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**Tackling corruption efficiently**

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Today is December 9 and today the world observes the International Anti-Corruption Day to raise public awareness about the impact of corruption on countries and societies across the globe.

Chapter V of the United Nations Convention against Corruption (2003) states that the global body is "concerned about the seriousness of problems and threats posed by corruption to the stability and security of societies, undermining the institutions and values of democracy, ethical values and justice and jeopardizing sustainable development and the rule of law".

To this end, the ‘Your NO counts’ campaign is a joint international crusade spearheaded by the UNDP and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime to mark International Anti-Corruption Day so as to raise awareness about corruption, its impacts and how to effectively combat it.

In the context of Pakistan, corruption has become a buzz word in both media and political discourse. The current regime is known to have dexterously exploited this slogan in its election campaign. What the end result of its anti-corruption mantra may be is a different issue as unfortunately various governments have used accountability selectively and more so as a political tool.

Various questions come to mind when we ponder over the decaying and dysfunctional affairs of the state. Is Pakistan really a poor country? Does it not have enough natural resources? Does the country have an unfriendly geography? Does it lack fertile lands, rivers and seaports? What about its manpower? Is a country of over 220 million people, the fifth largest in the world in terms of population and 34th largest in physical area, not a huge market for a variety of consumer goods? Then why are investors, both domestic and foreign, reluctant to invest in this huge market with unprecedented potential? What ails the Islamic Republic of Pakistan? Illiteracy, law and order issues, political instability, lack of soft and hard infrastructure, prevalence of corruption, and lack of good governance – or what?

Prior to the finalization of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under the UN 2030 Agenda, 11 themes for global consultations on the post-2015 development agenda were selected by the UN Development Group (UNDG). The central impetus behind this was to come up with a diverse set of development challenges a majority of the people faced, both in developed and the developing world. These key issues included Conflict and Fragility; Education; Energy; Environmental Sustainability; Food Security; Governance; Growth and Employment; Health; Addressing Inequalities; Population Dynamics; and Water.

In the first phase, 88 national consultations were carried out in countries where the UN provides assistance to governments. These processes were facilitated by UN country teams in coordination with central and states’ governments, the private sector, think tanks and civil society. The final report – titled ‘A Million Voices: The World We Want’ – collected the perspectives from over one million people around the globe. The process was completed in almost one year where people of diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, genders and ages expressed their opinions and aspirations regarding the key development challenges people face.

These consultations revealed that continuing the indignity of poverty, inequality, injustice and insecurity are pressing challenges. Ending income poverty and hunger, achieving full gender equality and improving health services and access to education for every child remained foremost in people’s priorities, and they wanted these issues to continue to be directly addressed in the future agenda.

What were the priorities and aspirations of the Pakistanis who participated in this global survey? As I mentioned earlier, what ails our beloved country? For most Pakistanis who took part in these consultative endeavours, peace and security was the most critical development challenge. There was a unique consensus among participants that without resolving the issues concerning security, law and order in the country, the achievement of other development targets will remain a distant dream. As these discussions took place at a time when the country was still immersed in the ‘war on terror’, it makes perfect sense that insecurity and law and order were a primary concern of most Pakistanis at that time.

The second key issue that Pakistani participants at the national level stressed was the lack of good governance. The report states that “good governance underpinned by the principles of transparency, accountability and the rule of law is the second most pressing priority for the people of Pakistan”, after peace and security (p75). Thus, there is no doubt that the prevalence of corruption is because there has never been across-the-board accountability and rule of law.

Pakistan has consistently lagged behind in improving transparency, rule of law and good governance. It is not surprising that 35 percent of respondents from Pakistan in the Transparency International Global Corruption Barometer still observed that corruption had increased in recent years while 28 percent believed that it had decreased. According to TI, the majority (60 percent) of Pakistani respondents believe that government officials, including police (76 percent), the judiciary (41 percent) and other public sector employees, are highly corrupt.

Like Pakistan, the majority of Asia Pacific countries are in the bottom half of the Corruption Perceptions Index. According to Transparency International (TI), 19 out of 30 countries in the region scored 40 or less out of 100 on CPI. The report further states that countries in the region perform poorly because of factors that include unaccountable governments, and lack of oversight and insecurity; both high-profile corruption scandals and everyday corruption issues continue to undermine public trust in governments.

Regarding the issue of corruption in Asian countries, in his study titled ‘Corruption in economic development: Beneficial grease, minor annoyance, or major obstacle?’ Wei (1998) has pointed out that Pakistan’s GDP per capita would be substantially higher if corruption were reduced.

For example, in its ‘Country Study Report Pakistan 2003’, TI estimated that widespread corruption in all public sectors costs over Rs200 billion annually to the country’s economy, severely affecting overall economic progress. This occurs despite the presence of various anti-corruption bodies including the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) and Anti-Corruption Establishments (ACE) and so many other institutional arrangements for anti-corruption.

Pakistan has one of the most extensive anti-corruption apparatus in the form of these and many other organizations at various tiers of the government. But what may be the actual performance and outcome of these agencies and anti-corruption establishments is anybody’s guess.

A key lesson from the case of Pakistan is that, although public accountability and anti-corruption laws and bodies do exist, their efficacy and efficiency is highly questionable. A TI report concurs that in Pakistan, “laws against corruption are comprehensive and strict, [but] implementation is very weak”. Thus, there is a need for strong determination and political will to strengthen anti-corruption institutions, and to make them autonomous so they can eradicate fraud and corruption across the board.

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