[**Power and corruption**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1659942/power-and-corruption)

[Rafia Zakaria](https://www.dawn.com/authors/410/rafia-zakaria)Published November 24, 2021 - Updated a day ago

The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

“POWER tends to corrupt”, the saying goes “and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Such words are easy to toss around in Pakistan, whose citizens have seen the process first-hand and numerous times in the existence of their still young country.

Each day is an exercise in navigating the corruption and power nexus, with even some petty overlords or government functionaries of a middling and insignificant sort demanding their palms be greased for doing what is essentially their job. When the bottom feeders are this way, the top naturally excel at the job; one constant in Pakistan’s story has been the rotating cast of scions of powerful (and corrupt) families seen to be looting the country’s coffers. Things change but not this.

Is it the system that makes these erstwhile leaders, generations of them, corrupt ie does their survival and rising to the top require the misuse of power? Or is the proclivity for corruption determined more by individual character?

In his new book Corruptible: Who Gets Power and How It Changes Us researcher Brian Klaas presents some interesting theses on this question. One study that Klaas writes about looked at whether people will follow the rules due to a commitment to doing the right thing. In this study, researchers looked at parking violations in New York City. In particular, the study looked at the period between 1997 and 2002 during which time United Nations diplomats stationed in NYC could get away with parking illegally because they had diplomatic immunity.

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When a car with a diplomatic licence plate was found to be illegally parked, a parking ticket would be issued, but it did not have to be paid because the diplomat could not be prosecuted owing to immunity. At one point, there was so much illegal parking by diplomats of various countries that the city was losing up to $18 million a day. Sadly, one of the 10 worst offenders was none other than Pakistan while diplomats from countries including Sweden and Norway rarely abused their power.

This would suggest that those who came from countries where corruption is common were more likely to abuse their power because the only way they may have got their position was by being unethical; using connections rather than rising on the basis of merit. Culture and context, Klaas concluded, had a “drastic” effect on how individuals behaved.

In 2002, Michael Bloomberg was elected mayor of NYC and he put an end to diplomatic immunity for parking tickets. As soon as this new directive was issued, the worst offender countries immediately started to follow the rules; countries like Kuwait, for instance, went down to almost no violations. This suggests that when the corrupt are held accountable for their abuse of power then they are less likely to engage in violations.

In this case, countries like Kuwait and Pakistan that had been among the top 10 offenders dropped almost to the bottom of the list. This indicates that while the abuse of power is common among the corrupt, the threat or actual prevalence of accountability can drastically reduce the abuse of power.

Of course, accountability is far easier to prescribe and far harder to enforce particularly in places such as Pakistan where it is more or less endorsed and even encouraged by the prevailing culture. The difficult question here is how to change a system that encourages, even requires corruption in order to succeed. As the example about parking tickets and diplomatic immunity illustrates, effective policing or enforcement is required to get everybody to get in line and follow the rules.

Making enforcement an expectation such that bad actors know that their chances of getting caught are very high is difficult if not impossible in a corrupt system which is based on the opposite assumption. So if Pakistan had a mythical leader who tried to end corruption, he/she would find his/her efforts stymied because the local elite that wants the corrupt status quo and hence their own largesse to persist will ensure that this leader would not be successful.

Once the ‘good’ leader realises this, his/her choices are revealed not as being good versus bad but rather the degree to which he/she capitulates to the demands of this elite that feeds off corruption. When the people in a system are used to corruption and even expect and welcome it, a good leader is useless, because the system requires corrupt behaviour.

A corrupt system, and in Pakistan we have just that, makes it difficult for good people to survive within it. Their choices are to become complicit with the system, do as others do, and forget about being a good moral actor or to exist outside the system to the extent that is possible. This is particularly true where politics are concerned; good people who do not want their conscience to be ravaged simply cannot enter this realm of the compromised. The consequence is that the progeny of powerful families, who have a genealogical history of upholding corruption, are the ones that are most eager to grab power and then to hold on to their ‘entitlement’.

As in the parking example, Pakistan needs someone to announce that the rules will be enforced so that the abuse of power can stop. Sadly, what is happening instead is that the longer any leader is in power, the more the system encourages them to be corrupt or condone corruption. As a result, everyone from the least powerful to the most powerful have no expectation that the abuse of power will be checked or curbed. The impetus for survival in such a system is to get as much power as possible, for the very purpose of abusing it.

*The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.*

[**rafia.zakaria@gmail.com**](http://mailto:rafia.zakaria@gmail.com)

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