

Corruption, democracy and Bangladesh

CORRUPTION
Your NO counts



Bangladesh has had a troubled political history since gaining independence in 1971 and is also beleaguered by poverty and natural environmental disasters. In particular, corruption is blighting its prospects for economic growth, undermining the rule of law and damaging the legitimacy of the political process.

The term, corruption, is very familiar to us. During the last caretaker government, it got a special meaning. Of course, we still remember the notoriety we unfortunately received as the top corrupt country in the world for several years in a row. But the good news is that our country is one of those countries which have been able to radically improve their corruption situation. This year she improved her ranking to 139 out of 180 countries, which is definitely a good achievement.

Is this enough? It is sad but true that we still find corruption at every level in our national, political and private life. And the most shocking thing is that corruption is becoming an acceptable norm to most of the people. People treat corruption as a normal matter.

In broad terms, corruption is the misuse of public office for private gain. It encompasses abuses by government officials such as embezzlement and nepotism, as well as abuses linking public and private actors such as bribery, extortion, influence peddling, and fraud. Corruption arises in both political and bureaucratic offices and can be petty or big, organised or unorganised.

Recently I was talking to some of my friends, who are waiting for their upcoming interview for the 28th BCS. All of them are graduates from the Dhaka University. Surprisingly they were not

talking about the possible questions they might face in the interview board. The topic they were talking about was how they can get a link among the PSC members and how much they are willing to pay for the job. Later on, I found out that this is a very common thing here. It's shocking as these are the people who are going to run the country by becoming judges, bureaucrats, police officers, teachers etc. Is this corruption? I don't know about other countries but in Bangladesh, the people don't think so. Otherwise, they would not willingly be part of the system. It always takes 'two to make a tangle'.

Corruption has become a part of our culture and society— and not just the government. Measuring the extent to which ordinary citizens are willing to justify corrupt acts is a complementary effort to measuring perceptions about government corruption. It has been documented that corruption is negatively related to economic development and to the existence of democratic institutions. Corruption in the political arena has a very negative effect on national development.

There are significant cross-national and cross-regional variations in corruption permissiveness, and attitudes toward corruption are indeed strongly and negatively related to democratic attitudes. Corruption permissiveness is, in particular, strongly and negatively correlated with support for democracy and with interpersonal trust, both of them being important components of a democratic political culture.

Many observers regard corruption as a growing threat to our democracy, while others take a more optimistic view, seeing the increase of corruption revelations as a sign that there is a crackdown on corrupt politicians and entrepreneurs.

It is commonly observed that after adopting competitive elections and market liberalisation ("democratisation") our country has experienced a rise in corruption. Such a correlation should not be surprising.

Incomplete democratisation often creates scopes for corruption, while it does not produce the elements of democracy that may enable those harmed by corruption to fight back .

If corruption involves harms caused by exclusion, a key means for fighting corruption should involve empowering those harmed to protect themselves by democratic means — with information, arguments, organisation and votes.

However, a question might arise: what comes first — democracy or corruption? Although the definitions of democracy vary in scope they generally include three basic concepts: competition, equality and the rule of law. Corruption undermines each of these concepts. Unfair advantage through corruption undermines competition. Corruption is used to make some people more equal than others. Unchecked corruption in society undermines the rule of law.

Why don't we understand that corruption poses a serious development challenge? In the political realm, it can seriously undermine democracy and good governance. Corruption in elections and in legislative bodies undermines accountability and representation in policy-making; corruption in the judiciary makes a mockery of the rule of law; and corruption in public administration results in the unequal provision of services. More generally, corruption weakens government institutions

by disregarding official procedures, siphoning off the resources needed for development, and selecting or promoting officials without regard to performance. At the same time, corruption undermines the legitimacy of the government and such democratic values as trust and tolerance. Corruption also undermines economic development. In the private sector, corruption increases the cost of business because of bribes, the management cost of negotiating with officials, and the risk of breached agreements or detection.

Although some claim corruption reduces costs by cutting red tape, an emerging consensus holds that the availability of bribes induces officials to contrive new rules and delays. Corruption can also shield companies with connections from fair competition, thus allowing inefficient firms to survive.

Corruption also generates economic distortions in the public sector by pulling public investment away from education and into projects where bribes and kickbacks are more plentiful. Corruption also lowers compliance with construction, environmental, or other regulations; reduces the quality of government services; and increases budgetary pressures on the government.

But we, the people of Bangladesh, do not seem to be concerned with the bad effect of corruption. We are not taking any responsibility. Instead, what we are doing is accepting it and helping towards it by taking part in it. One thing we do very well is to pass the responsibility on others. It is very common to say that the system is corrupted, the government is corrupted and the officials are corrupted. But we will never agree that we are the ones who are helping this system, the government or the officials to be corrupted by accepting their wrongful acts. As long as we do not take the responsibility on us, corruption will continue in the society — in the country. And when we all will start questioning the system and stop acting according to the system, the corrupt system will break down. It is high time for us to identify the right and the wrong and say a 'BIG NO' to all sorts of corruption.

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