**Endemic of corruption**

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Until a few years ago, Georgia suffered a similar situation to today’s Pakistan. Rampant corruption, bribery at all levels, tax evasion and theft of government revenues had left the whole country in shambles. Corruption, combined with weak judiciary, lack oflaw enforcement and poverty, provided an ideal environment for corruption to prosper. The national unity was weakened and the country harboured an environment of stress and frustration. However, this was turned around in a mere seven years.Within 7 years, it became,from one of the most corrupt countries, to the ‘best corruption-buster’ in the world. The journey of Georgia may carry many useful lessons for Pakistan.

According to Philippe Le Houérou, the ex-Head of the IFC, World Bank, Georgian experience shows that the vicious cycle of endemic corruption can be broken, and with appropriate and decisive reforms, can be turned into virtuous cycle.

Just like Pakistan, corruption was an everyday routine in Georgia, bribery was common and officials would do ‘favours’ in return for ‘favours’. From mere policemen, to high-ranking ministers, the entire public sector was involved in corruption. It was just a scrabble for money for all. New projects couldn’t even be completed without under the table deals, resulting in poor outcomes and disastrous results, sounds familiar, doesn’t it?

Due to the situation, people took to the streets and broke into parliament with ‘roses’ in their hands. The protests lasted for 20 days resulting in resignation of the president Shevardnadze. Media played a key role in developing awareness amongst people against the corrupt regime and promoting the ‘Rose revolution’.

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Then, Mikheil Saakashvili, after winning with a strong public majority, introduced revolutionary reforms to eradicate corruption. He fired the entire staff from one ministry, got the police trained by the Germans and adopted Italy’s anti-mafia efforts. Arrests of high-ranking government officials were broadcast live on TV to the public.Naming and shaming the officials was simply part of the campaign to reduce corruption. Judiciary provided much needed support in quick decisions against the corrupt who were jailed for many years and the robbed money was recovered from corrupt politicians and government officials.

Within 3 years of revolutionary steps and a no tolerance policy, the corruption reduced significantly and the country performed on par with many European countries with good governance. This provided a major relief to the public in terms of petty corruption, it  reformed the police and the education and tax departments. This resulted in a great relief for the general public, although some may argue that Georgia still has significant corruption and the top officials operate with near impunity. However, at the very least,it doesnot bother,to such an extent,the public, who can now contact the police without any fear, whonow know that their kids are getting the best education available, who can now sleep peacefully knowing that their money and livesare protected.

Key components of a successful governance include judicial independence, reduction in administrative burdens, trade openness, tax and education reforms, police reforms, budget transparency, freedom of the press and clear and strict management of key public services. Organisations like PIA, Pakistan Steel, Pakistan Railway, Education Department, Health Ministry and others which provide direct public service should be given targets to meet, otherwise they should be relieved from their duties and a new team should be appointed that can actually deliver the required results.  This ensures that people work, and there remains very little room for corruption. Most of the services should be moved online so there is little space for haggling, bribery and red-tape.

To overcome the endemic of corruption, a national effort needs to be launched where people are educated through media, officials are made accountable and faster decisions are made on any large-scale cases. Once a precedence is set, the others will start having to be more careful. The main issue is that we seldom see any officials being charged despite living way beyond their means, and to be honest, the anti-corruption policies are not working.

Simply put, corrupt people sitting at the helm of an anti-corruption policy can never get rid of it. It requires genuine change of faces and change of mindset. Georgia didn’t even have police for a couple of months; one should close a service which doesn’t provide relief and is just costing the country valuable revenue.

It is important for Pakistan to take lessons from Georgia and start introducing small steps towards bigger goals. There is no harm in firing a whole department if needed and recruiting new people ‘on 100% merit’. Give them the authority and make them accountable for their performance. With the available talent within Pakistan, it shouldn’t be a hard task. Political compromises don’t need to be made once the public trust is built on true accountability and they can see the outcome from a government policy.  It is essential to have a completely independent NAB or similar authority, protected from partisan influences, that can uncover corruption, supported by a strong judiciary for quick decision making to eradicate this endemic of corruption in our country.

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