[**Corrupt absolutely**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1720439/corrupt-absolutely)

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The writer is a poet. His latest publication is a collection of satire essays titled Rindana.

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SOMETHING strange, unsettling and heartbreaking is happening in the world. Unpleasantness does not diminish the reality; it makes it unpalatable, but even bitter truths must be acknowledged. The corruption narrative has failed. The anti-corruption drive did not just run out of steam, it went bust. Not just in our neck of the woods, but globally.

Benjamin Netanyahu, poised to take back the reins in Israel, was indicted on several charges of corruption and abuse of public office in 2019. Unlike some of his predecessors, he refused to step down after the indictment. He is likely to become PM again. The entire case may be annulled if his right-wing allies’ plans succeed.

In Brazil, Luiz Lula has just defeated Jair Bolsonaro in the elections. The same Lula who in 2017 faced trial on corruption charges and was convicted to serve jail time; in 2021, he was given a reprieve by the supreme court that asserted the trial court did not have proper jurisdiction. Is the electorate ‘gullible’ or has the triumvirate of executive, legislature and judiciary been playing too much to the gallery?

If someone convinces you to believe that the Brazilians only care about the sand and sun and football and samba, how would one explain what happened in the Philippines recently? The Marcos legacy was nothing but corruption and nepotism. It wasn’t just a one-man show, it was a family-run saga of poor governance, cronyism, and amassing wealth at public expense.

Imelda Marcos became a synonym for conspicuous spending. Her staggering shoe collection became as infamous as her husband’s conviction in a murder trial in his younger days; the conviction was later overturned by the supreme court. The entire family was banished to plush exile in Hawaii when the regime was overthrown in 1986.

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The heir, Ferdinand Jr was, however, only recently elected to the highest office in the country. So, Filipinos still suffer from feudalism and have not gotten the hang of democracy rooted in public accountability, you believe? How about Malaysia and Indonesia? The datos and putris do not all have pristine reputations.

The corruption narrative is on its last legs.

No disrespect or malice is intended against any one of these great nations. Not just because they are friendly countries but because we suffer from the same public malaise in Pakistan. We are all in the same boat and it seems that we the public are collectively poking the holes that let the water in before we start jumping ship to swim towards islands of excellence and healthier democracies.

No one is suggesting that corruption be dropped from the public discourse or that the anti-corruption struggle be abandoned. All efforts to remove corruption at the service delivery level where they make life miserable for the common folk must continue.

What we also need to discuss is whether the present-day multiparty democracies, one-party oligarchies, military dictatorships, nanny states and banana republics are all failing alike because that is the nature of the system they are based on.

Closer to home, the corruption narrative is on its last legs. The proponents are under investigation for anything from petty thievery to illegal donations to money laundering. Most are yet to be proved in a court of law. Those already convicted for not disclosing potential income to the Election Commission are poised to return to the country and to power.

Those who were tried, terribly unsuccessfully one may add, for decades and for any and every corruption charge under the sun are making hay whether it shines or not.

Communism has been discredited. Social democracies are questioning their gospel of social justice and affirmative action. Addiction to hydrocarbon and consumption-fuelled growth has held the capitalist edifice hostage to Russian energy pipelines. Yes! The same Russia whose communism was pulled down along with the Berlin Wall now sits smugly as Europe braces for a bone-chilling winter. The situation in Ukraine holds the key to global energy and grain supplies.

The electorate must insist on focusing election debates and manifestos on the delivery of services like education, health, potable water, sanitation, reliable and renewable energy, law and order, functioning courts, housing, and employment. Anyone who tries to rally support by telling you who among their opponents looted how many billions, ask them how many zeros there are in a billion. Most jokers hire personal accountants to do their math — to maintain double ledgers — who then return from exile to run the exchequer to tell us how empty it has been.

Before one is accused of holding a brief for the corrupt, please bear in mind that delivering even half the mentioned services would hardly leave anyone with time to indulge in loot and plunder. The discourse needs to be about what impacts citizens’ daily lives and not lectures on piety, crusades, jihad and the corruption wild goose chase.

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