Fighting Corruption: Do We Have a Flawed Approach?

We need to focus on reforming institutions and not individuals, argues Mridul Chowdhury



AMIRUL RAJIV

DURING the past year, there has been significant rejoicing over the capture of some corrupt government officials who have amassed huge amounts of wealth through manipulating loopholes in government procedures. The rejoicing is understandable, but what is sad to see is that there is so little talk about the very loopholes that have allowed these individuals to suck out money illegally from helpless citizens. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) seems to have taken on a rather narrow-minded mission to strike at corrupt individuals, and has largely failed to bring to light the sources of these corruptions in the government.

I once had to go to the Revenue Department of a government telephone office in Dhaka, where they keep track of phone bills and payments, and came across a startling discovery. The entries in the huge register books that kept track of this information were in bold and clear figures -- however, they were written in pencil! If you know how to satisfy a clerk or an official who has access to these register books, all it takes is a simple "eraser-action" to put your records "straight." When the procedure is that simple, how do you blame the clerk or the top government executive in the office who is turning a blind eye to this or maybe even the person running the country?

We have to realise that corruption in the government is fundamentally a result of simple economics -- that of demand and supply. When there is demand for citizens in paying a little extra to "straighten records" or to receive a government