

The future of our campaign against corruption

We cannot have results overnight, or declare victory over corruption by simply empowering an institution or individuals to fight this malaise. But we can make progress if we show our commitment to battle the venality of graft, larceny, and use of public office for private gain at all levels of our society.

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

"In any country where talent and virtue produce no advancement, money will be the national god. Its inhabitants will either have to possess money or make others believe that they do. Wealth will be the highest virtue, poverty the greatest vice. Those who have money will display it in every imaginable way. If their ostentation does not exceed their fortune, all will be well. But if their ostentation does exceed their fortune they will ruin themselves. In such a country, the greatest fortunes will vanish in the twinkling of an eye. Those who don't have money will ruin themselves with vain efforts to conceal their poverty. That is one kind of affluence: the outward sign of wealth for a small number, the mask of poverty for the majority, and a source of corruption for all."

— Diderot (French Philosopher)

It was only a little more than two years ago that our nation watched with amazement as the stories of stupendous corruption and greed of our public officials were revealed on the pages of our newspapers and on electronic media. Most of us applauded the virtuous campaign against corruption that was launched by the then interim government, and most of us seemed to be in full agreement when the alleged perpetrators of the heinous offences were rounded up and thrown into jail.

The celebrity list included former ministers, parliamentarians, business people, and civil servants. Many of us expressed our support for this cam-

aign through writing, talk shows, and other public forums. Most of us agreed that this was a campaign that was long overdue, one that would cleanse our politics for good, and pave the way to repair our much tarnished international image as a venal country.

We applauded when the moribund Anti-Corruption Commission was recharged, renewed, and launched into action with new leadership, who seemed highly committed to take on the menace of corruption head on. In less than two years of its renewal and restructure, the Anti Corruption Commission lodged more than a thousand cases with courts against individuals from all walks of life, mostly prom-

inent people. We were all reassured by these actions that, finally, the long arm of the law has spared no one.

But our expectations were soon to be apprehended when the plethora of cases kept piling up without much advancement -- primarily for investigation delays, and lack of adequate evidence to prosecute the alleged culprits. That was a principal reason why only a handful of the individuals out of about 150 celebrities arrested and cited for corruption and pilferage of public exchequer could be prosecuted in that period.

Even this handful of prosecution had been done in such a haphazard manner that the higher courts, later in a more litigation friendly climate, would declare the whole process illegal, leaving us all wondering what went wrong.

In my earlier piece about when our anti-corruption campaign was in full blast, I had commented that the entire campaign would be doomed if the whole process did not move fast, quality of investigation did not improve, and the number of cases was not brought within a reasonable limit. Some of the recent acquittals by the higher court of several highly watched corruption cases, unfortunately, establish this hypothesis.

Another unfortunate fallout of these dismissals, and the litany of requests for withdrawals of hundreds of such cases, is a growing perception in the public mind that our campaign against corruption is losing steam, and we are going back to our old ways. It will be a

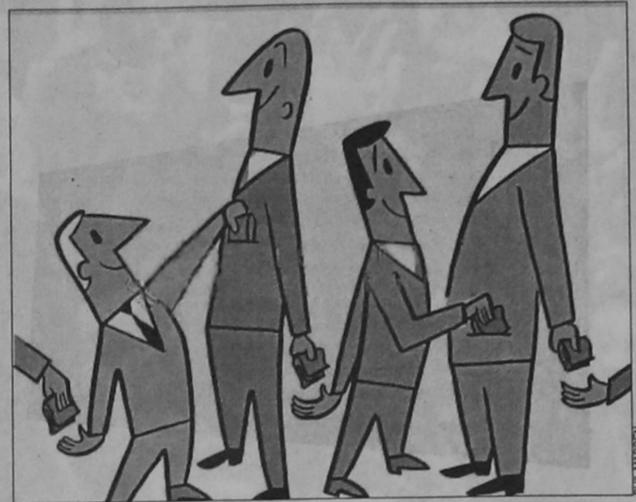
sad day if this perception turns to reality.

No government lasts forever, least of all an unelected interim government. However, any good act that is undertaken for the well being of the nation deserves to continue, in my opinion, the campaign against corruption and corrupt politicians rates at the top of such good acts.

The government that initiated this bold campaign is no longer there. The baton has been passed to a government that was voted to power with the highest popular support in recent history. And I do not think the government would like to defy the people's will that we do not return to the period of kleptocracy that had eaten into our soul.

A major reason why an anti-corruption campaign fails is because actions initiated by one government are shelved by the succeeding government on grounds that those could have been politically motivated. In other cases, the actions are slowed or simply allowed to disappear for political compromises.

Usually, in a parliamentary democracy, the party that had been voted out of power can exert pressure on the new government to carry on with the campaign if it is the one that had initiated it. Unfortunately, we do not have the immediate past government that had launched the anti-corruption crusade to ensure that. But our nation has it in its conscience, and we had the election promise of our newly elected leader to carry on with the campaign.



Will this chain reaction ever end?

However, even with the best of intentions, and good will from all, a campaign can fail if it is not propped up by adequate infrastructure. This infrastructure comprises a firm political support for the campaign, ensuring independent and unbiased operation of the agency that is entrusted to implement this campaign, and fortifying it with adequate resources to carry out this mandate.

I know we cannot have results overnight, and we cannot declare victory over corruption by simply empowering an institution or individuals to fight this malaise. This is an uphill task.

But we can make progress if we show our commitment to battle the venality of graft, larceny, and use of public office for private gain at all levels of our society.

This should not only be through verbal commitments, but also through actions that are visible and transparent. We will eagerly await further and unhindered continuance of a program started more than two years ago that made us feel good both at home and abroad.

Ziauddin Choudhury is a former civil servant.

Redefining victory in Afghanistan

If military victory is a matter of a subjugation of the people then Afghanistan is the most treacherous place in the world. There are only pyrrhic victories in Afghanistan. Indeed victory in Afghanistan has altogether a different meaning.

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

SOON the world will see the 80th anniversary of the rout of Taliban by American forces in Afghanistan. The coalition force is now a 41-nation International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF). The total strength of Allied Forces has gone up to 90,000. The US troops strength has increased from 57,000 to 68,000. President Obama's administration has relocated its focus from Iraq to Afghanistan. A new US commander General Stanley McChrystal has replaced General David McKiernan as the Chief of ISAF forces.

It is the second longest American war after Vietnam. Yet the ISAF casualties keep mounting. More than 1200 coalition troops have died in Afghanistan. Of the dead, 730 were Americans 175 British and 124 Canadian. Britain is nervous about its growing casualties. The Taliban are as elusive as ever. And when they strike they strike with ferocity.

Not long ago, they had launched a daring attack on Kandahar jail and secured the release of their fellow combatants. The Taliban are far from being a spent force. Disenchantment of Afghans with coalition forces are growing and the

Afghans are getting restive about the presence of foreign forces in their soil.

Civilian casualties are aiding the rage. Thousands have died and the death toll stokes the fire of vengeance. Last year alone around 1,000 civilians were killed by errant combat mission and by wayward air-strikes. The vengeance runs deep; the victory of the coalition forces has fallen into disrepute. Poppy cultivation is paying court to the Taliban, and is thriving. The coalition forces are learning to live with it. Now how do you define victory in Afghanistan?

For the coalition forces the very definition of victory is changing. Former American foreign secretary General Colin Powell realised the ground realities of Afghanistan, and wisely observed that "victory" in Afghanistan has to be redefined. From the way things are turning out in Afghanistan, it can be understood that the prospect of a decisive military victory looks remote. It is becoming a battle of winning the hearts and minds of the Afghans.

Afghanistan has a predominantly tribal society. It is a patchwork of dominant Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Turkomens, Baloch and others. The Afghans have always been



It's not victory until Afghanistan says so.

wary of foreigners. It has been demonstrated down the history.

In the thirties of the 19th century, a contest was going on between the British and the Russians for sphere of influence in Kabul. It was an inflexible decision of the British that Afghanistan has to be secured for the British Raj. The tussle was called the "Great Game." It required patience to play the "Great Game" deftly, but the British wanted quick result.

Alexander "Bokhara" Burnes was the British commander. He was an impetuous career soldier and wanted to go all out. A contingent of 15,000 British and Indian soldiers were sent

to Kabul supported by 30,000 strong baggage train. His order was to "take Afghanistan in hand and make it a British dependency." Kabul was occupied and a puppet ruler was installed. But the Afghans were not the type that would tolerate foreign troops for too long. Soon they rose in revolt and Burnes was cut to pieces.

The whole army was routed, a single soldier managed to struggle to Peshawar in bedraggled condition. The event remains a chilling reminder for any foreign occupation in Afghanistan.

When the Russians went to Afghanistan the then Russian

President Leonid Brezhnev boasted that it will take two to three weeks to complete the operation. The Russians were pinned down. The war went on for ten years. When the Russians left in 1989 they had suffered over 19,000 casualties. 1.5 million Afghans were killed and the war left 15 million landmines in Afghanistan.

If military victory is a matter of a subjugation of the people then Afghanistan is the most treacherous place in the world. There are only pyrrhic victories in Afghanistan. Indeed victory in Afghanistan has altogether a different meaning.

The new ISAF commander in Afghanistan General McChrystal wants to provide security to the Afghan people. For that he will isolate the Taliban pockets from the general people. There will be no more wayward air-strikes of the kind seen in the past. He comes nearer to the shortest possible time. It is the tribal compact that gives them security. Foreign presence only destabilises it. That is why it is much easier for the Taliban to snuggle back into the favour of Afghan people. Their presence offers security.

Poppy cultivation is another reality in Afghanistan. Only 4% of the total arable land in Afghanistan is used for poppy cultivation. It is the high return that attracts Afghans to poppy cultivation. Of the 3 billion US Dollar generated from opium trade only a

quarter goes to the general people. And it accounts for two thirds of GDP. That is why Afghan life continues to remain of subsistence level.

The living standard is primitive! The 2004 United Nations Development indicators list Afghanistan at the bottom of the table, being 173 out of 178. All significant human indicators like nutrition, infant mortality, life expectancy and literacy list Afghanistan poorly, life expectancy at birth is 42.9 years, and the infant mortality is 154.67 per 1,000 live births (2008).

Half the Afghan children under 5 are malnourished. Only 10% of rural mothers are literate. Adult literacy is 28%. Gross national income is 250 US Dollar. Population using improved sanitation is 34%. The percentage of people using improved drinking water is 22%. The per capita health expenditure is 19 US Dollar. One year old immunised against measles is 64%. Physicians per 100,000 is 19. Children with diarrhoea receiving oral re-hydration are 48%. Percentage of under-five children suffering from underweight is 39. The litany of ills is long.

For Afghanistan victory is to be redefined here. The task list for victory in Afghanistan is to be fought in human development and social advancement sectors. For that the countries of coalition forces have unlimited possibility. We have yet to see how quickly the coalition forces learn it and get down to work on it. The sooner the better.

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How malls trick retailers



A friend of mine wanted to rent a shop space. He was pleasantly surprised to find one might soon become available on the second floor of a shopping mall nearby. "Thank goodness," he said. "I was worried the only thing I'd be able to get is somewhere tucked away on a high floor of some tall building."

His fears made sense to me. Last year I bought a camera from a fancy showroom in town. It stopped working. I was told to go to the customer service department.

This turned out to be a tiny room on

the tenth floor of a huge block on a sprawling industrial estate on an otherwise uninhabited tundra in the extreme north of Russia or somewhere like that. I threw the camera away.

I told him: "The second floor is as high as you want to be. Never rent a place higher than that."

The following day, we arrived at the car park of the mall, and then went up two or three floors to meet a friend who was acting as our unofficial property advisor. "Is this the second floor?" I asked. She shook her head. "No. You just came up through three layers of car park which don't count." I replied: "So this is the ground floor?" She shook her head again.

We went up the escalator to the next level of the building. "So this is the ground level?" I asked. She replied: "No, actually, this is the lower ground level." We went up another escalator.

"So this must be the ground level," I said. She shook her head again, saying: "No, there are two lower ground levels."

We went up yet another set of escalators. This time I didn't need to ask. I just looked at her. Looking guilty, she said: "This is also not the ground level. This is the upper lower ground level mezzanine." (Mezzanine means "in-between floor.") I am not making any of this up. You can go and check it out yourself. The mall is in called Festival Walk and is in Hong Kong.

We eventually reached a floor, which was labeled "ground level." By that time, I calculated that we had risen at least eight floors from where we started. A short walk along this level led us to yet another set of escalators, which we climbed, expecting to reach the first floor. But this turned out to be the "upper ground floor." I

pointed to a nearby set of escalators. "So they lead us to the first floor?" I asked. She shook her head and said: "No, they lead to the upper ground floor mezzanine."

To cut a long story short, we eventually found the store. It was right at the top of the building, on a level labeled "second floor," which was at least 11, possibly 12 floors up from where we'd started.

Despite this ridiculous situation, my friend put down a cash deposit for the shop. If the managers of that shopping mall are reading this, you have to collect it. He has left it for you in a tiny room on the ninety-eighth floor of a huge block on a sprawling industrial estate on an otherwise uninhabited dune in the extreme west of the Gobi Desert. Good luck.

For more on shopping mall floors, visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com.

