

Book Announcement

Corruption in the Public Sector: An International Perspective

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A lot has been written so far about what corruption is, and how to curb it, if not how to eradicate it altogether. Mathew C. Stephenson (2016) produced a bibliography on the subject running into 348 pages. During the last three or four years, a lot more was written. Ronald Kroeze, Andre Vitoria, and Guy Geltner (2018) produced a seminal volume dealing with a chronological comparative and international explanation of large-scale corruption. Carole L. Jakiewicz (2020) edited a volume covering “Global Corruption...” The current book attempts to make a humble addition in this regard.

The study of corruption has rather very ancient beginnings. Kautilya in India, writing sometime during 321 and 296 BCE, categorized as many as 44 types of “embezzlement” (he did not use the expression “corruption” per se), and recommended ways to deal with the transgressors (Shama Sastry, 1967, pp. 67–71). That he was in fact codifying extant texts in his time only adds to the interest in the subject even before his time to dates unknown. That we have been witnessing innumerable studies and various attempts by several nations on curbing corruption suggests that we continue to muddle along. Needless to say, we are yet to find the “silver bullet” to slay this monstrous scourge.

It is important to note that the very definition of “corruption” is fraught with many a pitfall. It defies a simple, universally accepted, definition

(Rose, 2020, pp. 3–10; Tummala, 2020, pp. 174–181). Indeed the often-cited World Bank’s elementary definition of corruption as using public power for private gain misses a lot. For that matter, any simple definition is of necessity tends to be simplistic.

Corruption is ubiquitous. Pope Francis (2019) admitted that there is corruption even in the Vatican! It is complex and endemic, as each nation with its own unique culture not only has its own brand of corruption, but also a variety of ways of combating it. Transparency International (TI, 2017) made the profound statement in its 2016 Corruption Perception Index report of 176 nations it studied that “(N)o country gets close to a perfect score.” UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres (2018) observed that a total of \$2.6 trillion, which amounts to about 5% of global GDP, is lost due to corruption. But worse is the TI’s (2019) ominous conclusion in its 2018 Report that “(C)orruption chips away at democracy to produce a vicious cycle, where corruption undermines democratic institutions and, in turn, weak institutions are less able to control corruption.” All this might lead one to despair, reminding Mark Twain’s famous expression about weather that everyone talks about, but not much can be done to change it. There, however, are some success stories – all small countries such as Norway, New Zealand, Denmark, Singapore, and Hong Kong. And certainly there are lessons to learn.

A couple of explanations are necessary. One, the various contributors here make no attempt to define precisely what corruption is. The editor advised them not to indulge in that effort, given the complexity, and the size of this volume. Moreover, as already noted, such an exercise might prove to be futile as a universally accepted definition is well-nigh impossible. Two, the title “International” might sound pretentious. After all, only a handful of countries are studied here. It is “international” in the sense it covers a variety of

them, big and small, and not pertaining to a single entity. It also uniquely includes subjects that are not normally studied such as corruption in procurement where untold billions of dollars of tax payer's money are contracted out. And there is the more nascent subject of the use of information electronically, infringing upon individual privacy.

The Table of Contents shows thus:

Chapter 1: Prologue: The Fight Against Corruption, Krishna K. Tummala

Chapter 2: Best Practices for Combating Corruption: Learning from Singapore and Hong Kong, Jon S. T. Quah

Chapter 3: India's Continuing Fight Against Corruption: The Modi Regime's First Five Year Saga, Krishna K. Tummala

Chapter 4: Right to Information (RTI) to Ensure Transparency and Accountability: The Case of India, K. Jhansi Rani

Chapter 5: Corruption in Bangladesh, Habib Zafarullah and Ahmed Shafiqul Huque

Chapter 6: Experience of Brazil and Chile in Their Fight against Corruption, Daniel Zirker

Chapter 7: Spectacular Failure in Curbing Corruption in South Africa, Naas Ferreira

Chapter 8: Corruption in Procurement in Southeast Asia, David S. Jones

Chapter 9: Ethical Privacy Policies for E-Government Website, Aroon Manoharan and Tony Carrizales

Chapter 10: Epilogue, Krishna K. Tummala

The following abstracts would provide a brief summary of each of the chapters.

Before turning to gloom and doom, it is perhaps advisable to start with a few success stories. Quah who studied corruption for long, lists two such cases: Singapore and Hong Kong. Not only TI's Corruption Perception Index but also seven other indicators place these two nations that were very corrupt at one time, but high on fighting the scourge very successfully. Four best practices are shown as effective tools in this endeavour, which might provide lessons for others.

Indian writers' preoccupation with corruption goes eons back. The East India Company, perhaps the first trading corporation (Darlymple, 2019) from Britain, went to India to trade, but soon began flying the British flag, and was known to be very corrupt. Edmund Burke's long speech in the British Parliament impeaching Warren Hastings, who served as Governor-General in India, for his corruption stands out. Post-independent India, despite long rhetoric, had not fared any better. The Manmohan Singh led Congress Party governments, despite his own impeccable personal credentials, indulged in wholesale corruption during their 10-year regime until 2014. That led Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party to excoriate that government for its failing while leading the general election campaign of the same year, and promising to clean it all up. While indeed there was some action in this regard, the outcomes during the first five years (2014–2019) of his rule were very mixed. The unsurpassed rhetoric fell short of the promise.

Starting from the premise that decent information is a *sine qua non* of the corruption-fighting effort, Jhansi Rani shows the contribution of the Right to Information Act of 2005 in India which made it obligatory for all public agencies to provide any information (excluding that which compromises national security) in a timely fashion, the failure of which would invoke punishment. While this in itself is seen as a success, it also led to unintended consequences such as putting the lives of journalists, in particular those who went

aggressively after corruption stories of the high and mighty, in jeopardy, as has been the case in many other countries.

Zafarullah and Huque turn attention to Bangladesh. They show that successive governments failed to curb corruption to the extent it became ubiquitous, running through the entire social and political fabric. They analyse the underlying historical, social, cultural, political, economic, and administrative reasons for pervasive malfeasance in the public sector. Demonstrating such complexity, they mirror the difficulties faced by successive governments, and their failure to deal with corruption as all efforts have been politicized.

Brazil and Chile have nearly similar recent political histories. Both emerged from military dictatorships into democracies, albeit with contrasting national emphases. But both countries went in separate directions, one succeeding better than the other. Zirker tries to uncover the key causal factors in such contrasting experiences.

Naas Ferreira provides a retrospect and prospect in South Africa. A small White minority Afrikaners ruled a large native Black and Colored majority. Apartheid policies of the past, suppressed the majority of the nation. By 1994, Nelson Mandela of the African National Congress party took over. A new Constitution was accepted in 1996 which set mighty powerful precepts, followed by a plethora of laws, toward an ethical and efficient rule looking forward toward an equal society. But it did not take long after Mandela's death for the country to fall into a morass of corruption. The succeeding President Jacob Zuma was embroiled in 783 corruption cases costing multi-millions of Rands. Private entities, led by one Gupta family, enabled the "state capture" for personal gain. This chapter shows the spectacular failure of that nation in its efforts at curbing corruption.

All countries, in their development ventures, and efforts to provide national security, spend enormous amounts of taxpayers' money. The less developed countries (LDCs) facing not only the necessity of providing for their citizens at least a minimally decent standard of life but also trying to catch up with the vanguard nations have a more onerous task on their hands. Procurement, thus, becomes common and complex. Outsourcing many governmental functions to the private sector with large amounts of money involved, results in lucrative sources for corruption. Jones, directs his attention toward the experience of Southeast Asian nations, and shows three different reasons for failure to curb corruption in contracting out.

With the increasing public use of the Internet and social media, governments worldwide are adopting digital technologies to leverage big data analyses to improve their decision-making and organizational performance. More importantly disseminating information to the public accurately and quickly is seen as paramount. Manoharan and Carrizales look at the issues involved in this process which are seen as threatening privacy, and the governments' need to restore confidence and trust of the public. Their primary focus is on local governments which seem to be widely using the emerging technologies, and their concomitant challenges.

The epilogue reflects on some lessons learnt which are not altogether new, but profound. The fight against corruption is not necessarily a lost cause despite all the difficulties and failures. There are success stories, though they are all from small countries. Large and diverse countries provide some serious challenges. Size of a nation matters. There are ecological constraints. Cultural/religious hurdles are not easy to surmount. Consequently, no single strategy to fight corruption succeeds. What works in one, does not necessarily work in others.

Parading a plethora of laws to combat corruption is not enough; they need to be implemented. Similarly, fighting the symptoms of corruption is not going to succeed. One must first find out what the causes for corruption are, followed by efforts to mitigate them. In addition, it is not enough to try to curb corruption sectorally, or piece meal. The effort must be all-encompassing.

Similarly, established institutions to fight corruption must in fact be used for that purpose only. They should not be burdened with fighting other crimes. In particular, they ought not to be used for political, partisan and personal gain. Most certainly, they should not be converted by the government in office into instruments of suppressing opposition. It is recognized that indeed some political exigencies come in the way of their successful use in pursuit of their true purposes such as appointing some to high office with not so stellar background. Frequent regime changes may contribute to the inability of a sustaining effort to fight corruption. Several questions are also raised, but remain unanswered. They deserve further study. What exactly does it mean when we say a country is corrupt? What is the unit of measurement? The study of political and constitutional corruption are given short shrift. In fact, constitutional corruption is more insidious in that it strikes at the very basis of government, and works against the society as such. In the ultimate analysis, enlightened leadership, independent and well-funded instruments to fight corruption are necessary. More importantly, those institutions must be allowed to work without political interference. In the absence of the above, a sustained, and meaningful fight against corruption would only be futile in the long run.
Note: The book is scheduled for release on March 8, 2021, but an earlier electronic version may be available.

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