

Corruption, politicians, and bureaucracy

Corruption
The News
17-12-07

Pakistan's theoretically omnipotent legislature has always been the centre of high tension, leading to the display of the members' muscle power and their command over vulgar language. Except when their privileges and perks constitute an item of the agenda, the government and opposition benches rarely agree. So it was hardly surprising, while watching the proceedings of the Senate the other day, that when the subject of corruption cropped up, the worthy members of the upper house of parliament united in singing "shame, shame" in unison. The emotionally charged senators joined hands to blast the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) when Prime Minister's Secretariat confirmed that the civil and military bureaucracy had committed more financial corruption than politicians; that the NAB had recovered Rupees two billion from the civil-military bureaucracy compared to only Rupees 431 million from politicians; and that NAB had detained, probed, and jailed 170 politicians in the last five years but only 12 military officers.

For a neutral analyst, these revelations lead to some logical conclusions. Firstly, Pakistani politicians are hardly immune to corruption and financial misdeeds. Their protest against the NAB is as unwarranted as the protest of a thief who has stolen a few million rupees and is punished along with another thief who has stolen more money, say a few billion rupees. Both are thieves who deserve to be punished.

Our politicians constantly accuse the NAB of being politically motivated, targeting politicians and letting other culprits go free; this charge has proved to be untenable. Had their accusation been correct, the figures pertaining to recovery of money from those against whom corruption charges were proved, would have been quite the reverse. In fact the figures released now provide quite genuine grounds to



Masud Akhtar Shaikh

The writer is a retired Colonel and freelance columnist
masudshaikh@hotmail.com

the bureaucrats to accuse the NAB of discriminating against them, for recovering a huge amount from relatively fewer bureaucrats and only a very small amount from a much bigger lot of corrupt politicians!

In fact, one could conclude from the given statistics that politicians are cleverer than the bureaucrats as far as the tricks of the trade (like hiding evidence, creating frontmen) are concerned. As the most important cogs in the executive machinery, politicians are in a more advantageous position to cover up their crimes, especially when they belong to the party in power. In this connection, one would not be wrong in saying that the military officers are mere novices. In the normal performance of their military duties, they seldom find an opportunity to indulge in financial irregularities except for using official transport for personal purposes. It is only during military rule when they land up in greener pastures and come in closer contact with their civilian counterparts that their mouths start watering. However, like the clever cat that never taught the lion how to climb a tree, the civilian master-hands also make sure that the military trespassers strutting about in a traditionally civilian domain are kept in the dark about some vital tricks of the trade. As a result, these newcomers find it hard to hide their misdeeds. The vast powers of the civil bureaucrats, the nature of their official duties, and complex and dilatory official procedures provide constant motives and ideal conditions to indulge in corruption. No wonder a huge sum of money has been recovered from those civilian bureaucrats who were unlucky to have been caught by the NAB hounds.

The process of accountability is an ongoing one that is likely to continue as long as President Musharraf sticks to his uniform. The figures now released by the Prime Minister's Secretariat may or may not follow the trend that has emerged as a result of the five-year toils of the NAB. The scales may well turn in favour of the politicians by the time the NAB is wound up at a future date. So far, the Bureau has been concentrating on the tip of the iceberg - and even so, corruption has not been eliminated despite the administration's claims to the contrary. Corruption is a cancer that has spread right down to the very bone marrow of this nation. NAB or no NAB, it is will remain the bane of the Pakistani society for all times to come. So politicians and bureaucrats will have plenty of opportunities to compensate for the time they are losing during this regime. The lessons they learn during this regime will prove helpful when they find an open field to play with the public money. In fact it will be greater fun looting the public money after the present government, given the over 12 billion dollars of foreign exchange reserves that are likely to increase.

The common man is least bothered whether the politicians or the civil-military bureaucracy win the championship trophy in the corruption brigade's race. He will suffer all his life at the hands of the corrupt, from the top to the bottom levels of administration. The claimed reduction in corruption at the higher levels has provided no relief to him because his dealings are with the lower echelons of administration where he is required to grease the palm of every official at every stage. It is unfortunate that at this level, the scale of corruption has considerably increased over the last few years. The ordinary Pakistani can only find satisfaction in belonging to a country whose name keeps appearing in the roll of honour of the most corrupt nations of the world from year to year.