

Navigating the Politics of Disruption: Institutional Lag, Leadership Failure, and Sustainable Governance in a Fragmented World

Author

Palaniappan Ramanathan Chettiar (commonly known as Palan)

The author's research spans education, social work, psychology, and management, with a focus on institutional lag and the human–institutional interface in contexts of political disruption across ASEAN and South Asia.

ORCID

0000-0002-1682-232X

Credentials

Ph.D. (Federation University, Australia)
Alumnus, Harvard Business School (USA)

Multidisciplinary Specialisation

Education; Social Work; Psychology; Management

Institutional Affiliations

Pro-Chancellor, University of Cyberjaya (Malaysia)
Professor, Centre for Research & Postgraduate Studies, University of Cyberjaya (Malaysia)
Visiting Professor, Madras School of Social Work (India)
Visiting Professor, Federation University (Australia)

Funding Statement

This research received no external funding.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no competing interests.

Keywords

Political disruption; Institutional lag; Institutional adaptation; Institutional renewal; Political participation; Governance and leadership; Disruptive innovation; Velocity gap; Precarity; Sustainable governance; ASEAN

Abstract (≈165 words)

Political disruption has become a persistent feature of contemporary governance across political systems and regions. This article examines the structural and leadership conditions under which disruption emerges and the pathways through which it shapes governance outcomes. Rather than treating disruption as democratic failure or episodic instability, the study conceptualises it as a diagnostic signal of institutional lag.

Using a conceptual, theory-integrative qualitative approach, the article synthesises Samuel P. Huntington's theory of political order with Clayton Christensen's theory of disruptive innovation. Huntington explains instability arising from the imbalance between political participation and institutionalisation, while Christensen illuminates how disruption originates from neglected constituencies overlooked by incumbent systems. This synthesis is extended through the concept of a velocity gap, capturing the growing mismatch between the accelerating pace of societal change and the slower speed of institutional adaptation.

The analysis further shows how the expansion of a precarity class and the amplification effects of digital disinformation intensify mobilisation. Leadership is identified as the key mediating factor determining whether disruption leads to institutional decay or institutional renewal. The article concludes that sustainable governance depends on institutional adaptation guided by capable, ethical, and contextually grounded leadership.

Empathetic leadership from the margins is the differentiator.

1. Introduction

Political disruption has become a defining feature of governance in the twenty-first century, evident in electoral volatility, declining institutional trust, and the rise of non-traditional political actors across diverse political systems (Fukuyama, 2014). From advanced democracies to emerging economies, political systems are experiencing heightened contestation and weakening legitimacy. Conventional explanations frequently attribute this turbulence to populism, social media manipulation, or ideological polarisation. While such factors are relevant, they remain insufficient to explain why disruption has become persistent rather than episodic.

This article advances a different argument: political disruption should be understood as a diagnostic signal of institutional lag rather than as democratic failure (Mounk, 2018). As societies become more educated, digitally connected, and economically aspirational, political participation and expectations rise rapidly. When political and economic institutions fail to adapt at a comparable pace, disruption emerges as feedback rather than pathology.

Integrating Samuel P. Huntington's theory of political order (Huntington, 1968) with Clayton Christensen's theory of disruptive innovation (Christensen, 1997), the article explains both why instability arises and where disruption originates. Huntington highlights the imbalance between participation and institutionalisation, while Christensen explains how incumbent systems overlook emerging needs at the margins. Building on this synthesis, the article introduces the concept of a velocity gap to capture the temporal mismatch between accelerating societal change and slower institutional adaptation.

The article further situates disruption within a multidisciplinary framework encompassing psychology, management, education, and social work, emphasising leadership as the critical mediator between disruption and governance outcomes. Particular attention is given to ASEAN and other rapidly transforming regions where legitimacy is performance-based, relational, and contextually grounded.

2. Methodology: Conceptual and Qualitative Approach

This study adopts a conceptual, theory-integrative qualitative approach to examine the politics of disruption in contemporary governance systems. Rather than relying on primary empirical data, the paper develops its arguments through systematic engagement with established theories, secondary scholarly literature, and illustrative comparative cases. This approach is appropriate given the paper's objective of explaining structural patterns across diverse political and economic contexts.

Conceptual research is well suited to analysing phenomena that are cross-contextual and theoretically under-specified. Political disruption transcends individual events and national boundaries, indicating the need for theoretical integration rather than isolated empirical measurement. The study draws on foundational texts in political science, innovation theory, governance, and development.

The methodology incorporates illustrative comparative cases used analytically rather than empirically. These cases serve to clarify how the conceptual framework manifests in real political settings, without claiming causal inference or generalisability.

An integrative multidisciplinary perspective informs the analysis. Psychology contributes insight into mobilisation, legitimacy, and behavioural responses to disruption; management informs institutional capacity, adaptation, and incumbent inertia; education provides a lens on institutional learning and leadership development; and social work foregrounds marginality, relational trust, and contextual sensitivity. Together, these perspectives enable a holistic analysis of political disruption as a behavioural, institutional, and governance phenomenon.

3. Research Design

The research design is structured around theory integration and qualitative analytical sequencing. Rather than testing hypotheses, the design constructs an explanatory framework capable of accounting for persistent disruption across political systems.

The first stage engages Huntington's theory of political order to explain instability arising when participation expands faster than institutional capacity. The second stage draws on Christensen's theory of disruptive innovation to explain how disruption originates from neglected constituencies overlooked by incumbent systems (Christensen, 1997; Christensen et al., 2015). These theories are integrated relationally rather than additively. The third stage incorporates illustrative comparative cases from ASEAN, South Asia, and the United States to contextualise the framework.

Leadership is introduced as a mediating variable through the triadic framework of capability, character, and contextual sensitivity. The design explicitly acknowledges its conceptual scope and limitations.

4. Results: Analytical Findings

The analytical findings demonstrate that political disruption follows a patterned logic shaped by institutional lag, neglected constituencies, and leadership response. Institutional lag constitutes the structural precondition for disruption. As participation and societal expectations expand faster than institutional capacity, legitimacy gaps emerge (Mazzucato, 2018).

Beyond relative levels of participation and capacity, the analysis identifies a velocity gap as a critical driver of disruption. While institutions adapt incrementally, mobilisation accelerates rapidly through digital connectivity and narrative dynamics. This temporal mismatch intensifies instability.

Disruption also originates from neglected margins rather than the centre of political systems. Incumbent institutions overserve established constituencies while underserving emerging groups, enabling alternative narratives and sources of legitimacy to gain traction.

Leadership mediates whether disruption leads to institutional decay or renewal. Leaders who combine capability, character, and contextual awareness are better positioned to translate mobilisation into institutional adaptation and long-term renewal.

The expansion of a precarity class further intensifies disruption by increasing participation while eroding trust in institutional competence. Disruption thus reflects accumulated insecurity seeking recognition and relief rather than ideological extremism.

The analysis demonstrates that political disruption becomes constructive not through speed, grievance, or anti-institutional sentiment alone, but through empathetic leadership emerging from the margins of institutional neglect. Disruption gains durable legitimacy when leaders are perceived not merely as challengers of elites, but as authentic interpreters of lived experience, social aspiration, insecurity, and dignity. Empathy, in this context, functions as a form of relational authority grounded in proximity, recognition, and moral credibility rather than positional power. When combined with sufficient responsiveness and governance capability, empathetic leadership enables disruption to be translated into institutional adaptation rather than dissipating into fragmentation or cynicism. Where empathy is absent, speed intensifies polarisation; where empathy exists without institutionalisation, disruption remains symbolic. Empathetic leadership from the margins thus constitutes the critical mechanism through which disruption is converted into legitimacy and renewal.

This pattern is evident across diverse contexts. Barack Obama mobilised disruption through a narrative of hope and inclusion, grounded in an empathetic understanding of minority experience and generational aspiration. His leadership combined narrative speed with relational empathy, enabling mobilisation to be translated—at least initially—into institutional adaptation and renewal.

Joko Widodo emerged from outside Indonesia's political elite, drawing legitimacy from proximity, humility, and attentiveness to everyday concerns. His empathetic style narrowed the

distance between citizens and institutions, allowing disruption to stabilise rather than fragment governance.

In South Asia, Vijay represents a culturally embedded form of disruption in which empathy is expressed through symbolic identification with youth, marginalised groups, and narratives of dignity. His appeal illustrates how disruption gains momentum when leaders articulate emotional truths that institutional language has failed to recognise. Whether such mobilisation results in institutional renewal depends on the subsequent translation of empathy into governance capability. Good governance is defined by its capability to enhance human freedom (Sen, 1999).

Across these cases, empathy functions as the critical connective tissue between disruption and legitimacy. Speed without empathy produces polarisation; empathy without institutionalisation risks remaining performative. Durable disruption requires both.

These cases can be interpreted through a speed–empathy lens. Speed reflects a leader’s capacity to respond rapidly to shifting narratives and mobilisation, while empathy reflects relational legitimacy grounded in lived experience and moral credibility. Leaders who combine high speed with high empathy are better positioned to channel disruption into institutional adaptation and eventual renewal. Where speed outpaces empathy, disruption becomes divisive; where empathy exists without speed or capability, disruption risks symbolic resonance without governance impact.

5. Discussion

In ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) contexts, where legitimacy is performance-based and relational, disruption mediated by empathetic leadership—rather than procedural authority alone—has proven more capable of narrowing institutional gaps and restoring trust.

The findings reframe political disruption as a structural response to institutional lag rather than democratic decay. Expanding participation without institutional adaptation produces instability, particularly in digitally accelerated environments.

Disruption emerges from margins neglected by incumbent systems, reinforcing the importance of inclusive institutional design. Leadership determines whether disruption is institutionalised or prolonged.

Digital disinformation amplifies disruption (Castells, 2012). by exploiting precarity, distrust (Diamond, 2019), and leadership vacuums, but does not generate disruption independently. Its effects are contingent on institutional and leadership capacity.

These insights have significant implications for sustainable development, which depends on institutional continuity, trust, and policy coherence. In plural regions such as ASEAN, legitimacy is relational and performance-based, making leadership sensitivity to context essential.

Leadership responses can be interpreted through a speed–empathy lens. Leaders who combine responsiveness with relational legitimacy are more likely to channel disruption into institutional renewal. The relationship between speed and empathy is central to understanding

why some forms of political disruption lead to institutional adaptation while others result in fragmentation. Speed explains mobilisation: it reflects a leader's capacity to respond rapidly to shifting narratives, grievances, and moments of collective attention in digitally accelerated environments. However, speed alone does not generate legitimacy. Empathy explains legitimacy by establishing relational authority grounded in lived experience, recognition, and moral credibility. It enables citizens—particularly those at the margins—to see their aspirations and insecurities reflected in leadership. Legitimacy, in turn, is the precondition for institutional adaptation. Without legitimacy, rapid mobilisation dissipates into polarisation or fatigue; with legitimacy, mobilisation can be translated into trust, compliance, and institutional learning. In this sense, empathy is analytically prior to sustainable governance outcomes. Speed may ignite disruption, but empathy determines whether disruption stabilises into institutional renewal or escalates into persistent instability.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that political disruption should be understood as a diagnostic signal of institutional lag rather than democratic failure. By integrating Samuel P. Huntington's theory of political order with Clayton Christensen's theory of disruptive innovation, the study explains both the structural conditions under which disruption emerges and the mechanisms through which it gains traction.

The analysis demonstrates that leadership is the decisive variable shaping whether political disruption results in institutional decay or renewal. However, leadership effectiveness in disruptive contexts cannot be understood in generic terms of authority, competence, or responsiveness alone. Empathetic, margin-rooted leadership emerges as the critical differentiator. Leaders who arise from, or remain meaningfully connected to, the lived experiences of marginalised and underserved groups are better positioned to convert disruption into legitimacy. Empathy, understood as relational authority grounded in recognition, proximity, and moral credibility, enables mobilisation to be institutionalised rather than dissipated. When combined with governance capability and contextual sensitivity, empathetic leadership allows institutions to adapt without eroding trust (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Where empathy is absent, speed intensifies polarisation; where empathy is present but institutionalisation fails, disruption remains symbolic.

Disruption is therefore predictable when participation and societal expectations expand faster than institutional capacity. Leadership mediates whether such disruption culminates in decay or renewal (Nye, 2008). Sustainable governance depends on institutional adaptation guided by capable, ethical, and contextually grounded leadership.

As a conceptual study, this paper does not claim empirical generalisability. Future research may extend the framework through comparative empirical analysis across political systems and regions. Disruption, when interpreted intelligently and responded to empathetically, can serve not as a threat to governance, but as a catalyst for long-term institutional resilience.

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