

It is my intent to demonstrate how difficult is the study of corruption—a subject that is on everyone’s mind. This short piece also mirrors some of the lessons learnt, and the admonitions and prescriptions by some important writers.

Both the often used IMF elementary definition of “corruption” as using public resources for private benefit, and the annual “corruption perception index” (CPI) by Transparency International (TI) have individual pitfalls. Considering the former, Dilma Rouseff of Brazil, did not take a penny out of the exchequer; she only fudged the budget numbers, but was driven out of office for corruption. Yingluck Shinavatra of Thailand, fulfilling a campaign promise, paid subsidies to farmers. She too was driven out of office charged of corruption.

As to the latter, the metric is only of “perceptions” not “facts.” Moreover, their sample, by their own admission, is skewed in that the actual sufferers, the citizens who had to pay bribes to get services normally expected as a right, are not included.

Samuel Huntington argued that a little money offered to grease the wheels are put in motion that would not otherwise move. Files start moving with “*bakshish*”, and “speed money”.

And then there are cultural imperatives such as in the oriental context, one would not go to visit an elder with empty hands. They must carry something tangible.

Two other factors need to be considered. What actually is the unit of measurement? When we say a nation is corrupt, are we talking of all the people, leaders, or only some scoundrels? Similarly, what is the metric, or criterion, used to decide on corruption? For example, Nicolas Shaxson, using black money parked in real estate and such, UK and US stand on top as corrupt in 2010. But TI placed them at 16 and 24 respectively, among 183 countries in its CPI Index for the same year. Into US alone, \$419 Billion (2% of GDP) of illicit money was moved.

A distinction also ought to be made between corruption as “extortion” (i.e, the public servant as provider demanding from the client, and “benevolent payment”— the client offering a bribe on their own to speed up things. That raises the intriguing issue of what is the cause and what is the effect.

Also, most corruption studies concentrate on Less Developed Countries (LDCs), not the vanguard countries, certainly not the not-for-profit groups which use public funds (by way of grants etc.) providing some public functions that in the past were the domain of the public sector.

William Riordin in *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, draws a distinction between “honest” and “dishonest” graft, and insists that “There is a world of difference between the two”. The former for him refers to extortion, blackmail and such while the latter is bribe offered in good faith. He also propounds: “I seen my opportunities, and I took them”, “What is a constitution among friends?” Presidential Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton while debating her opposing Republican candidate Donald Trump pointed out that he used all sorts of tax breaks to enrich himself. Trump hit back claiming that he was only smart to use the loopholes. And he went to the White House, and turned out to be the “Thief-in-Chief”, now facing numerous criminal cases. Yet, he announced that he would run for the presidency in 2024.

All this is not an apology, or worse an advocacy, for bribes/corruption. It is but a recognition of facts, not always appreciated.

Setting aside all the nuances and niceties of debate, there are only two reasons for corruption: Need and greed. Some writers suggest that the former can be tackled by providing a sustainable pay. (That argument has its own pitfalls such as what the minimum wage should be, what is the state of the economy, how much the state can pay in comparison with the private sector, and so on.) The latter, greed, however, is more challenging to deal with. Sound laws, equally applied to all (Rule of Law), making corruption “high price, low yield” enterprise is a commonly suggested remedy.

Jeremy Pope, writing for TI, set out a six-point criteria to tackle corruption: 1. Committed political backing; 2. Adequate resources for institutions to fight corruption; 3. They be endowed with operational independence, free from political interference; 4. Adequacy of accessing documents; 5. User friendly laws; and 6. Leadership with high integrity. Perhaps, more importantly, he recognized that corruption is a societal problem. Hence the attack against it shall be all-pronged. It is not enough that the government fights corruption, but societal norms shall be developed to combat corruption.

Christine Lagarde, former Managing Director of International Monetary Fund, at the Anti-corruption Summit in London in 2016 made this profound statement laying down a litmus test. “Although active and sustained political leadership is critical to the success of any anti-corruption campaign, it is important that reforms in this area are not hijacked to implement a political agenda. One way of assessing whether anti-corruption efforts are credible is to note whether enforcement is limited to the prosecution of political rivals, or instead also extends to the government’s political support.” Most nations fail this test; more so those which are trending towards autocracy, led by self-centered leaders controlling dominant political parties treating all opposition as an evil to be vanquished, not tolerated as a legitimate institution in a working democracy worth its name.

Thus while a satisfactory definition of corruption is still illusory, at least for this researcher, methods to combat it are equally controversial. However, there are some important lessons learned over time. One, there is no silver-bullet to slay the dragon of corruption. Two, the methods to combat corruption cannot be universally applied. Three, much is conditioned culturally, and contextualized. Four, size matters. Small countries can better manage the fight against corruption. Larger countries with diverse population dispersed over a large territory would have a harder time. Five, numerous and elaborate laws by themselves do not help; they need to be implemented without fear or favor. Six, extant governmental organizations to fight corruption ought not to be burdened with all sorts of crime-fighting activities. Seven, worse, those institutions ought not to be turned into instruments to suppress political opposition and public dissent.

While the above discussion might sound very pessimistic, there is hope. In June 18, 2021 TI announced some findings as a result of a survey of 40,000 people in 27 European Union nations. Sixty-two percent thought corruption is a big problem, and 30% admitted paying a bribe, or having used personal connections to access public service. But the most important finding which is reason to be optimistic is that 64% thought people make a difference in fighting corruption. That generates optimism for a better future.

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