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Culture, Corruption and the Hereafter

Corruption is a symptom of some social disease, but there are very many different kinds of such diseases.

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Some readers, whose intelligence I respect, took my last op-ed to be dismissive of corruption as a cause of Pakistan's social decay. I apologise for having failed to express myself adequately: I certainly do not dispute that Pakistan is reaping the terrible consequences of wholesale corruption. Corruption, by definition, expropriates that which rightfully belongs to others. By doing so, it hurts the poor more than the rich, lowers productivity, creates mistrust of authority, breaks down the social contract and leads towards ungovernability. We all know that the average Pakistani is frustrated and that he encounters corruption while reporting a crime, seeking justice in a traffic accident, getting an electricity or gas connection, securing admission to school for children, or getting a business contract signed. We have *kunda* mafias, tanker mafias, and mafias of all shapes and forms that raise the collective blood pressure.

So, instead of emphasising corruption, why did I choose to identify the principal problems of Pakistan as a) unbridled population growth; b) terrorism; and c) slowness of cultural modernisation? (Please wait until I define modernity; it doesn't mean consumerism or rock music!).

My plea: corruption is a symptom of some social disease, but there are very many different kinds of such diseases. To borrow a medical analogy: high fever could come from typhoid, pneumonia, measles, flu and a hundred other diseases. They can all make you hot and sick, but no genuine doctor specifically targets 'fever'. Buying the wares of roadside *hakeems* who advertise anti-fever brews is worse than useless. It is equally useless to target corruption without understanding its origins.

At one level, corruption is easily understandable. When Willie Sutton, America's famous bank robber was put to trial, the judge asked why he robbed banks. Sutton's answer was straightforward: "That's where they keep the money." This makes perfect sense from the point of view of rational choice theory. Sutton was bent upon maximising his well-being while knowing that it came at the cost of depriving others. In short, he was selfish. To those who perceive the world in adversarial terms and have a negative view of human nature, foul and fair are equal and corruption is just as natural as honesty.

Our world has millions of Suttons. People in every country go through red lights, break queues, cheat on taxes, forge documents and degrees and rob banks. In this regard, there is nothing unique about Pakistan. The real question is quantitative: why do some societies have many more unbridled self-seekers than others? Why has Pakistan become so terribly tolerant of the chain of corruption that extends from its generals and political leaders down to the humble office peon and the dweller of a *katchi abadi*?

The answer according to sociologists, such as Eric Uslaner at the University of Maryland, lies in lack of social trust. Corruption and trust are polar opposites. Trust is a value expressing the belief that others are part of your moral community. It lays the basis for cooperation with people who are different from yourself. People who have faith in others are more likely to endorse strong standards of moral and legal behaviour. Simply put, corruption flourishes when we don't trust one another. Francis Fukuyama of Stanford University, who coined the phrase 'trust capital', argues that trusting societies have lower administration costs, higher institutional reliability and can have large and efficient organisations.

Trust capital is not increased by dire threats that you will be punished in the hereafter. Studies of European societies by Max Weber in the 19th century firmly established that those who share a religion may still cheat one another. His results can be succinctly summed: Protestants were this-worldly and ethical, Catholics were other-worldly and corrupt. Today, corrupt countries such as Greece, the Philippines, Mexico and Italy have more churches per capita when compared with less corrupt countries such as Germany or France.

These lessons apply equally to us. A celebrated couplet of Allama Iqbal is manifestly wrong: the symbolic Mahmood (ruler) and Ayaz (ruled) have never become one — or more trusting of each other — although both have prayed in the same *suff* (prayer line). The number of mosques in Pakistan is said to have doubled in 30 years. Bazaar merchants and traders drip piety from their pores, perform frequent pilgrimages, but most are defiantly corrupt and short-change their customers as readily as they cheat the state on taxes, electricity and water. The Urdu saying *nau sau choohay kha kay billi haj ko chalee* fits neatly. Our political leaders are no different. Flaunting his piety, President Asif Ali Zardari has ordered the sacrifice of one black goat for his every day in office. His wife, whose financial integrity was just as suspect, was a *mureed* of Pir Pinjir, the famous holy man.

So, what can increase the trust capital within a society?

The answer lies in speeding up the transition towards modernity. Modern societies build trust because they emphasise competence over kinship and efficiency over patronage. Jobs in a truly modern society do not depend on your caste or religion; just your suitability matters. Transparency and a free press — also a part of modernity — are powerful enemies of corruption and can potentially keep the elite in check. A legal system that has a clear set of rules, which apply equally to all members of a society augments trust whenever the announced rules are actually respected and applied. Democracy, while not strictly necessary (Singapore!), can be helpful in enhancing trust. But democracy must not be understood as a system wherein feudal lords and wealthy men play musical chairs in parliaments. Instead, it has to be a system that actively involves the population in matters of governance.

To conclude: it is certainly time for the people of Pakistan to get rid of their venal leaders. But that is far from enough. A larger social transformation — one that encourages modernity — is needed. Let us beware of magical solutions, such as Cricketer Khan's promise to eliminate corruption in 90 days (and terrorism in 19 days!). Hanging current leaders by their necks (or perhaps, chopping off a few limbs) can yield little beyond some temporary satisfaction. Dealing with a systemic problem of changing a culture of distrust into one of trust, is much tougher.

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