



OpenMind

Proposal of a Dignity Scale for Sustainable Governance

By Nayef Al-Rodhan

In October 2005, two North African teenagers died of electrocution in one of the *banlieues* of Paris as they were running from the police through a dangerous power substation. An inquiry later established the teens were innocent, and the incident sparked some of the worst unrest seen in France over the past 40 years. The riots brought about much debate over the tense relationship between immigrant youth and the state, the recurring problems of “fracture sociale,” and a perceived lack of social justice. Above all, the protests were an expression of acute feelings of alienation experienced by a large section of society. The banlieues have been a breeding ground for deep frustration, maintaining a distinctly poor and marginalized status for decades. Unemployment is common and 36% of the banlieu residents are estimated to live below the poverty line—three times the national average.

In a different context, yet similar in spirit, the Arab Spring was triggered by an overwhelming lack of dignity, due to a combination of poor domestic governance and external geopolitical manipulations by external powers.

These two examples share an important lesson about **the crucial importance of human dignity**. Although often invoked by scholars, theorists, and leaders, dignity and its critical role in good governance remain insufficiently understood or appreciated. More than the need for freedom, democracy and free elections, dignity is fundamental to human existence. It cuts across North/South (hemispheric), social, ethnical or political divides. Guaranteeing dignity *for all, at all times and under all circumstances*, is inclusive of all democratic principles in the first place, while simultaneously addressing inequality, something most liberal democracies tackle insufficiently.

Dignity is also more meaningful and encompassing than the notions of liberty and democracy. If we take dignity as a standard for good governance, it exposes the numerous inadvertencies in liberal democracies. I would like to briefly mention here the example of Singapore. While the previous two examples have highlighted political failures, Singapore’s case highlights exactly the opposite. Singapore does not have many of the conventional criteria of good government under the rubric provided by Western-style liberal democracies. However, its form of governance has clearly provided a quality of life surpassing that of many liberal

democracies and an environment where **citizens enjoy conditions for a dignified life**. Certainly, there are discrepancies if we look at its institutions. Graham Allison suggests we look at the idea of liberty **in terms of “liberty to”** and “liberty from.” Here, the metrics reveal surprising findings. In terms of “liberty to,” Singapore does not enjoy extensive freedom of expression, political pluralism or freedom of the media. However, **the “liberty from” metrics** reveal a different picture: Singapore has a high life expectancy and low infant mortality. The chance of violent death in the United States is twelve times higher than in Singapore. Singapore scores very high in terms of economic freedom and very low on indexes of perceptions of corruption. A Gallup poll in 2014 also showed that the majority of the population was “thriving in financial well-being.” Singapore has created a system that has managed to minimize exclusions and marginalization in society, ensuring that opportunities and good public services will be available to all.

This does not mean that the Singaporean system is necessarily better than Western-type liberal democracies, but it does suggest that **there are other factors that are important for sustainable governance and prosperity than mere political freedom**.

What are the substrates of dignity-based governance?

While philosophy has been preoccupied with the meaning of human dignity for decades, its specific role in good governance has received less attention. My aim is to bring dignity into focus, and to do so with insights from neuroscience. The neurochemical underpinnings of human nature provide invaluable understandings about the importance of dignity to humans, proving its critical role in governance.

My theory of *emotional amoral egoism* explains human nature with a heightened focus on morality and its interplay with practical policymaking. With insights from neuroscience, this theory argues that human nature is characterized by emotionality, amorality, and egoism, and that working for social cohesion and sustainable history requires careful consideration of the dignity needs of human beings.

It is important to note that what I mean by dignity is much more than just the opposite of humiliation. It is a holistic governance-based framework. In order to quantify this accurately, I previously identified, in my Sustainable History theory, nine primordial governance-based dignity needs, including: *reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation, and inclusiveness*. Each one of these is conditioned or motivated by aspects of our nature (emotionality, amorality, egoism), and must be upheld at all times. My central task is to describe the features of our nature, and to resolve these with those respective dignity needs that require attainment in order to ensure a more sustainable domestic and global order.

Emotional, Amoral Egoism: understanding what propels good governance

Emotionality

Since the publication of my account of human nature, researchers have continued to aggregate results demonstrating the powerful role the emotions play in the cognitive

process. Although for a long time emotions were thought to be non-cognitive, more recently it has been shown that we make emotional inferences with great frequency. Moreover, emotional response will often precede our rational thinking. Neuroscientific research has revealed that it is common for human beings to rationally “decide” something only after emotions have caused a person to make a certain decision.

Such findings show that our emotions are deeply involved in our decision-making and demonstrate our vulnerability to manipulation by those who appeal to our emotions with the intent to pursue their own agendas. This also explains why, for instance, in a climate of hopelessness, recruitment initiatives by terrorist organizations meet with considerable success.

The capacity to discern clearly between our moral and immoral actions should not be taken for granted, especially when confronted with fear, deprivation, humiliation, or insecurity. These conditions can shift our moral compasses and should be kept in mind when designing policy.

Amorality and Egoism

As I have argued at length, and as a great deal of contemporary research and typical experience has confirmed, the archaic notion of an inborn morality is false. Human beings are amoral at best and are susceptible to the conditions of the environments in which they find themselves. As a consequence, their capacity for moral feeling as well as their willingness to be socially cooperative is significantly determined by their environment. From this underlying principle, it becomes clear that untutored human nature is amoral and subject to whatever influences individuals may encounter. Again, good governance plays a fundamental function in enabling or obstructing the propensity for moral acts. It is unlikely that humans, most of the time, will be moral within the context of oppression and injustice. Conversely, the likelihood of brutishly immoral human behaviour in inclusive, accountable, transparent, and just regimes is significantly reduced.

Although we lack innate morality, human nature does come with a minimal predisposition geared toward survival. I have previously described this aspect of our human nature as apredisposed tabula rasa, indicating that we are born with a basic suite of survival instincts that will always guide us towards those actions that ensure or maximize our chances of survival. Besides these instincts, humans are otherwise “blank slates” that receive the bulk of their character from experience. It is in this sense that human nature is fundamentally egoistic: at our most foundational level, we are only geared towards survival, and the rest of our moral compass is developed throughout the course of existence.

How and Why Human Dignity Needs Matter

This neuro-philosophical understanding of human nature presents a number of challenges that can only be addressed through appropriate forms of governance. Of the nine dignity substrates I previously identified, three in particular correlate to human *emotionality*: reason, security and human rights. Public institutions must be accountable in order to limit the power concentrated by single individuals or a group. History has shown repeatedly that

regimes that aim to indoctrinate and hold absolute monopolies on truth are unsustainable will lose legitimacy, and ultimately, their grip on power.

For example, the story of the demise of the Soviet bloc captures the contradictions of a strong state apparatus. It possessed impressive military, scientific and space programmes yet also profound internal weaknesses that eventually contributed to its downfall. The Communist Parties gradually eroded not only people's liberties, but also their own sense of worth and dignity. The sense of disempowerment and alienation became unbearable. In Communist Ukraine, for instance, the assault on human dignity was systematic and had multiple sources. The public sector was in crisis, inflation skyrocketed, and housing conditions became deplorable. Freedom of religion and worship was severely repressed, often to the extent where priests would be represented as mentally unstable. These abuses of power did not go without consequences.

The assurance of security is another requirement for stable social relations, as human dignity is closely linked to conditions of security. This does not apply exclusively to armed violence, but can also describe a more pervasive and constant state of psychological anxiety, which in turn creates the environment for pre-emptive violence. When basic security is scarce, the likelihood of a scenario reminiscent of Hobbes' 'war of all against all' increases.

Similarly, a clearly articulated commitment to human rights is critical to dignity—and sustainable governance. China has lifted millions out of poverty, but its citizens continue to face various forms of disenfranchisement from limited freedoms to forced relocations and unfair compensations in the process of development. In the early days of the Arab Spring, many observers speculated about a Chinese Spring. This did not happen, partly because China continues to offer enough opportunities to prevent bringing its people to the point of a generalized revolution. However, China will have to give consideration to the growing discontent—expressed nowadays via social networks—as well. In 2010 alone, there were reportedly 180,000 protests in the country.

Man's *amoral* nature must be balanced with accountability, transparency and justice. A fair and well-governed judicial system incentivizes pro-social behaviour while establishing consequences to serve as deterrents for antisocial behaviour. The judicial system must be transparent, accountable, and non-discriminatory. If these values are neither present nor visible to society, the rule of law loses its legitimacy. Therefore, if governments wish to be seen as legitimate, they must have a judicial system that is both transparent and perceived as fair. Justice plays another critical role. Impartial, well-functioning and transparent judicial systems constitute the backbone of good governance.

The *egoistic* nature of human beings must be balanced by opportunity, inclusiveness and innovation. Opportunities for innovation, creativity and self-expression must be made available to all. Systems of education that foster cultural synergy and promote social cohesion will decrease the effects caused by economic disparity. Without this inclusiveness, the egoist element of human nature will find even its basic security threatened.

In order to explain the relevance of this theoretical framework, I have compiled an index that proposes quantifiable indicators for the constitutive elements of human dignity. As outlined above, dignity means much more than the mere absence of humiliation. The absence or fulfilment of dignity is defined by a more comprehensive set of nine criteria. We can never be complacent about human nature, its inherent weaknesses, or its virtuosity. Governments must craft public policies carefully so as to mediate between the emotionality, amorality and egoism of human nature and our nine dignity needs.

A close analysis of these indicators makes clear that dignity and a dignity-based model of governance do not necessarily overlap with liberal democratic values and systems of government, where exclusion and injustice can run rampant. A dignity-centered governance model would improve current forms of Western-type liberal democracies yet still be applicable across various political systems and cultural frameworks.

Explaining the scale

In terms of quantifying human dignity, I have studied several existing surveys that measure indicators such as human rights, accountability, and justice. In this regard, I have found that the Fragile State Index (FSI), for example, published by the Fund for Peace, is particularly helpful when measuring distinct indicators of human development. The FSI measures 12 indicators, many of which can be applied to my human dignity framework. I have formulated my own ranking for human dignity and its components based on a score from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning the indicator is completely absent and 5 meaning that the particular indicator of human dignity has been fully integrated into society and is fully protected by the law and the state. Therefore, the higher the score, the more integrated human dignity is within that state’s governance.

Reason: The existence of reason can be argued to reflect how important dogma is to a society. I argue that a dignified society is one that is based on reason that encourages quality education for all. The political discourse in a dignified society does not favor dogmatic populism over true facts and reasoned arguments.

REASON	1. There is no political discourse due to totalitarian rule, civil war or the absence of state institutions. This may be especially visible in the absence of any educational infrastructure.
	2. One political doctrine is clearly favored by the state and is based upon populist invectives. Opponents of this state-favored dogma are harassed, arrested, tortured or killed.
	3. Different ideologies are allowed to exist, but public political discourse is based on appealing to base emotions rather than reason. High level education is only available to the wealthy and privileged.
	4. Political discourse is mixed between reasoned, neutral arguments and emotional, populist appeals. High level education is only available to the wealthy and middle classes.
	5. Political discourse based on reasoned arguments is the societal norm. Only fringe political and media actors appeal to base emotions. High-level education is available to all segments of the population.

Security: This is an essential component of human dignity, as individuals living under the constant fear of violence and death are denied their basic needs. The provision of the right to security must be conducted in an effective and accountable manner.

SECURITY	1. "Security" is maintained by fear. Use of violence and torture by security forces is widespread and goes unpunished. Dissenting voices are systematically targeted, imprisoned or executed.
	2. Security forces are under nominal governmental control with some oversight mechanisms, but abuses by security forces are endemic. Violations are underreported and their prosecution is not consistent. Violence can lead to unrest.
	3. The ability of security forces to provide equal security differs across different regions, or according to income levels or ethnic groups.
	4. Security forces are subject to civilian authority and oversight. Acts of violence by security forces can occur periodically but many cases are prosecuted. Security forces are generally effective at preventing violent crime.
	5. Security forces are under strong civilian control with established oversight mechanisms. Acts of violence by security forces are very rare, and when they do occur, they are prosecuted on a systematic basis.

Promotion and Protection of Human Rights: This includes protections against cruel and degrading treatment and discrimination of all kinds, of protected civil liberties; political freedom; and economic, social and cultural rights (education, work, health).

HUMAN RIGHTS	1. There are no protections for any human rights, which are routinely abused with impunity.
	2. Human rights have little legal or effective protections, and abuses are widespread throughout society.
	3. Human rights have some legal or constitutional recognition, but enforcement and prosecution of violations is uneven.
	4. Human rights are protected by law and are effectively enforced. Abuses can occur but victims have legal recourse.
	5. Human rights are given maximum protection by law, and abuses are very rare and always punished.

Accountability: State leaders must be accountable to the individuals they serve, as the lack of representation and ensuing feeling of disenfranchisement are indicators of inequality.

ACCOUNTABILITY	1. Leaders are not at all accountable to the people and maintain power through fear and repression. No system of checks and balances exists to prevent abuses. Any elections are rigged.
	2. Unequal political representation for some groups exists, political rights are not distributed evenly among the population.
	3. The state holds elections and employs a system of checks and balances, but nepotism and patronage networks weaken state accountability and popular trust.
	4. A system of checks and balances is institutionalized and allows for democratic transfers of power. Elections are usually free and fair, and corrupt officials can be prosecuted.
	5. Leaders are considered to be reflective of the will of the people. There are strong government oversight mechanisms, and checks and balances are constitutionally protected and enforced.

Transparency: A lack of transparency also reflects endemic inequality and disenfranchisement vis-à-vis the state.

TRANSPARENCY	1. Corruption permeates all aspects of society and stymies any economic development. Leaders are immune from prosecution.
	2. Anti-corruption agencies are weak and ineffective, and can be threatened by individual leaders.
	3. The state is able to prosecute some instances of corruption, but lack of adequate resources prevents its effectiveness.
	4. Acts of corruption may occur but are effectively discouraged thanks to effective enforcement.
	5. Acts of corruption, if they occur, are rare and are severely prosecuted. Leaders lose their offices if found guilty.

Justice: Individuals need to benefit from the due process of law and are entitled to an independent judicial system which protects their dignity and full judicial rights.

JUSTICE	1. The judicial system, if it exists at all, is completely controlled by the party in power and does not enforce the rule of law.
	2. Laws are arbitrarily enforced, and agents of the judicial system are often corrupted or entirely controlled by the government.
	3. The judicial system may lack effective mechanisms guaranteeing its independence, but individual judicial rights are usually protected. Officials are less susceptible to corruption.
	4. The judicial system has well established procedures and officials are well-trained. It is relatively free from outside influence.
	5. The judicial system is fully independent from the executive, and individual judicial rights are consistently upheld.

Opportunity: This can be defined as the ability of a state to provide economic opportunities for its citizens, which can be measured with economic factors.

OPPORTUNITY	1. Economic opportunity is virtually non-existent, unemployment is rampant, and individual incomes are at or below the poverty-line.
	2. Opportunities are reserved for a select portion of the population, while the majority is unemployed and lives in poor conditions.
	3. The economy is weak but the state is able to attract some investment. Unemployment remains elevated as does the number of people living in poverty.
	4. The state is able to attract investment and create jobs. The proportion of people living at the poverty-line is relatively low.
	5. The economy is very strong and is creating numerous economic opportunities for individuals. Unemployment is chronically low, as is the number of people living below the poverty line.

Innovation: The ability of a state to encourage professional, scientific and intellectual growth. State funding for research and development (R&D) is a good indicator of innovation and can remedy to some extent the issues surrounding economic opportunity.

INNOVATION	1. There is no investment in any form of R&D, and subsistence and survival activities consume all available resources.
	2. The state does not have any specifically assigned resources for innovation research; any R&D is small in scope and done on an ad-hoc basis and mostly favors military and security-related policies.
	3. The state nominally assigns some bureaucratic and financial resources to R&D activities, but lack of resources proscribes the scope of research, and may encourage its students to study abroad.
	4. The state is able to support some research institutions, but may have trouble remaining competitive in terms of attracting talent on the global market.
	5. The state has dedicated and well-funded research departments and facilities dedicated to developing innovative ideas, which are world-renown.

Inclusiveness: The presence of a significant economic gap between rich and poor not only prevents economic development, but may fuel the rise of deep-seated resentment, anger, and even violence.

INCLUSIVENESS	1. Opportunities almost uniquely benefit one particular group at the detriment of others. This inequality is directly responsible for violent unrest.
	2. Opportunities favour the privileged minority. This inequality leads to a widening economic gap in the country. Anger and resentment are often shown through acts of violence.
	3. Economic opportunity is uneven but some measures have been taken to address inequality. While there can be strong feelings of resentment, acts of violence are low.
	4. Lack of opportunities does not specifically disadvantage any particular minority group. Social resentment may be present but is expressed through non-violent means.
	5. Opportunities are fairly and evenly distributed among the population, and the income gap between rich and poor is negligible. Levels of resentment are low.

Below, we have applied the framework of human dignity through nine substrates in an evaluation of fifteen countries. The results paint a slightly different picture than the more traditional conclusions about international standards of responsible governance.

		The Americas		Europe				Asia				Africa		Middle East		
		United States of America	Brazil	United Kingdom	France	Poland	Sweden	Russia	China	Japan	India	South Africa	Egypt	Israel	Iran	Turkey
Emotionality	Reason	5	4	5	5	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	3	3	3	3
	Security	4	3	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	3	3	3	1	2	3
	Human Rights	4	3	4	4	4	5	2	2	4	3	3	2	1	2	3
Amorality	Accountability	5	4	5	4	4	5	3	2	5	3	3	2	4	3	4
	Transparency	4	3	4	4	4	5	3	3	4	3	3	2	4	2	3
	Justice	4	3	4	4	4	5	2	2	4	3	3	2	1	2	3
Egoisms	Opportunity	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	3	3	3	2	3	3
	Innovation	5	4	5	5	4	4	4	5	5	4	4	2	5	3	4
	Inclusiveness	3	1	4	3	4	5	2	2	4	3	2	3	1	2	3
Total		38	29	39	36	35	42	27	27	39	29	28	22	22	22	29
Place out of 15		3	6	2	4	5	1	8	8	2	6	7	9	9	9	6

The case studies analyzed represent just a small selection of countries. The same methodology can, of course, be further applied to virtually all countries. For each of the nine dignity needs I have used pertinent data compiled and measured in other relevant reports or studies.

Quantifying dignity is a difficult task and we cannot expect to lay out definite or indisputable scores. However, while approximate, the values assigned for the case countries are based on a careful and thorough examination of the relevant indicators in each country. It is hoped that with this proposed dignity scale, it will become clear how the overall situation of dignity presents itself across countries and which indicators need to be improved.

The final conceptual **conclusion** from this exercise is that **dignity is not only essential to human beings**—and that governance based on the fulfilment of dignity is most likely to remain sustainable in the long run—but also that dignity -based governance **is not intrinsically present only in liberal democracies**. Rather, dignity-based governance is complementary to liberal democracies. Numerous forms of marginalization or exclusion can

exist in liberal democracies as well, and **the mere existence of political rights does not guarantee a dignified life**. While Western-type liberal democracies remain one of the most effective and tested forms of government in history, what is needed, globally, is not necessarily a transition to liberal democracy but rather **a more careful consideration of the fundamental human quest for dignity**, which often bears interpretations that are ‘endogenous’ and adapted to various socio-cultural settings. It is therefore critical for leaders and governments everywhere to give due attention to dignity as a central focus in policy-making. Failure to do so is bound to accelerate social unrest and destabilize domestic social and political order, and ultimately global order.

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