



Sarah Chayes

You might remember correspondent Sarah Chayes from NPR in the 1990's, filing reports from Paris. In the early 2000's, she took up a far less glamorous posting: Kandahar, in Afghanistan, and has just completed her second book about it. The book, [\*Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security\*](#), contains an important lesson for those interested in environmental protection in the Global South.

Chayes posits that corruption is not a byproduct of weak regimes, but rather their *raison d'être*: these governments are not so much failed states but rather vertically integrated criminal enterprises, extracting wealth from the citizenry in a systematic, Mafia-like fashion. Just as importantly, this sort of corruption constitutes a primary — perhaps *the* primary — reason for the growth of Islamic radicalism. Many who support Islamic rebels such as the Taliban and Boko Haram have no interest in their ideology, but are so badly oppressed by corrupt brutality that they are willing to turn anywhere else.

So what does this have to do with the environment? Well, consider the problem of poaching, species extinction and habitat destruction, which is rampant in the Global South. Many observers worry that these problems might be impossible to eradicate because the states in which they occur are simply too weak to control the interests that wreak such destruction. But as Chayes shows (not airtightly but with a lot of good qualitative and anecdotal evidence), the problem isn't that the state is too *weak*, but rather that it is very effective in getting what its leaders want it to get, namely, resource wealth. And that includes wildlife and other natural resources — as well as, of course, the natural resources used by indigenous peoples, such as [the areas around Lake Turkana in Kenya](#), which has been systematically looted by government officials over the last few years.

If Chayes is right, those working on environmental issues in the Global South should not be attempting to train and strengthen the state, but rather decapitate its corrupt head. Making police forces stronger might actually worsen the situation because they will use their power to further despoil the environment. The strategy should not be to find poachers; it should be to clean up the government. Chayes found that many of those whom the Afghan government claimed were “terrorists” were actually political opponents of corrupt state actors; to the extent that she is right, I would not be surprised to see the same sort of thing occurring with those whom the government claims are environmental criminals.

Easier said than done, of course: Chayes recounts that the military’s anti-corruption initiative in Afghanistan halted because it turned out that the most corrupt actors were all on the CIA payroll. At least when it comes to environmental terrorism (if one can use such a term), the odds of corrupt actors being on a similar payroll are lower: the CIA isn’t playing as extensively in Kenya, or Zimbabwe, or Uganda, or Tanzania (or at least so we think). But it remains a formidable challenge.