

Combating Corruption Starts from Thyself

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A news story that recently made headlines is the assassination of Fernando Villavicencio, a candidate in Ecuador's 2023 presidential election. He was gunned down on August 9th during an election campaign. Villavicencio was a strong voice against corruption and crime. Before entering politics, he was an investigative journalist covering drug trafficking and corruption.

Corrupt people are powerful. In fact, the very definition of corruption indicates that it is connected with power. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) defines corruption as "the use of public office for private gain or the abuse of entrusted power for private gain". It further asserts that corruption supports organised crime by shielding criminal entities from law enforcement and disruption orchestrated by dishonest public officials. Since Villavicencio was causing 'disturbance and disruption' to the powerful corrupt-criminal nexus, they just eliminated him.

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The detrimental effects of corruption are all pervasive and endless. The March 15, 2023 brief from the World Bank titled 'Addressing Corruption' affirms that corruption disproportionately affects the poor and vulnerable. It drives up the cost and diminishes access to essential services such as healthcare, education and justice. On a broader scale, corruption hampers investments, thereby impacting economic growth and the creation of jobs. Corruption also erodes trust in governmental institutions and sustains the inequalities and dissatisfaction that can lead to the rise of violent extremism and conflicts.

The people in positions of power who make decisions on the distribution of resources or provide access to facilities often tend to become corrupt. British historian Lord Acton wrote in a letter to Bishop Mandell on April 5, 1887: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." His observation which has since become a famous quote is probably a timeless truth. Corruption by people in power was present in remote ancient times. In the book "Thinking about Bribery", published in 2017 by Cambridge University Press, the author remarks that "Bribery has probably existed for as long as there have been some forms of authority to bribe." The book mentions that the Code of Urukagina, the oldest known legal code that dates back to around 2370 BC, includes provisions of punishments against bribe-taking by bureaucrats of Lagash. Lagash was an ancient Sumerian city that existed at the site of present-day Tellih – a village in south-eastern Iraq. Urukagina was the king of Lagash and his codes are widely acclaimed as the first documented instance of government reform.

Corruption is also a global problem. No country in the world can claim to be free of corruption. The differences are in the degree of corruption. One widely accepted and renowned measure of country-wise corruption is Transparency International's corruption perception index (CPI). Transparency International's CPI ranges from 0 – highly corrupt to 100 – very clean. The 2022 CPI has been published in

January 2023. It can be noted that no country scored above 90. The only country scoring 90 is Denmark. CPI for the G7 nations Germany, Canada, Japan, the UK, France, the USA and Italy are 79, 74, 73, 73, 72, 69 and 56 respectively. Despite economic development, social progress and the existence of well-established systems and structures, these countries are not free from corruption.

Why do people engage in corruption? A human child is born honest. The human body resists dishonesty, as lie detectors sense changes in blood pressure, heartbeat and eye movement when a person lies. Then how do people become corrupt and why? Is it due to poverty? Maybe not, we observe instances of corruption among the wealthy. Lack of education? But there are examples of highly educated individuals engaging in corruption. Is it due to a lack of religious faith? Again, we see people who practice religious faith involved in corruption. Actually, corruption can arise from various personal traits, motivations or circumstances that differ from person to person. Corruption cannot be tied to a single factor such as poverty, education or religious faith. It is a complex issue influenced by a combination of societal, economic, cultural and individual factors.

Dr. Marco Tavanti, a professor at the University of San Francisco, mentioned in a research article published in 2013 that culture is generally recognised to be an important macro-variable that influences the perception and practices of corruption. As corruption is linked with power, cultures with high power distance have a natural acceptance and tolerance for corruption by powerful people. A society that condemns corruption and places a high value on integrity can encourage individuals to reject corrupt conduct in order to safeguard their social standing.

In 2006, Jacob de Haan and Harry Seldadyo of the University of Groningen, Netherlands published a research paper titled, "The Determinants of Corruption: A Literature Survey and New Evidence". In that paper, they examined 70 hypothesised causes of corruption. They include income, size of the public sector, trade restrictions, population, schooling, political liberty, decentralisation, rule of law, ethnic heterogeneity, colonial past, culture, and so on. The number of causes and their diversity indicates how complex and difficult it is to find the determinants of corruption and ways to address them.

So, how to deal with corruption? Can incentives stop it? Probably not, because, as Mahatma Gandhi said, "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed." Can strong external measures like strict laws, surveillance, and policing stop corruption? Again, the corruptors will just strive to invent new ways to circumvent them. This does not mean that these are unnecessary. Laws, regulations and enforcement are essential for creating a deterrent and holding individuals accountable. However, as corruption is a complex phenomenon any single prescription cannot do away with it. Also, anti-corruption drives will have to be adapted to cultural values. Fostering a culture of integrity, promoting ethical values, and encouraging individuals to resist corrupt behaviour from within may create a sustainable change that goes beyond legal consequences.

As we have noted above, the causes of corruption are diverse and complex. There may be various psychological, social, economic and cultural factors that might be attributed to an individual's corrupt behaviour such as an opportunity for personal gain without consequences, a sense of being deprived due to unfair distribution of resources and career perks, peer pressure to fit in a professional or social group where corruption is normalised, and so on. However, the bottom line is always the lack of strong moral and ethical values. Strong personal ethics and morality can resist and override most of the causes of corruption.

A society can be termed corrupt, systems and institutions can be perceived as infested by corruption, and a country can gain a reputation as a corrupt country. But corruption begins with individuals. It is the corrupt individuals who taint societies, institutions and nations with the stigma of corruption.

Hence, the necessary changes to eliminate corruption from society and the country have to begin at the individual level within the inner self. As Michael Jackson sang in his famous song "Man in the Mirror": "I'm starting with the man in the mirror; I'm asking him to change his ways", let the 'man in the mirror' engage in introspection and muster the morals, ethics and conscience to make the change.

The writer is a former corporate professional and academic