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## **Public trust: An asset**

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An opinion poll conducted this month by *Washington Post and ABC News* on the American President's performance reveals Obama is slipping in popularity.

Only 43 percent of the people have confidence in him as compared to 54 percent this time last year.

Slow economic recovery, unforeseen hurdles in the implementation of his Affordable Care Act and disgusting spying on citizens and world leaders are responsible for the disillusionment.

It is also revealed that Obama has a lower approval rating in his fifth year than all other recent two-term presidents, except Richard Nixon.

In 2005, former president George W. Bush had a positive rating of 47 percent, while approval ratings of other post-World War II presidents were above 50 percent in the fifth year in their second terms. The exception was Nixon. In his fifth year, Nixon faced the Watergate scandal, which brought down his approval rating to 29 percent, ultimately leading to his resignation.

Early this month, India witnessed the "semi-final of the match" between the ruling coalition and the opposition. The country's grand old party, the Congress, which is the major coalition partner, was trounced in all the four major states, where elections were held for the local legislatures. Analysts attributed the defeat of the Congress to widespread corruption and poor governance.

The blow is considered the most severe ever inflicted at one given time.

The federal parliamentary elections are scheduled in May next year.

## **Consistent decline in trust**

Waxing and waning of public confidence of a particular government or an individual leader as president is not unusual.

What is unusual is the consistent, universal decline in confidence in governance almost all over the world during the last five years. Of course, there are some exceptions.

A recent study on 34 advanced countries, which are members of the rich nations' club, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) showed that public confidence in governments declined by five percentage points in 2012 since 2007.

The study results are based on the Gallup poll results: in 2012, only 40 percent of the people expressed confidence in governments as against 45 percent in 2007.

The *Economist* of London commented thus: "Economic woes, unpopular wars and nuclear meltdowns eroded public trust in the authorities."

Only in the case of Switzerland, Sweden, France, Germany and Britain, the percentage of people expressing confidence in their governments rose during the period 2007 to 2012.

The plunge in confidence from 2007 to 2012 was the sharpest in the case of Greece, followed by Ireland, Australia and Japan.

In the case of non-OECD countries, India experienced the worst fall in public confidence. It fell from a close 80 per cent in 2007 to a close 55 per cent in 2012.

## **Trust as a precious asset**

Addressing the Global Seminar on *Restoring the Public's Trust by Delivering on Public Policy Goals*, which was held in Austria in September 2013, the OECD Secretary-General Dr. Angel Gurría told the audience:

"The majority of the population in OECD countries doesn't trust governments".

Referring to public trust as one of the most precious assets, he declared it is the cornerstone of effective governance, the main ingredient to promote economic growth and social progress.

"Like never before, our countries are running dry of this precious asset", he lamented.

Dr. Gurría referred to three pillars for restoring trust:

- Integrity : raising a high level of honesty and eradication of corruption;
- Transparency in budget spending and digestible budget data.
- Engagement for promoting inclusive and responsive policy making by putting government data on websites and giving citizens a voice in the process,

## **Costs of growing distrust**

The economic and social costs are immense.

Declining trust reduces the credibility of policy formulation of process; adversely affects faith in policies so formulated; and leads to their poor implementation as public cooperation would not be in full measure.

Distrust slows down economic recovery. It scars away investments and delays job creation.

Above all, degradation of confidence in the government as moral entity poses the most serious threat to society.

The OECD Secretary-General aptly recalled the memorable words of the American philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson:

“Our distrust is very expensive.”