

How to become the world's most corrupt country

If rich countries of the world do not have any qualms about closing down loss-making companies then why do we persist in carrying on with lame duck operations?

I Hassan

The writer is a former broadcaster, commentator, foreign correspondent and a freelance columnist.

Cutting edge

I often wonder how it is that year in and year out one scam or another takes place, with billions of rupees skimmed off by one operator or another and yet the country although limping still carries on. Add to this the fact that the majority of the swindlers have declared themselves being somewhat bereft of any ostensible wealth. Add to this further that all the billions that have been stealthily taken away have not resulted in any productive activity. There are no industries or big commercial houses. The country has the distinction of being number two in the list of the most corrupt countries. (Even here it lagged behind and did not achieve the distinction of being number one!)

The country owes about 83 billion dollars and at the rate at which it is being denuded, it should not take very long to arrive at the point when no one will lend this country a penny. This is notwithstanding the great claims made by the officials that economically a great battle has been won. No doubt,

when he took over, the general proclaimed that he would uproot corruption. All that has been achieved is that there is a National Accountability Bureau that is made to work somewhat selectively but in the meanwhile the number of termites has increased.

Hundreds of members of legislatures, central and provincial, have been recruited and given billions of rupees as development funds, and they are also given plots of land in urban areas which are then sold by them at astronomical prices. Upon enquiring from an estate agent what the price of a few *marlas* of land in Islamabad was, the person laconically said, "One and a half to two and a half". Not understanding what it was, I asked, "Two and a half what?" "Crores," he replied. This shows how much money has been siphoned off and is floating around that lakhs are left far behind!

Nearly five years have passed since the General took over and promised that he would be the death of corruption. Presumably this promise will be redeemed over another timescale.

Instead of going on in general, let me cite a specific example. We have a national airline: Pakistan International Airline. It has been milked so frequently and so often that it is a "hopping" airline. Passengers are stranded in various places and miss their connections. The maintenance of the aircraft is such that at the eleventh hour

when the flight is to take off, it is discovered that it is not airworthy. This happened recently at Peshawar airport when a flight connecting with an international flight to Europe could not take off.

PIA as a milking cow is forever being milked. Recently when its aging fleet had to be renewed, the choice was between Airbus and Boeing. The type of aircraft required and suitable for PIA was so obviously Airbus that it at one time was declared that Airbus was chosen. To buy the aircraft money was borrowed by the billion from overseas banks with the Pakistan government underwriting the loans, thus adding to the rising loans of the government.

Whenever aircraft are bought, the kickback commissions are such that there is a massive tussle in which no one can guess who would win. Despite the fact that it was declared that Airbus was chosen, all of a sudden one saw, emblazoned in the newspapers, that Boeing had been chosen. Who is going to find out how this happened? Obviously not the National Accountability Bureau.

This has, however, been reflected in the market. PIA is a joint stock corporation that had on offer 57,536,500 shares to the public at the price of Rs 20 per share in May 2004. There were new shares issued then. The Minister for Privatisation, Dr Abdul Hafeez

Shaikh informed the Senate that these shares were offered to the public and that the share value had gone down to Rs 13.45 per share from Rs 20. The defence minister revealed in the senate that the 57 million share holders of PIA had suffered a loss of 377 million rupees during the last six months because of 33 percent depreciation in the price of PIA shares.

It hardly needs to be said that PIA is an albatross round our neck. If it were a normal business organisation it would have folded up a long time ago. There is no prestige in running a lame duck. If you are not capable of running an airline like Singapore airline then admit your incapacity and fold it. After all Belgium closed down its airline - Sabena as indeed has Switzerland - Swissair. If these great solvent countries admitted that they could not run loss-making companies then what need have we to persist in conducting a lame duck operation? Even the British sold out their then British Overseas Airways Corporation, which upon becoming a public-owned company is now running as British Air.

There is no shame in closing down a loss-making entity. If no shame is left in being number two in corruption in the world then why go on losing more money by running loss-making organisations? Perhaps to achieve the target of number one corrupt country in the world!