**Corruption, wealth and vengeance**

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There is no acceptable form of indigenously acquired wealth in Pakistan. If you were born wealthy, then obviously your ancestors were bootlickers of the British. And if you have become wealthy in your own lifetime then, equally obviously, you are a thief.

For the record, my definition of ‘wealthy’ does not include those upper middle-class individuals lucky enough to own their own house and a few cars. My reference here is to those people who own private jets (or are at least capable of owning private jets). Those people, at least in Pakistan, are deemed to be beyond redemption.

The apotheosis of this attitude can be seen in the Supreme Court’s famous judgment in the Panama Case where Justice Khosa cited Balzac (via Maria Puzo’s ‘The Godfather’) to argue that: “Behind every great fortune lies a great crime.” Except that Balzac himself never said that. What he said was “behind every unexplained fortune lies a successful crime.” It is that omission of the word “unexplained” – and in a Supreme Court judgement, no less – which reveals so much about our society’s attitude towards wealth.

Where does this aversion to wealth come from?

My entirely unscientific theory is that the basis lies in the nature of wealth in Pakistan. To be more specific, the vast majority of wealth here consists of land. And land is, by definition, the ultimate zero-sum resource. To quote one wag, “they’re not making more of it” (though that may be news to the housing authorities happily reclaiming land from the sea in Karachi).

The problem with a zero-sum resource is that the more somebody else has, the less you have. Hence if somebody else has acquired more land in their lifetime, the natural corollary is that some other people have been deprived of their share.

But isn’t that the case with all wealth? The answer is no. Stocks and shares, for example, are not a zero-sum form of wealth. If somebody successfully floats a company on the stock exchange, they do not automatically make anybody else poorer. But everybody else falls (at least for Pakistanis) in the category of robber barons.

I was reminded of this peculiarity of Pakistani culture by a recent conversation with a dear friend in which the name of a well-known businessman happened to come up. My friend’s immediate response was “scumbag”. When I asked for the basis of his contempt, there was ultimately no justification beyond whataboutery. As in, what about his son being rude to so and so? What about the fact that he attended a famous school? What about the fact that he was not born rich? Could I certify that he had made his money through entirely legitimate means?

Obviously, I could not certify the origins of the relevant businessman’s wealth though I certainly knew enough about him to discredit the standard misconceptions. None of that mattered. So far as my friend was concerned, the burden of proof was on the businessman – and, by extension, on me – to prove that the wealth in question was not ill-gotten.

Does any of this matter? Yes, it does. And for two reasons.

The first reason has to do with the economic growth of this country. If this country is to become wealthier, that in turn requires its citizens to become wealthier. But if to become wealthier is also to invite the scorn of society and to be automatically classified as a “scumbag”, then why bother? Why not take one’s ideas overseas where becoming rich does not automatically mean becoming the subject of veiled – and sometimes not so veiled – taunts? I’m not suggesting that we need to replace the national anthem with Gordon Gecko’s famous “greed is good” speech but perhaps the assumption of innocence can be extended to the wealthy as well.

The second reason pertains to our national obsession with corruption and the proceeds of corruption. As argued earlier, the people of this country have been continuously seduced with the argument that if only the proceeds of corruption can be recovered, then all will be well. The most recent iteration of this argument is in the PTI’s single-minded focus on the “chor, chor, chor” front which has certainly found much traction in the public mind. But the antecedents of this philosophy go back to the PRODA law introduced by Liaquat Ali Khan in 1949, and from there to Ayub Khan’s EBDO law, the accountability laws introduced by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and General Ziaul Haq, the Ehtesab Act of Mian Nawaz Sharif and, most recently, the NAB Ordinance introduced by General Musharraf.

So, if anti-corruption laws don’t work, should one simply accept corruption as a fact of life instead?

No. But allow me to elaborate.

First, some degree of corruption is inevitable. Every single country in the world has corruption issues. And please spare me the garbage about how the execution of such and such person proves that China’s growth is a consequence of a zero-tolerance policy towards corruption. There is no shortage of corruption within China just like there is no shortage of corruption in the United States, the United Kingdom or even Switzerland.

Second, given the inevitability of ‘some’ degree of corruption, the issue is not whether corruption is to be socially accepted but the extent to which the state tries to prevent corruption by: (a) reducing regulation; (b) paying high salaries to government officials; and (c) establishing a robust mechanism to punish corruption if and when it occurs.

In my humble view, Pakistan has the worst of all possible worlds. We have a heavily regulated state which gives huge amounts of discretionary power to high officials who are hugely underpaid, not just in absolute terms but in comparative terms, and which tries to prevent corruption by giving hugely discretionary and dictatorial powers to a prosecutorial agency manned by untrained and underpaid officers. So, not only does corruption flourish but the heavy-handed attempts to smash corruption through state-sanctioned thuggery are in fact counterproductive not only because they terrify law-abiding officers away from making any decision but also because the prosecutorial agency lacks any ability to go beyond grabbing people and throwing them in jail.

Let me try and restate my argument in simple terms. Corruption exists because our governance systems are broken. You cannot fix a broken governance system without changing the factors which make the system broken. Hence the solution to corruption is not a bigger hammer with which to smash the corrupt. That approach is tried, tested and failed. All that does is produce self-styled saviours convinced that every problem is a nail which needs an even bigger hammer to smash it. Been there, done that.

One final argument: if there is one thing the commentariat agrees on, it is that things used to be better in the good old days. But we did not have the NAB Ordinance in the good old days. So clearly, the problem (and its solution) lies elsewhere.

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expressed in this column do not represent the views of his firm.

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