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Culture of corruption

By Anwar Syed

MUCH is said almost every day about the pervasiveness of corruption among both high and low in government and politics. It includes nepotism, misappropriation of public funds, and bribery, among other reprehensible practices.

I agree with those who observe that corruption in Pakistan today is much greater than it was, let us say, thirty or forty years ago, and that it was greater then than it was during British rule. The British personnel who served in India after 1857 responded to the political tradition of their own country where, for some two hundred years before that time, the ruling classes had been learning that the king and his agents were under the law, and that they were accountable to the people.

The great majority of the British officials in India did not accept, and were not even offered, bribes. Money in the treasury might symbolically belong to the king, but he and his officials could not use it except for purposes authorized by law. Following our independence, British thinking in this regard began to fade away, and then our nativity burst forth.

A people's nativity is made by its historical experience. When they think of their history, Pakistanis generally look to Islamic rule from 622 to 661, and then to Muslim rule (as distinct from Islamic) in various parts of the world, including India. Islam tells us that rulers are under, not above, the law, that the interest of the community takes precedence over that of the individual, and that none may take anything that does not belong to him either as a result of his work or inheritance.

While glorifying these injunctions as high ideals, Muslim rulers have ignored them in actual practice everywhere since 661 (end of the pious caliphate), barring a few brief exceptions. They regarded the money in the treasury as their own, which they could spend as they liked; they dispensed wealth and power to their favourites as the spirit moved them and felt free to confiscate the property of those with whom they happened to be displeased.

They allowed the ulema to enforce the sharia upon ordinary persons, but neither they that now constitute Pakistan for many hundreds of years before the first Muslim conquerors arrived. Their political experience also forms part of Pakistan's nativity. I cannot speak with certitude, but my impression is that Hindu rulers in pre-Muslim India were not unlike their Muslim counterparts in other lands at the time. We do, however, have some examples of non-Muslim rule in recent history. There is, for instance, Sikh rule in Punjab and parts of the NWFP before the British conquered them.

Ranjit Singh is generally thought to have been a fairly competent and decent ruler. But his successors were not. Their rule is often called "Sikha Shahi," meaning that it was personal, arbitrary, and anarchic. After the British conquest and until 1947, many "princely states" in Punjab and elsewhere in India were ruled by Hindu and Sikh rajas and maharajas under the general but perfunctory supervision of British "residents." Personalism and arbitrariness were prevalent in these "states" to a large extent.

Society in all areas of Pakistan was feudal and/or tribal in varying degrees. The tribes made war upon one another, and grabbed land and cattle belonging to the other side. While members of a given tribe would unite against other tribes, their own interpersonal relations were often marked by feuds and violence. The feudal lords in Punjab and Sindh, and the tribal chiefs in Balochistan, oppressed and exploited the hapless poor under their control in the old days as they have done more recently.

Concerned with himself and his family, the feudal lord did not see any collectivity to which he might give his loyalty. Tribal chiefs did not recognize any entity other than their tribe or sub-tribe as deserving of their attachment. The idea of a public domain—beyond family, clan, or tribe, and its interest— was unknown to them as it had been to princes. The same holds for Nawaz Sharif, Benazir Bhutto, and their predecessors in power. They had heard and read about the distinction between public and private, about the primacy of the public domain, but they had not internalized these concepts. With slight modifications, largely decorative, they thought and acted like the kings before them.

Is reform possible? Most of evil being eternal, the reformer's goal is not to abolish evil altogether but to mitigate it. I have spoken of Pakistan's nativity because, in my view, it is one of the deeper and more potent forces underlying corruption. But, happily, nativity evolves with time and, given the current ease of communication, it is capable of changing faster than before.

Can the idea of the public interest, introduced to us by Islam and more recently by the British, be planted in our soil again? If so, how? No amount of sermonizing to generals, bureaucrats, and politicians will make them righteous. Privatization and a drastic reduction in the scope of governmental functions are also not adequate solutions. Private power can be just as self-indulgent, exploitative, and non-responsive as public power.

It is much easier to identify the causes of social ills than it is to prescribe reliable remedies. With appropriate modesty, therefore, I venture to propose a course of action, which is to launch a popular movement to uphold the primacy of the public interest in all relevant spheres and to oppose corruption of all sorts. Such a movement should be guided by an alliance of various opinion makers, leaders of various segments of civil society, smaller merchants (shopkeepers), politicians known for their patriotism and integrity (if any such can be found), and those of the ulema who may be willing to put aside their demand for an immediate and total enforcement of the sharia in favour of a specific Islamic value, in this case, "rizq-e-halal," which obviously requires eradication of corruption.

This crusade should spread the idea of the primacy of public interest as an essential ingredient of patriotism. It should not only condemn corruption as something that is destructive of the country's good order; it should also urge citizens to refuse to give bribes to those who demand them. It may establish local organizations to which victims of corruption may appeal for help. I do not claim that the movement I propose will be easy to launch and sustain, or that it will quickly achieve its goal. It will take time to emerge and much longer to become influential. But, then,

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They allowed the ulema to enforce the sharia upon ordinary persons, but neither they nor their higher-ranking officials submitted to its authority in their personal or political conduct. Their rule was arbitrary and, when it suited them, lawless. The ideas of a public, the public interest, the public domain, and public accountability were, for the most part, foreign to their thinking.

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Is reform possible? Most of my conversations with Pakistani friends end with their sorrowful conclusion that it is not. But I remain optimistic. Men and women of goodwill must continue to strive for reform howsoever distant the prospect of success may be. In this connection, we can receive some encouragement from the fact that it has happened in other countries. The struggle between good and

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