development of the law-and-order system"*. We evaluated health and law-and-order performance on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very bad*) to 5 (*very good*), with higher values indicating greater competency. Prior research, including Norris (2022) and World Values Survey Wave 7, used similar measures to understand the association between government performance and citizen trust.

Quality of government
The dataset included indicators of government quality, including corruption, favouritism, equal treatment, rule adherence, and bribery. Principal component analysis (Appendix 3) identified two key dimensions: *involvement in corruption and maintenance of rules and regulations*. This article measured these indicators using two constructs: i) "public service personnel in various public institutions are corrupt", and ii) "public service personnel in various public institutions discharge their duties based on established rules, procedures & norms" on a four-point scale from "strongly agree" (coded as 4), to "*strongly disagree*" (coded as 1). Higher scores on the first indicator reflected weaker government quality, whereas higher scores on the second reflected stronger government quality. The European Value Survey/World Values Survey Wave 7 used these indices to determine the correlation between trust in the government and perceived institutional impartiality.

Social capital
We measured social capital through *associationism*, which captured individuals' involvement in various organisations. The dataset showed participation across multiple organisational types. Principal component analysis identified a single underlying dimension (Appendix 4). Associationism comprised *two principal component* constructs: i) "*You are a member or associated with any social organization*", and ii) "*You are a member or associated with any voluntary organization*", with "yes"

coded as 1 and "no" coded as 2. The voluntary organisational aspect, denoting civic associationism, forms a key element of the societal approach to institutional trust. Previous studies, such as Baniamin (2019), have employed similar indices to measure social capital.

Authoritarian cultural orientation

To measure authoritarian cultural orientation in the three countries, we constructed an index from two related statements: i) "*Even if parent's demands are unreasonable, children still should do what their parents ask/suggest*"; and ii) "*It is natural that those with power and money and who belong to a family with high status should be respected and obeyed*". Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree)* to 4 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating stronger authoritarian cultural orientation. We scaled both indicators together (Appendix 5). Ma and Yang (2014) used similar questions to measure cultural dimensions.

Control variables

We included four control variables- age, gender, education, and income (Appendix 6)- consistent with prior research (Christensen & Lægreid, 2005; Kim, 2010). While some studies report weak/negligible effects (Turner & Pidgeon, 1997) others note variations: women often express higher institutional trust (Lægreid, 1993), trust increases with age (Christensen & Lægreid, 2005), and higher education correlates with greater trust in government (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003).

Findings

Dependent variable: trust in public institutions in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka

Table 1 indicates that trust in public administration, comprising civil services and local governments across the three countries, averaged 3.03. This score reflects a high level of citizen trust during 2020–2021. Among the countries, Bangladesh recorded the highest citizen trust in public administration with a mean value of 3.15, while Sri Lanka reported the lowest trust at 2.85.

Descriptive statistics on independent variables

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the independent variables, reporting the mean values of explanatory indices.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for trust in public institutions (dependent variables).

	Institutions	Bangladesh	Nepal	Sri Lanka	Pooled
			Mean (S.D.)		
Trust value	*Public administration*	3.15 (0.576)	2.94 (0.537)	2.85 (0.609)	3.03 (0.412)
	Valid N	**2670**	**2192**	**1233**	**6095**

Minimum value (1) and Maximum value (4).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the control and independent variables.

Independent Variables	Mean (S. D.)				Min	Max
	Bangladesh	Nepal	Sri Lanka	Overall		
Economic and Public Service Competency: (Low - High)						
(a) Economic Competency	2.30 (1.067)	2.55 (1.017)	2.87 (1.070)	**2.48 (0.761)**	1	5
(b)Law and order	3.49 (1.004)	3.21 (0.914)	3.08 (0.902)	**3.33 (0.721)**	1	5
(c) Health	3.14 (1.024)	3.09 (0.993)	3.30 (0.940)	**3.15 (0.844)**	1	5
N	**2721**	**2221**	**1244**			
Quality of Government:						
(Weak-strong)						
(a) Corruption	3.27 (0.826)	2.85 (0.778)	3.00 (0.863)	**3.10 (0.587)**	1	4
(b) Maintenance of Rules and Regulations	2.28 (0.903)	2.66 (0.742)	2.47 (0.866)	**2.45 (0.600)**	1	4
N	**2665**	**2218**	**1242**			
Social Capital (Yes = 1)						
Associationism with:						
(a) Social organisation	1.79 (0.408)	1.69 (0.464)	1.37 (0.483)	**1.69 (0.319)**	1	2
(b) Voluntary organisation	1.96 (0.202)	1.89 (0.319)	1.62 (0.487)	**1.88 (0.212)**	1	2
N	**2740**	**2255**	**1244**			
Authoritarian Orientation						
(Low – High)	2.84 (0.658)	2.25 (0.558)	2.08 (0.641)	**2.48 (0.702)**	1	4
N	**2736**	**2241**	**1243**			

Economic and public service competency variable

Using a 1–5 scale, where 1 denotes "*very bad*" and 5 represents "*very good*", Table 2 illustrates variations in citizens' perceptions of economic and service competency in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. *Law and order competency* achieved the highest mean score among the variables (3.33), and *economic competency* recorded the lowest (2.48). These results indicate moderate citizen satisfaction with the economic and public service competencies of public-service institutions.

Quality of government variable

Across all three countries, the corruption index averaged 3.10 (range: 1–4), suggesting that respondents perceived low procedural impartiality in service delivery. The rules-and-regulations index averaged 2.45, reflecting weak rule adherence and inconsistent application of administrative norms. These two indices show that citizens view government service delivery as lacking impartiality in rule implementation. This contradicts our hypothesis that a higher quality of government fosters greater institutional trust. Why is there high institutional trust in public institutions despite citizens' perceived lack of government quality? Is performance theory of trust applicable to these three South Asian countries? This article examines trustworthiness dynamics using regression analyses incorporating potential explanatory factors.

Social capital variable

Social capital remained low across all three countries based on their associationism scores. A associationism with a social organisation averaged 1.69, while voluntary associationism averaged 1.88 (associational involvement: Yes = 1, No = 2). Bangladesh recorded the lowest levels of both forms, whereas Sri Lanka showed the highest.

Authoritarian orientation variable

The aggregate authoritarian orientation index for the three countries is 2.48. Bangladesh has the highest authoritarian orientation (2.84), while Sri Lanka recorded the lowest (2.08), indicating a highly authoritarian cultural orientation overall.

Regression analysis

The regression analysis (Table 3) assesses how explanatory variables influence trust in public-service institutions across three countries. We estimated separate models for each independent variable set, controlled for demographic characteristics, and then conducted a pooled analyses combining all variables. Model 7 extends the pooled by introducing country dummies, using Bangladesh as the reference category and including Nepal and Sri Lanka to compare institutional effects across countries.

Trust in public administration: pooled regression analysis

Table 3 highlights the main determinants of trust in public-service institutions across the three countries. Models 1- 4 examine individual independent variables, showing significant effects for economic, law-and-order, and health indicators: $\beta = 0.070$ ($p < 0.005$), $\beta = 0.014$ ($p < 0.010$), and $\beta = 0.059$ ($p < 0.001$), respectively. In the combined model (model 5), these effects remain significant: $\beta = 0.062$ ($p < 0.001$), $\beta = 0.025$ ($p < 0.010$), and $\beta = 0.039$ ($p < 0.005$). Model 6 confirms these relationships after adding demographic controls. In

Table 3. Pooled linear regression models: citizens' trust in public administration (standardised beta coefficients).

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Economic and Public Service	**0.070****				**0.062*****	**0.063*****	**0.030***
Competency (low-high)	**0.014***				**0.025***	**0.036***	**0.051***
Economic Competency	0.059***				0.039**	0.040**	0.068*
Law and order							
Health							
Quality of Government (weak-		− 0.035**			− 0.030**	− 0.031*	0.006
strong)		− 0.051**			− 0.050**	− 0.050**	− 0.026*
Corruption in public institutions							
Maintenance of rules and							
regulations							
Social Capital: Associationism			0.011		0.003	0.002	0.038
(1 = Yes and 2= No)			0.064**		0.082***	0.079***	0.044*
Social organization							
Voluntary organization							
Authoritarian orientation			0.054***		0.032**	0.031**	0.011*
(Low – High)							
Control Variables						− 0.020*	− 0.040*
Gender (ref: Male)						0.026*	0.077**
Age (low-high)						− 0.019	0.004
Education (low-high)						0.008*	0.055*
Income (low-high)							
Ref. category: Bangladesh							
Nepal (dummy)							0.121*
Sri Lanka (dummy)							0.294*
Adjusted R²							0.419
N							1223

*$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.005$, ***$p < 0.001$.

the pooled model with country dummies (model 7), all three indicators remain statistically significant.

The "quality of government indices" shows significant negative effects on trust in public-service institutions across all models. Corruption ($\beta = -0.035$, $p < 0.005$) and maintenance of rules and regulations ($\beta = -0.051$, $p < 0.005$) remain statistically significant. This negative pattern persists in models 5, 6, and 7, where both indicators retain negative coefficients: $\beta = -0.030$ ($p < 0.010$) and $\beta = -0.031$ ($p < 0.010$). While hypothesis two predicted a positive effect of rule maintenance, respondents across the three countries do not associate it with higher institutional trust. Our discussion critically analyzes the factors underlying this unexpected result.

The results reveal that associations with volunteer organisations significantly predict trust in public-service institutions. In the individual model, this relationship remains positive ($\beta = 0.064$, $p < 0.005$). The combined model ($\beta = 0.082$, $p < 0.001$) and the demographic-inclusive model ($\beta = 0.079$, $p < 0.001$) confirm the strength and significance of this relationship. The pooled model with country dummies reinforces this finding, highlighting the positive role of voluntary organisational involvement in fostering institutional trust.

Authoritarian orientation also demonstrates a consistently significant positive association with citizens' trust in public-service institutions. In the individual model, this effect is notable ($\beta = 0.054$, $p < 0.001$). The combined model ($\beta = 0.032$, $p < 0.001$) and the demographic-inclusive model ($\beta = 0.031$, $p < 0.005$) similarly show significant positive effects. The pooled model with country dummies confirms these findings, demonstrating that authoritarian orientation positively influences trust in public administration across the studied contexts.

Discussion

This research examines how performance and cultural factors shape citizens' trust in public-service institutions in South Asia. Using a pooled regression model with country-fixed effects, the analysis identifies more similarities than differences across the three nations.

Regarding the *performance approach* to trust theory, two indices- *economic and public service competency* and *quality of government*- produced varying results. Regression findings show that economic, health, and law-and-order performances significantly predict citizens' trust in public-service institutions. These results align with studies by Kim (2010) and Chen (2017b). The analysis indicates that citizens perceive institutions, such as civil services and local governments, as responsive to enhanced and modern economic, law-and-order, and health-competency benefits. Consequently, citizens tend to trust institutions that deliver tangible benefits (Lumineau, 2017).

The evidence suggests that effective governmental economic performance strengthens institutional trust. Li and Wu (2018), applying economic self-interest theory, demonstrate that individuals who perceive benefits from government policies express higher trust in public-service institutions (cited in Baniamin et al., 2020). This finding suggests that perceived progress in economic, health, and law-and-order sectors reinforces institutional trust, supporting hypothesis 1.

Citizens anticipate public-service institutions to display both competence and ethical conduct. The findings on the "quality of government" show that *corruption* significantly reduces trust in public administration, especially in Bangladesh. However, the *maintenance of rules and regulations* also diminishes trust. When citizens perceive public administration as corrupt and overly rigid in service delivery, their trust declines. This finding contradicts our hypothesis that maintaining rules and regulations enhances trust in public-service institutions.

What accounts for this negative effect? Two factors explain this paradox: First, Hofstede's administrative culture framework (Hofstede et al., 2010) indicates that South Asian countries, including Bangladesh and Nepal, rank high on Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance index (Haque & Mohammad, 2013). Governments in these contexts impose excessive and rigid rules, producing bureaucratic red tape for public-service institutions. This complexity leads to another layer, namely, a high administrative burden on citizens, which may produce distrust.

Administrative burdens describe an individual's experience with governmental services and become trust-reducing when rules and procedures obstruct access to public-service institutions (Christensen et al. 2020; Masood & Azfar Nisar, 2021).

Dependent variable: citizen trust in public administration

Scholars frequently criticise Bangladesh's administrative system for excessive red tape, corruption, and inefficient service delivery (Zafarullah & Rahman, 2008). In Nepal, analysts portray the bureaucratic system as complex, centralised, and inefficient, especially in rural and marginalised regions (Dahal et al., 2002). Although Sri Lanka possesses greater administrative capacity, centralised decision-making, red tape, and political interference continue to weaken public service delivery, particularly in health and education (Wickramasinghe, 2014). Across Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, administrative burdens limit equitable access to services and erode citizens' trust in public-service institutions. This finding mirrors global evidence showing that excessive bureaucratic rules undermine citizens' trust. Peeters et al. (2018), Christensen et al. (2020), and Ali and Altaf (2021) found that regulatory burdens generate distrust in public-service institutions, while Van de Walle (2007) links perceptions of red tape with lower confidence in civil services in Europe.

Thus, the findings partially support the quality-of-government hypothesis (Hypothesis 2), which involves corruption and rule enforcement. Full support would require both lower corruption and stricter rule enforcement to increase trust, which the results do not show. Strict rule enforcement may enhance trust when corruption is low, but under high corruption, people may view rules as ineffective or selectively enforced, reducing trust. Institutional trust relies on the rule-of-law, where authorities apply the law equally, transparently, and without bias. This differs from rule-by-law, in which elites selectively or manipulatively use law to maintain control (O'Donnell, 1998). Rule enforcement, therefore, builds trust when people perceive it as operating within a legitimate rule-of-law framework.

We examine civic associationism by hypothesising that participation in volunteer organisations increases trust in public-service institutions. The article supports this hypothesis, finding that volunteer associations influence trust more than social organisations. These results align with social capital theories (Putnam, 1994; Wollebaek & Selle,

2002), which emphasises the role of volunteer associations in fostering civic engagement and trust. Scholars widely recognise trust as a core indicator of social cohesion (Ramesh, 2017). However, research on the relationship between civic engagement and institutional trust in Bangladesh remains unclear. Mahmud (2021) suggests that participation in non-governmental organisations and political activities shapes trust in local administrative bodies. Jamil and Baniamin (2021) similarly find that participation in social and voluntary associations correlates with higher institutional trust in Bangladesh and Nepal. In Sri Lanka, civil society organisations helped rebuild trust in democratic institutions after the war (Ramasamy, 2024). Thus, this article confirms that civic engagement-based social capital is crucial for promoting trust in public-service institutions.

Hypothesis 4 involved authoritarian orientation as a source of citizen trust. The findings help explain why citizens in all three countries report high trust in public-service institutions despite poor performance on objective measures, including the human development index (United Nations Development Programme, 2025). Considering the region's long histories of authoritarian rule, entrenched patron-client relationships, and weak governance, performance approach alone cannot explain the origins of citizen trust. From a cultural perspective, authoritarian orientations emerge as a significant source of trust in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. In Bangladesh and Nepal, respect for authority is strongly influenced (Khan, 2016).

The findings reveal an interesting contrast between citizens' trust and authoritarian cultural orientations in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Bangladesh had the highest citizen trust and authoritarian orientation, whereas Sri Lanka showed the lowest. What may be the cause of these differences? In Bangladesh, authoritarian cultural orientations are ingrained in the political culture. Since independence in 1971, repeated periods of military rule and strong leadership have reinforced a political culture in which authoritarian governance ensures stability and development (Jamil & Baniamin, 2021). In Sri Lanka, authoritarian tendencies emerged during the civil war and under leaders such as Mahinda Rajapaksa (Centre for Policy Alternatives [CPA], 2024). However, a longstanding tradition of democratic governance and civic activism persists. Movements such as the 2022 *Aragalaya* protests highlight a political culture more willing to resist authoritarian drift (Sri Lanka study finds public preference for authoritarianism, 2024). Thus, while hierarchical norms exist in both societies, their political expressions differ significantly.

Regarding trust levels between the two countries, citizen trust in public-service institutions in Bangladesh remains paradoxically high despite widespread criticism of governance institutions. This trust may not be based on institutional performance, however, but rather on an embedded authoritarian culture. Citizens in Bangladesh often display "blind trust" in authority figures/institutions, underpinned by a high power-distance culture that values obedience and hierarchy (Hofstede, 2022). Political loyalty and patron-client relationships further reinforce these dynamics. Contrarily, Sri Lankan citizens evaluate institutions based on effectiveness. During the 2018 constitutional crisis and the 2022 economic collapse, trust in institutions such as Parliament and the presidency declined significantly, reflecting a more performance-oriented civic mindset (CPA, 2024). While some groups endorse authoritarian rule during crises, this support remains conditional and fluctuates with governance quality.

Respondent response bias offers another explanation for fostered trust in authoritarian contexts. In all three countries, characterised as closed societies with restricted expression,

media control, and suppressed dissent (Norris, 2022), respondents may avoid expressing mistrust out of fear of state retaliation. However, prior studies by Ma and Yang (2014), Baniamin (2019), and (Yang et al., 2021), confirm authoritarian orientation as an independent explanatory variable for citizen trust.

Recent protest movements in Sri Lanka (Jayamaha, 2022), Bangladesh (Mahmud, 2025) and Nepal (Pandey & Gautam, 2025) demonstrate that authoritarian cultural orientations, although historically strong, remain mutable. These youth-led uprisings challenged authoritarian rules and demanded democracy, accountability, and governance reforms. High trust levels reported in 2020–2021 represent a pre-uprising snapshot, not durable legitimacy. In authoritarian and hybrid contexts, authoritarian/hierarchical orientations can inflate reported trust (through obedience/deference) despite poor governance (Baniamin, 2019, 2021; Ma & Yang, 2014). Fear and preference falsification further raise expressed confidence under risk, especially when media and civil society face constraints (Hossain, 2025). Such trust remains conditional and brittle; shocks involving repression or perceived injustice can rapidly trigger preference cascades and collapse trust, as seen in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh (Hossain, 2025; Ramasamy & Baniamin, 2022). These cases reflect a pre-shock equilibrium of thin, hierarchy-based trust, rather than contradiction.

While this article characterises pre-uprising trust as conditional and fragile, it is important to explain how such trust can unravel rapidly rather than erode gradually. Kuran's (1989) theory of unanticipated revolution explains how people misrepresent their preferences under repression, so regimes look stable until a small shock reduces the perceived costs of dissent and suddenly reveals a vast, previously hidden opposition. In all three countries, reported trust reflected citizens' acceptance of existing institutions under constrained political choice, not confidence in fairness or effectiveness. When economic pressures intensified, and state responses turned coercive (Mahmud, 2025), a tipping-point dynamic occurred, acceptance eroded, protest risks declined, and citizens openly articulated long-standing dissatisfaction.

Finally, the article demonstrates that gender, age, and income shape citizen trust in public-service institutions. Highly educated people report lower trust, while higher income increases trust. Women report less trust than men, consistent with Van de Walle and Migchelbrink's (2022). The findings contribute to global debates by demonstrating that in South Asia, authoritarian cultural orientations and hierarchical norms can sustain reported trust, despite poor governance; however, this trust remains fragile. Similarly, this article extends the administrative burden framework by demonstrating that excessive rules restrict service access and weaken institutional trust, while voluntary associationism strengthens trust and supports governance reforms.

Conclusion

This article examines the factors shaping citizens' trust in public-service institutions in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Findings show that citizens across all three countries report relatively high levels of institutional trust. Using original survey data, this article tests four hypotheses and demonstrates that economic and public service competencies significantly influence citizen trust, supporting the performance hypothesis advanced by Mishler and Rose (2001) and Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2003). Contrarily, indicators of government quality produce unexpected

results. Respondents identify *corruption* and *maintenance of rules and regulations* as negative predictors of trust, a key contribution of this article. Citizens perceive the maintenance of rules and regulations in public-service institutions as a barrier to accessing services, which intensifies distrust. This finding contradicts Rothstein and Stolle (2008) and Rothstein (2011) but aligns with Sztompka (1998) and Christensen et al. (2020), who link corruption, poor administrative capacities, and administrative burdens to declining trust. Finally, social and voluntary associationism positively predict trust across all three countries, confirming hypothesis 3.

This article makes another major contribution by identifying a clear association between authoritarian orientation and citizen trust. The empirical analysis supported the hypothesised link, demonstrating that authoritarian cultural orientations shape trust in public-service institutions across sampled countries. Prior research (Baniamin, 2019) similarly identifies authoritarianism as a source of trust in South and East Asia (Ma & Yang, 2014; Shi, 2001).

These findings align with preference falsification theory: citizens in authoritarian contexts may overstate institutional trust due to fear or conformity to hierarchical norms (Kuran, 1995). This dynamic explains why high levels of reported trust observed in 2020–2021 collapsed rapidly during the 2022–2024 protest cycles in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, revealing trust as both inflated and brittle.

In addressing the research puzzle, the article argues that high trust levels persist despite widespread corruption. Authoritarian cultural orientation explains this paradox. Jamil and Baniamin (2021) emphasise that norms of deference and hierarchy cultivate trust regardless of institutional performance in Bangladesh and Nepal. Citizens may acknowledge corruption, yet believe institutions deliver core services, which legitimises trust. Sri Lanka's free education and healthcare services and Bangladesh's visible local administrations reinforce confidence despite inefficiencies (Mahmud, 2021). Thus, citizen trust reflects societal norms and experience, not institutional efficacy alone.

The relationship between citizens and anti-corruption agencies further illustrates this paradox. Jamil and Askvik (2016) compared trust in anti-corruption agencies in Bangladesh and Nepal, noting that trust reflected citizens' broader political experiences and perceptions of institutional trustworthiness. This implies that even institutions designed to combat corruption remain shaped by cultural and societal factors, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive anti-corruption strategies. These findings emphasise the need for contextual caution when using perception-based data. However, the article's focus on only three South Asian countries limits generalisability, calling for broader comparative research.

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Rifat Mahmud is currently pursuing his PhD from the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham, UK, being awarded the Commonwealth PhD Scholarship. He completed his Masters Program in Public Administration (MPA) under the supervision of Professor Ishtiaq Jamil from the Department of Administration and Organization Theory at the University of Bergen, Norway. He has completed his graduate and post-graduation studies in public administration at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. He works (on study leave) as a faculty member in the Department of Public Administration at the University of Barishal, Bangladesh. His articles have been published in notable journals such as the Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration, the International Journal of Public Administration, Local Government, and the South Asian Survey. His research area of interest involves Local Government, Institutional trust, administrative reform, and bureaucracy.

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Appendicess

Appendix 1. Principal Component Analysis for the dependent variable

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.805
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	34.773
	df	15
	Sig.	.001

Total Variance Explained									
	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
Component	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	1.120	33.666	33.666	1.120	33.666	33.666	1.078	32.974	32.974
2	1.029	27.152	60.818	1.029	27.152	60.818	1.043	28.386	61.360
3	1.013	26.878	87.696	1.013	26.878	87.696	1.040	26.336	87.696
4	.990	16.493	69.189						
5	.953	15.890	85.079						
6	.895	14.921	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotated Component Matrix[a]			
	Component		
	1	2	3
Trust_Parliament	.865	.709	.861
Trust_Civil Service	.145	.848	.130
Trust _Police	.689	.119	.202
Trust _lower judiciary	.121	.134	.805
Trust _higher judiciary	−.147	−.011	.574
Trust _Local Government	.091	.810	.020

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.
a.Rotation converged in 4 iterations.

Appendix 2: PCA for independent variable 1 (Economic and public service competency)

KMO and Bartlett's Test[a]		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.729
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	84.919
	df	15
	Sig.	< .001

a.Based on correlations.

Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	.708	39.211	39.211	.708	39.211	39.211	.517	28.644	28.664
2	.517	28.644	67.855	.517	28.644	67.855	.707	38.191	66.860
3	.342	18.974	86.829	.342	18.974	86.829	.345	19.994	86.829
4	.238	13.171	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotated Component Matrix

Component

	1	2	3
Law and order	.717	.003	.010
Economic competency	.041	0.832	.031
Education	.003	0.232	−.001
Health	.003	2.191	.840

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. .
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.

Appendix 3. PCA for independent variable 2 (Quality of government)

KMO and Bartlett's Test[a]

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.759
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	84.919
	df	15
	Sig.	< .001

a.Based on correlations.

Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	1.144	50.544	50.544	1.144	50.544	50.544
2	.879	29.092	79.636	.879	29.092	79.636
3	.459	10.303	89.939			
4	.337	5.397	95.336			
5	.293	4.664	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotated Component Matrix[a]

	Component	
	1	2
Corruption	.827	−.045
Favouritism	.070	.666
Maintenance of rules and regulation	−.121	.840
Equality	−.121	.083
Hint/asked for involved in corruption	.028	.049

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
a.Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.
a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

Appendix 4: PCA for independent variable 3 (Social capital)

KMO and Bartlett's Test[a]

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.876
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2236.886
	df	10
	Sig.	< .001

Based on correlations.

Total Variance Explained

	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
Component	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	.132	57.832	57.832	.132	57.832	57.832
2	.073	22.274	80.106	.073	22.274	80.106
3	.027	9.643	89.749			
4	.022	6.444	96.193			
5	.016	3.807	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotated Component Matrix[a]

	Component	
	1	2
Social organisation	.845	−.045
Religious organisation	.070	.266
Trade Union	−.121	−.140
Voluntary organisation	−.037	.890
Political party	.028	.049

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.
a.Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

Appendix 5: PCA for independent variable 4 (Authoritarian orientation)

KMO and Bartlett's Test[a]		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.809
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	117.009
	df	3
	Sig.	< .001

Based on correlations.

Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	1.070	42.667	42.667	1.070	42.667	42.667	1.061	42.377	42.377
2	1.002	39.386	82.053	1.002	39.386	82.053	1.010	39.676	82.053
3	.928	30.947	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotated Component Matrix[a]

	Component	
	1	2
Even if parent's demands are unreasonable, children still should do what their parents ask/suggest"	.772	.773
It is natural that those with power and money and who belong to a family with high status should be respected and obeyed	.682	.756
Top officials in government/private sector/NGOs are like the head of the family; their decisions should be followed by everyone	.007	.241

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.
a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

Appendix 6: Control variables

	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)	Mean (S. D.)	Min	Max
Control Variables					
Gender (Male = 1)					
Bangladesh:	1292	47.20	1.53 (0.499)	1	2
Male	1448	52.80			
Female					
Nepal:	1163	51.60	1.48 (0.501)	1	2
Male	1091	48.40			
Female					
Sri Lanka:	622	50.00	1.50 (0.500)	1	2
Male	622	50.00			
Female					
Total-	3077	49.30	1.51 (0.500)	1	2
Male	3161	50.70			
Female					
Age	2739		42.07 (13.071)	19	92
Bangladesh	2255		38.69 (13.850)	18	98
Nepal	1244		39.54 (13.385)	18	84
Sri Lanka	6238		40.34 (13.508)	18	98
Total					
Education (Illiterate = 1 to Master's degree and	2740		3.96 (1.904)	1	8
above = 8)	2255		4.90 (2.109)	1	8
Bangladesh	1244		5.39 (1.292)	1	8
Nepal	6239		4.58 (1.967)	1	**8**
Sri Lanka					
Total					
Income (USD/month)	2740		190.98	0	3182
Bangladesh	2256		(168.726)	0	7592
Nepal	1244		270.69	7	1667
Sri Lanka	6240		(407.380)	0	7592
Total			120.41		
			(101.787)		
			205.73		
			(278.619)		