

Lack of accountability and corruption

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Corruption

GOOD governance claimed by the present government as its *raison d'être* for displacing an elected government has yielded an "improvement" in the country's rating done by Transparency International. It is now 129th in rank out of 145 countries. Earlier, Pakistan was 92nd out of 133 countries. This translates into 19 per cent increase in corruption in just one year.

Pakistan scores 2.1 on 1 to 10 scale, one being the most corrupt and 10 the least. Among the more corrupt countries than Pakistan, according to this ranking, is Bangladesh and one must count one's blessings because had Bangladesh been part of Pakistan we would have ranked still lower.

It seems Bangladesh has been a pioneer in some other social fields as well. Much before cheating in examinations became commonplace, it was quite a well established practice in former East Pakistan. It was 1969 when I was posted as SDO Serajgang that a letter arrived nominating me as chairman, examination committee. I was surprised at the district administration's involvement in matriculation examination because this was an affair for the teachers and the school administrators. What surprised me more was the ritual of a series of steps that had to be taken including imposing a ban under 144 Cr.P.C. against assembly of people in and around examination centres. It all looked unnecessary — till the examinations commenced.

What one saw was totally unfamiliar and utterly unbelievable. There were people in spite of deployment of the police all around the examination centres busy passing notes through windows to the examinees. Technology had not advanced too far and they were supplementing their humble efforts by reading out the answers on loudspeakers for everyone inside the examination centre to hear. As long as my visit lasted these boys disappeared to re-appear soon thereafter. The same thing started happening a few years later, in today's Pakistan.

Getting back to Pakistan and its corruption index, we are in the distinguished company of Haiti, Nigeria, Chad, and Myanmar and share the honour of being bracketed with Cameroon, Iraq and Kenya for its much-merited position. Some indignant statements, few articles and editorials followed the announcement of corruption index by Transparency International. Soon all will be forgotten and we would be marching forward to progress. Few years later we would have successfully transplanted Bangladesh.

Transparency International has come up with hackneyed solutions. It has pointed to an urgent need to address civil service reforms and to tackle issues such as the living wage, a clear code of conduct for civil servants, clear rules of conflict of interest and nepotism and effective monitoring of implementation including the removal of corrupt officials. It recommends discretionary powers to be significantly reduced, though it is easier said than done. NAB acting as deterrent against all decision-making by the civil servants has already accomplished the last part. Most of these proposals are an alibi for failure.

What Transparency International has failed to appreciate is that these recommendations lead a country like ours nowhere. Even if all these recommendations are accepted, corruption will remain as rife as before. Our ambitious generals periodically mutilate the source of all laws, the Constitution. What do you do when no bid contracts at twice the market rates are awarded say by National Highway Authority to NLC or FWO? All are military outfits and no questions are asked. Sukkur Barrage is the latest casualty. Islamabad roads are perhaps theirs too.

Corruption is not limited to paying the traffic policeman to evade a challan. It is the governance issue and mega corruption is the problem. The basic flaw in the polity has to be addressed first and foremost. Unaccountable military rulers, answerable to no one who take over the reins of the country at the drop of a hat, are the fundamental source of the malaise.

International agencies miss out on fundamental causes because it is inconvenient to their interests, which are better served by cozying up to the military rulers. It is the

periodic elections that enforce an element of accountability. India which is placed almost in the same position as Pakistan has a better ranking simply because an element of accountability is inherent in their democratic dispensation.

In Pakistan elections are often fixed if they ever take place. They are a farce and are used only to legitimize an undemocratic dispensation. I am reminded of my little girl when I expressed my wish that Reagan should lose to get a second term. She was surprised and said 'you mean he can lose?' I said yes. Then why is he holding the elections?, she asked. When military rule is the norm how can an upright civil servant stand up to his military boss without jeopardizing his career? He knows that there is an element of permanence to the military and he cannot hope for its replacement to be able to see another day.

So, lack of accountability reinforces the human streak to indulge in compliance and corruption. Improving administration is not a nuclear science. What one needs is adherence to merit. If people are appointed on merit, which includes honesty, things start improving. Here even judges to the highest court are not appointed on merit. There is a Chinese saying that the fish starts rotting at its head. Or snow melts at the top.

Another phenomenon noticed particularly during the last five years is the blatant militarization of the civil services. The retired military officers know quite well that the standard of accountability for them is different from their civil counterparts. The NAB is another military outfit. The government has appointed ministers and even prime ministers who had NAB cases against them. On the other hand it has convicted/arrested some people of unimpeachable integrity.

When our parliament expressed concern, the NAB came up with a tongue-in-cheek remark that it was up to the mem-

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bers of the parliament to identify the primary areas of corruption and also present themselves for accountability. The implication of this remark is that only the parliamentarians are corrupt and secondly the NAB does not know the corrupt and wants the parliament to identify

them. How is it in this business if it doesn't even know who the corrupt are? And who does it want it to believe that only the politicians are corrupt? There are at least two generals' sons in the bloated cabinet who have not even bothered to explain till today the millions of dollars they came to possess after the successful careers of their fathers.

Selective accountability does not pass for better governance. Quite the opposite. Talking of selective accountability, a former minister for petroleum is being tried in a NAB court for appointing a retired major to a civil job in a corporation. Surprisingly, General Naseerullah Babar, who ordered the minister to do so, has not been charged nor has been the beneficiary, the retired major. A former speaker of the National Assembly has been convicted for ten years for appointing people without merit. That is wrong if he did so, but how is it different from the fact when retired army men are appointed en masse to civilian jobs. These too are political appointments even if 'non-politicians' make them.

In the cabinet division, there is an emergency relief cell, which is supposed to provide emergency aid to victims of floods, earthquakes or any other calamity. It has huge funds which are misused because there is no oversight of the ministry of finance. Among other things it is maintaining a fleet of five aircraft in the name of emergency and they are used for VIP movement. Half of them remain grounded. Their repair is supposed to be done by the army which is given the total budget funds on that account at the beginning of the year.

Surprisingly, the officers on deputation from the military get the repairs done from the market. One has not seen any private workshop repairing aircraft. How is that possible? Because, the cabinet secretary has all the powers which he tends to misuse for want of competence or oversight or both. When men of low competence, poor intelligence and dubious are appointed to high offices, corruption and chaos are bound to ensue. ■