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### America's Familial Tribalism: Will it Impact Education Internationally?

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# America's Familial Tribalism:

## Will it Impact Education Internationally?

## INTRODUCTION

With President Trump in power, the United States may have entered a new era of *familial tribalism*, a style of governing that could best be depicted as a sudden disruption to the traditional democratic governance and merited mobility the United States has historically promoted both at home and abroad. With this form of *familial tribalism*, a new level of power has been given to the members of the First Family, resulting in the United States increasingly mirroring the *modus operandi* of many developing countries that it had formerly criticized for their own lack of ethics, transparency, and competence amongst the governing elites. Ironically, the U.S. can now learn about the impact of *familial tribalism* on society and particularly on higher education from those very countries it has tried to reform in the past.

Bosnia is one of those countries, where familial and social relations matter and where people are known to seek connections even to secure a spot in a graveyard. Bosnia's widespread corruption amongst the elites in government stalled its post-war recovery in the late 1990s, eventually seeping into the country's higher education system.<sup>1</sup> When elites signal that they value belonging and loyalty to their own group *over* competence and skill, the consequences, as Bosnia shows, are profound. Today, Bosnia is a country marked by the [world's highest youth unemployment rate of 67.6%](#) and a [continuous brain drain](#), where the most educated citizens leave for more attractive opportunities abroad. Examining the effects of *familial tribalism* on Bosnia, particularly in higher education, provides a warning for those worried about the imprint that a developing *familial tribalism* in the United States will make on the U.S. itself and the rest of the world.

## FAVOR RECIPROCATATION IN BOSNIA

Once familial and social relations become predictors of upward mobility in society, corruption often emerges and over time becomes an operating standard in that society. The kind of corruption we refer to here does not fit a simple pecuniary model of corruption where, in education for instance, the passing grades are exchanged for pay. Instead, we refer to the kind of corruption that profoundly redefines societies: a complex system of favor reciprocations studied in prior research.<sup>2</sup> These favor reciprocations typically occur through the *unofficial* interactions between the elite members who leverage their *official* positions of power. For instance, a professor may be tenured in exchange for passing a Minister of Education's son on an exam.

The elites' favor reciprocations within their own socioeconomic, ethnic, religious, or racial groups maintain the elites' power while curtailing the social and economic rise of other non-elite groups. The governing elites comprise a tribe of their own that sees other groups as a threat to their firm grip on power. The central focus of the governing tribe is therefore its own self-preservation rather than the inclusion, cohesion, and well-being of society as a whole.

## HIGHER EDUCATION AS A GATEKEEPER

Higher education plays an important role in this type of societal dynamic. It becomes a key gatekeeping tool for the elites. It gives the elites a way to legitimize their power in the eyes of the broader audience. Through their control of higher education, the elites ensure that their current and future members are favored in that environment. They create a cycle that keeps them in power by handing to students from families like theirs a diploma and countless opportunities beyond higher education. In Bosnia, favor reciprocations are more valuable than bribes and are only available to the elites who have these connections. From the admissions process, to grades, to diplomas, to opportunities beyond university, students from non-elite families are being set up to fail, due to the terms that are

fixed behind the scenes. Despite a student's work ethic or successes, the favor reciprocation system bases his or her potential on his or her membership in the elites.<sup>3</sup>

The rising elites, who are carefully selected and sponsored by the existing elites, are credentialed with ease and often without merit. With the option to use favors, elites usually opt for the shortcuts their status can provide. Consequently, it is not unusual in Bosnia to be treated by a doctor who may have skipped some if not most exams in his medical school nor is it rare to have a powerful individual in government obtain his PhD in an excessively short period of time without ever gaining the appropriate expertise. For this reason, Bosnia's youth ranks favor reciprocations between the academic, political, and economic elites as the most frequently occurring form of corruption they observe in their higher education institutions.<sup>4</sup>

## ADAPTING TO EDUCATIONAL CORRUPTION

Favor reciprocations involving faculty and students are frequently hard to identify. With the ability to control the legal framework, the elites avoid any prosecution or inspection of their actions and can manipulate the framework for their own benefit. The cycle also clearly harms those who do not share in the familial influence. Students who do not have parents of leverage must work much harder to benefit themselves in the educational realm. Even with hard work and determination, the masses have limited opportunities. Knowing they can gain more from a student of influence, professors and those in the administration reject those who do not carry this same personal advantage.<sup>5</sup>

These social dynamics lead to profound, formative changes in a society. They signal to youths the need to adapt their behavior to the corrupt system and demonstrate loyalty to the elites if they are to progress within a corrupt higher education system. When familial and social relationships define prospects for upward mobility, research proves that youths do not protest or resist the corrupt higher education institutions, but rather accept favor reciprocations benefiting one group over others as a norm.<sup>6</sup> In the higher education system of Bosnia, this translates to the acceptance of the academic elites gifting degrees or passing grades to the elite members and their families in exchange for various types of benefits being received by the university faculty, administration, and their families.<sup>7 8</sup>

Instead of combating educational corruption, Bosnia's youths work to adapt to it. They do so because behaviors of the governing, academic, and economic elites signal that favoritism of those deeply entrenched in the system via their familial and social relations is the operating model for the country. The young therefore begin to engage in corrupt behaviors when possible because the corrupt system demonstrates the value and belief in the familial and social relationships rather than competence as a tool for upward mobility. They gradually shift away from working hard within the society's norms and guidelines and towards taking the advantage of the system.<sup>9</sup>

This distorted value system in turn undercuts the power of education as a vehicle of merit-based mobility. Higher education that is typically tasked with moving individuals up the social ladder based on their achievement rather than familial or social relationships is thwarted from functioning properly. When this occurs, the elites have succeeded in using the *familial tribalism* framework to impair a country's development and progress in the long run.

## INTERNAL VERSUS EXTERNAL IMPACT

Bosnia's corruption amongst the elites is limited in its impact to the country itself. But, if *familial tribalism* becomes an operating style of governing in the United States, the consequences of such a social transformation may be even more impactful *beyond* the confines of the United States than they are domestically. The U.S. democratic system is

robust given the country's history of democratic governance that provides multiple buffers against the potential abuse of political power. The country's deeply seeded practice of academic freedom and higher education's independence from many of the political governing structures is resilient and the system is unlikely to accept, adapt to, or normalize the *familial tribalism* that the Trump Presidency may be heading towards.

However, for youths in Bosnia and around the world who are yearning for inspiration outside of the confines of their own corrupt educational systems, they would no longer be able to see the United States' leadership and governance as a beacon of hope where competence and hard work are the primary driver of one's upward mobility and rise to power. In the eyes of Bosnian students, the sudden change in the United States under President Trump would likely be seen as the U.S.'s departure from merited mobility in favor of familial and tribal loyalties. This would exacerbate already existing problems faced by youths around the world, reaffirming a way of life already too well known to students in Bosnia and many other developing nations.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sabic-El-Rayess, A. (2014). Acting and reacting: Youth's behavior in corrupt educational settings. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 89(1), 70-85. Available at: <https://sabicelrayess.com/publications/>

<sup>2</sup> Sabic-El-Rayess, A., & Mansur, N. N. (2016). Favor reciprocation theory in education: New corruption typology. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 50, 20-32. Available at: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0738059316300566>

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 1.

<sup>8</sup> Sabic-El-Rayess, A. (2016). Merit matters: Student perceptions of faculty quality and reward. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 47, 1-19. Available at: <https://sabicelrayess.com/publications/>

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 1.

## About:

### Author

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