

Combating corruption

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Social Problems

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WHEN President Musharraf addressed a conference on combating corruption in the public and private sectors, the campaign against the pervasive evil appeared to have hit the proverbial political wall. The same routine remedies for the cancer eating into the vitals of society were suggested as had been done in the past and no radical new solution came forth.

The president spoke of the need for strong institutions, merit-based systems and doing away with the discretionary powers of officials. He said other means to check corruption including reducing human contact through E-governance, improving the quality of law enforcement agencies and an honest, dedicated and correct leadership.

The merits of such remedies, though not all, cannot be disputed but what matters is the enforcement and sustaining of such reforms. Wishing is one thing and making a success of such remedies is quite another.

At a time when it appeared the government does not intend to come up with radical anti-corruption measures, it has arrested two former secretaries to the government on charges of corruption. They include captain (retd) Naseer Ahmed, former petroleum secretary and Shahid Ahmed, a former director-general, petroleum, and they have been charged with causing a loss of up to Rs 1.5 million to the national exchequer. The NAB has also arrested Safdar Hussain Kazmi, former secretary, local bodies, on a charge of embezzling the development funds allocated for members of the National Assembly during Benazir Bhutto's regime. Mr Kazmi was suspended from service on charges of corruption during the period when Mohammed Khan Junejo was prime minister and was restored to service later.

It has been reported that many more top bureaucrats who had worked in different sectors are likely to be arrested on charges of corruption. Meanwhile, an accountability court in Lahore has put off until September 6 further proceedings in a reference against Interior Minister Syed Faisal Saleh Hayat, as the prosecution witness failed to appear before the court. The minister has been facing charges of being a wilful defaulter of some financial institutions.

Though the fact that the cases against the home minister have not been dropped for good has been welcomed by the people, the question arises whether the embezzlement cases against some senior officials will be vigorously pursued now and that whether the cases against the politicians will be

dropped or set aside. In the interest of the country, there must be no discrimination in handling these cases and no partisanship to gain political advantage.

The president has prescribed a merit-based system to check corruption. Merit is not what counts in our political system today. That is evident from the manner in which the PML (QA) was hurriedly formed. Such ruling parties were formed by military rulers at the end of their direct military rule earlier. Merit is not what counts in the choice of leaders or members of such parties or the selection of ministers. Political opportunism often reins supreme in such circumstances.

And such governments choose those senior officials who can conveniently serve their political purpose, and not based on merit. While it is good to do away with the

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discretionary power of officials and introduce uniform rules in a country with too many people and too small supplies, the officials will have to use their discretionary powers to help the people who are in distress or in greater need than others. While reducing human contact through E-governance can be essential or welcome, how many millions in the country have access to the Internet, and how often does it fail for the want of power? And in a country where corruption is common, the people would seek access to senior officials, than be content with the adverse decisions of junior officials. We have to create perfect conditions of governance before we can eliminate the need for contact between officials and citizens in need or with a problem.

An honest, dedicated and sincere leadership, which the president regards as imperative for eradicating corruption, is possible only in ideal conditions. While such a leadership tries to create ideal conditions in society, such conditions keep the leadership on the right path, if the people are vigilant and uphold the principles of democracy.

In such conditions law enforcement can be proper and regular and people will fear criminals more than the police and not avoid filing complaints with the police, or the police refusing to register FIRs. The president says

that corruption at the highest level is unpardonable and that the corrupt should be punished. But he has not specified at what level of government should such punishment take place and how severe the punishment should be. But the fact is that the most of the people deal with junior officers like the policemen or the taxation officials who tell them that the graft money they receive is passed up and not all is retained by them. It is hence essential that corruption should be punished at all levels, with more severe punishment for the higher officials.

Lt-Gen Munir Hafeez, chairman of the NAB, suggested that an anti-corruption awareness campaign would be launched with the active help of the youth and with the cooperation of the education ministry. That can be a good move if a serious anti-corruption drive heedless of personalities is meant. But if such a campaign is launched through the education system, the students will ask many questions about corruption in the country, and they have to be satisfied. If not, they will agitate, protest and even come out on the streets against corruption. Is the government prepared for such eventualities?

The punishment for corruption should not be mere sacking of the official with all the loot so that he can enjoy at leisure. Instead he should be dispossessed of what he had grabbed and he and his family should be prevented from becoming industrialists or starting a political career. Admiral Mansoor ul Haq, former chief of the naval staff, was a classic case of an official made to part with his illegal earnings. What proportion of that he was forced to surrender, we do not know. But the dispossession should be complete and total so that the families too will know that they cannot enjoy the loot of the head of the family. The poor country needs the recovery of such embezzled funds instead of only a part of that.

The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank are coming up with two to three billion dollar loans to finance certain reforms, beginning with the CBR as well as judicial reforms. This is a very costly way of reforming ourselves, but it seems to be the modern way and we have to make the best use of the reforms.

The president has stressed the importance of strong institutions to check corruption. That means having strong and clean political parties but it is too much to expect in the present situation. Frequent military rule with its loose political strings does not help create a democratic order, but a political mish-mash. Strong institutions are based on strong and eternal values which are not upheld in our midst. And until the rulers at their official aides uphold such values, good governance will be a distant dream.