

The Corruption Surprise

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"Since 2001, Bangladesh has improved every year on the Corruption Perception Index except in 2007. Surprised? Rounding up politicians in the name of an 'anti-corruption' drive may grab headlines, but as long as power remains concentrated, reducing corruption will be difficult. The government's complete monopoly on state power, systematic disregard of due process, and intimidation of free thinkers all have conspired institutionally to undermine its goal of fighting corruption."

When Transparency International published its Corruption Perceptions Index—or CPI—for 2007, the leading English daily in Bangladesh greeted the news with a deliberately positive headline: 'Bangladesh improves on its graft image: Climbs up to 7th position from bottom of TI's corruption index.' Indeed it is an improvement, considering that Bangladesh had tied for the third lowest spot last year. What's important, position or perception?

The perception that underlies Bangladesh's gain in rank remains exactly the same as before. Both in 2006 and in 2007 Bangladesh received a CPI score of 2.0. In other words, Bangladesh showed no improvement in corruption between 2006 and 2007. The country's ranking improved only because seven countries of the world became more corrupt this year: Cambodia, Central African Republic, Papua New Guinea, Turkmenistan, Venezuela, Equatorial Guinea and Laos. In addition, four new countries (Afghanistan, Tonga, Uzbekistan and Somalia), also with worse corruption than Bangladesh, were added as new entrants to the list.

Policymakers and the media engaged in a hair-splitting exercise to figure out what's more important, the rank or the score. But given the self-censorship in the country, few had the courage to say outright that the rank is an outcome of indexing. What is important is that the perception of corruption in Bangladesh remains as strongly negative as before.

That conclusion, not made forcefully in public, would be an embarrassment to the caretaker government, which has been fighting a 'war on corruption.' Indeed, like authoritarian governments almost everywhere, it legitimizes its existence primarily to its anti-corruption drive. Cleaning up politics is the pretext on which it has stretched the limits of constitutional interpretation by delaying the election date till the end of 2008. But now the world's leading corruption watchdog comes out to say essentially that the anti-corruption effort has had little or no effect so far. How can this be tackled? Madness of the method

Not wanting to provoke the government, TIB (Transparency International Bangladesh) had to play a delicate line. It noted that the unchanged score 'proves that at least corruption is not increasing in Bangladesh,' and attributed that success to the government's anti-corruption efforts. It then explained: 'Included in this year's index were data collected until the end of July 2007, which means CPI 2007 was relatively more influenced by the data from 2006' [1].

Government spokespeople had got their ammo. The timeframe, mid-2006 to mid-2007, is claimed as a major reason why this report should not be given much importance. Questions were also raised about the methodology, especially the fact that the index is based on a perception of corruption rather than 'actual' corruption.

But perception does not arise out of the blue. Most businesses have experience in having to provide bribes to secure deals, or simply be allowed to do business without hassle. Some report that their fear of terrorism is now replaced by a fear of the government.

Moreover, a perception of corruption is not a fluke. CPI is not something done once by one organization. It is a two-year rolling average of fourteen corruption-related surveys done by eleven independent organizations. Perception is crucial to investment decisions, and perception is precisely what this index tracks; hence the name Corruption Perceptions Index. Therefore the perception of the business community is not a mitigating factor to explain away the CPI score, it is the score.

Another common talking point was to say that a low score is misleading, since 90 percent of the people are not corrupt [2]. TIB should have been more forthcoming about this allegation. The survey is not concerned with corruption of the population at large. Its focus is solely on corruption in the public sector. When it says that Bangladesh scores low, it is essentially saying that Bangladesh's public officials are perceived as more corrupt than those in most other countries. Image is everything

Bangladeshi policymakers, past and present, have all been extremely image-conscious. As a result, they have often blamed the messenger instead of heeding the message. A pooh-poohing of TI's report, therefore, is not surprising.

The government's stance is that the perception of the community at large is irrelevant, for it knows exactly who is corrupt, how far, and how to deal with them. In this, our self-appointed graft-busters consider themselves uniquely capable, for, in the words of the Chief Advisor, "a nonparty caretaker government doesn't suffer from the burdens of political patronage"; [3].

With this logic, the government used the "anti-corruption" drive to undertake a political purge, with little respect for due legal processes. In public, it created the impression that Bangladesh was becoming more and more corrupt under successive democratic governments led by politicians, and therefore a forceful intervention was in order. Taking account vs taking credit

A look at how Bangladesh fared between 2001 and 2007 in Transparency International's own numbers tells a startlingly different story. The graph below includes data from 2001 when TI first started tracking the CPI score for Bangladesh [4].

Notice that Bangladesh improved every year on the CPI score except in 2007. From 2001 to 2006 Bangladesh was under democratic rule, and contrary to the meme that has been nurtured by Bangladesh's current government, Bangladesh improved steadily. If past trends had continued, 2007 should have shown an improved CPI score. However, the military government's "anti-corruption" drive has instead stopped Bangladesh's slow climb out of corruption.

The government's intent of reducing corruption is noble. But its complete monopoly on state power, its shelter behind emergency laws, track record of arbitrary detentions without due-process rights, and its intimidation of freedom of expression all conspire institutionally to undermine the goal of reducing corruption.

The crucial missing element of fighting corruption is accountability. What the TI data show is the result of an unaccountable government's "anti-corruption" drive. As with all dictatorial governments, the results are predictable. It is no coincidence that at the bottom of TI's list this year is Burma, one of the world's longest ruling military dictatorships.

Corruption in Bangladesh cannot be eliminated by decapitating the political leadership, and it certainly cannot be done by an unaccountable military-led government. There is no question that individuals in past governments engaged in massive corruption. But what encouraged that is the tyranny of a few within those governments. As long as power in Bangladesh remains concentrated, reducing corruption will be difficult. Rounding up politicians in the name of an "anti-corruption" drive may grab headlines, but the deeper damage caused by the application of draconian laws and the complete disregard for the rule of law will only breed more corruption. Our past gives us every reason and every right to be very suspicious of any government run by a few and accountable to none. Notes:

1. The Daily Star, September 27, 2007
2. New Age, September 27, 2007
3. Time, March 22, 2007
4. According to TI, the 2001 CPI score is an outlier based on a small number of surveys, but we have left the data in for completeness.

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