

Legitimacy Without Agency

Why Institutions Are Losing Trust in Plain Sight

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About the Author:



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As President and CEO of PersuMedia, he led initiatives combining open-source analytics and behavioral insights to map discourse dynamics and public perception. He is also the Founder and Executive Director of Iran 1400 Inc., a nonprofit examining how historical understanding and civic dialogue inform institutional renewal and civic agency in transitional societies. Vafa previously served as Senior Anchor and Managing Editor at the Voice of America Persian Service.

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Legitimacy Without Agency: Why Institutions Are Losing Trust in Plain Sight

Across many governments, policy institutions, and the industries that support them, a dangerous assumption persists: that continuity equals legitimacy. Procedures function, authority remains intact, outputs are produced, and compliance appears stable. From the outside, systems look resilient. They are not.

As argued in *Navigating Uncertainty*, volatility is no longer episodic; it is structural. Institutions that treat disruption as an anomaly rather than a permanent condition misread their operating environment and overestimate their durability. In *Beyond the Spy Game*, this argument extended further: trust, morale, and narrative coherence are not “soft” variables but measurable indicators of strategic resilience.

What remains insufficiently acknowledged is the missing link between these dynamics: citizen agency.

Institutions are not losing legitimacy because they lack authority or technical competence. They are losing legitimacy because they no longer integrate citizen agency into decision-making, narrative formation, or strategic adaptation. This failure does not announce itself through open rebellion. It manifests quietly, through withdrawal, self-censorship, performative participation, and hollow allegiance. The most dangerous institutional failures do not look like collapse. They look like stability.

From Trust Erosion to Agency Loss

The erosion of institutional trust is not emotional or impulsive. It reflects a largely rational response to accumulated integrity failures, persistent gridlock, unfulfilled promises, and decades of participation mechanisms that offered voice without influence. Representative institutions, in particular, have borne the brunt of this disillusionment, even as other forms of authority remain comparatively stable. A fragmented information environment has amplified polarization and accelerated disengagement, but it did not create these conditions.

Yet even this diagnosis is incomplete. These factors explain why trust eroded, not why legitimacy has failed to recover. The deeper failure is the erosion of *felt agency*: the belief that participation meaningfully shapes outcomes.

Agency, in this context, is not activism. It is the internalized conviction that engagement matters, that feedback loops exist, and that institutions are permeable rather than closed systems. Where this belief collapses, trust follows. Not loudly, but irreversibly.

Institutions increasingly mistake trust loss for a communication problem when in fact, it is an agency collapse.

Participation as Performance

Modern institutions are rich in participatory mechanisms and poor in participatory influence.

Consultations are convened. Surveys are administered. Committees are formed. Stakeholders are “engaged.” Yet outcomes often remain unchanged, feedback loops opaque, and decision rationales insulated from public input. The result is participation without influence. This is not inclusion; it is ritual.

As explored in *Beyond the Spy Game*, apparent cohesion can mask deep fragility. Manufactured consensus, procedural compliance, and message discipline may produce surface-level order while concealing declining morale and legitimacy beneath the surface.

When participation becomes performative, individuals do not rebel. They disengage. They comply outwardly while withdrawing inwardly. Institutions continue to function, but they cease to be experienced as meaningful. This is how legitimacy erodes without resistance.

The Strategic Blind Spot: Citizens as Audiences, Not Agents

A persistent institutional error is treating citizens as a communications challenge rather than as actors within the operating environment.

In this model:

- Messaging substitutes for responsiveness
- Narrative management replaces narrative participation
- Compliance is confused with legitimacy

This logic may sustain order in the short term, but it degrades strategic performance over time.

Citizens today are not passive recipients of institutional outputs. They are narrative producers, networked actors, and informal validators of legitimacy. They shape resilience or fragility through discourse, behavior, and moral alignment, often outside formal structures.

Institutions that fail to recognize this are not simply disconnected from the public. They are strategically blind.

Why Strategy Fails When Agency Is Ignored

Policy failures are increasingly not failures of design, but failures of implementation and internalization. Strategies falter not because objectives are unclear, but because the public no longer experience institutional intent as their own.

When agency is excluded:

- Compliance becomes brittle
- Adaptation slows
- Early-warning indicators are missed
- Trust metrics lag behind lived reality

Institutions optimize for control in an environment that rewards legitimacy. They prioritize order while neglecting ownership. The result is systems that persist procedurally while losing their capacity to mobilize, adapt, and endure stress. This is not a moral critique. It is a strategic one.

Civic Agency as Strategic Infrastructure

The central error of modern institutional strategy is treating civic agency as optional, an accessory to governance rather than its foundation. Agency is not disorder. It is not dissent. It is not inefficiency. It is strategic infrastructure.

Institutions that integrate agency adapt faster, detect instability earlier, retain moral credibility under stress, and sustain resilience beyond compliance. Those that suppress, manage, or ignore agency may appear stable, but they become increasingly fragile.

As previously argued, intelligence, policy, and strategy must shift from leader-centric and output-centric models toward ecosystem awareness. Civic sentiment, narrative coherence, and participatory legitimacy are not peripheral, they are decisive.

The Cost of Over-Control

In an era defined by uncertainty, institutions increasingly default to caution, risk aversion, and message discipline. What once preserved order now constrains relevance.

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Over-control produces intellectual stagnation, cultural disengagement, loss of innovation, and moral distance between the institution and the public. Unity enforced through silence is not unity. It is deferred fragmentation.

The greatest threat institutions face today is not criticism, but irrelevance to the moral energy of the societies they govern.

A Strategic Wake-Up Call

Institutions will not disappear. Authority will persist. Procedures will continue. But legitimacy is no longer guaranteed by continuity alone.

The pace and visibility of legitimacy erosion vary across regime types, sectors, and cultural contexts, but the underlying dynamic remains consistent.

Institutions that fail to integrate citizen agency will not collapse. They will govern systems that no longer believe in them.

The strategic challenge of our time is not restoring order. It is rebuilding legitimacy through participation that influences outcomes, narratives that are co-created, and authority that listens as well as guides.

This is not a call for reform rhetoric. It is a warning grounded in strategic reality: **institutions that cannot be felt will eventually no longer be followed.**

Author's Note

This analysis builds on PersuMedia's ongoing work in strategic communications and open-source intelligence (OSINT), including *Beyond the Spy Game: Why Trust Is the Next Strategic Capability* (with John D. Sotos) and *Navigating Uncertainty: Proactive Adaptation, Trust, and Strategic Resilience*. It also reflects longitudinal civic observation conducted through the Iran 1400 Project, which examines how participatory legitimacy, narrative formation, and citizen agency evolve within society over time.