

Dabhi, James C. 2010, 'Bribe and corruption violate people's right to development in Afghanistan', Published in Afghan Online Press, on 20<sup>th</sup> July 2010, ([http://www.aopnews.com/opinion/dabhi\\_corruption.shtml](http://www.aopnews.com/opinion/dabhi_corruption.shtml)).

### **Bribe and corruption violate people's right to development in Afghanistan**

Bribe and corruption are not new to south Asian countries; Afghanistan may be topping the list. Some may say it is a way of life here. Bribe and corruption are *haraam* (an Arabic term meaning forbidden) but people in power and position thrive on it.

Afghan and foreign officials have been under attack for being corrupt. There have been public charges blaming each other for the rampant corruption surrounding aid spending. Afghan officials say most of the corruption is due to the fact that foreign contractors and NGOs control the aid. Afghan Justice Minister Habibullah Ghalib recently told reporters in Kabul, "The foreigners come here and wipe their dirty hands on our clean clothes." But international officials generally defend the foreign NGOs' record and transparency. They argue that the international aid is generally well spent and there are good audit controls in place to ensure that it meets the needs of the people.

Eliminating corruption has become the top priority for the government in Afghanistan and it will be an issue discussed in Kabul conference. The agenda if translated into to action has a huge political and economic implication for those who reap the benefits of corruption (in Afghanistan and outside). Therefore scepticism among the masses about the political-will of the higher ups in implementing the agenda is understandable.

According to a recent survey by Integrity Watch Afghanistan, the average Afghan household pays out an estimated \$100 US in petty bribes every year. With approximately 70 percent of the population surviving on less than \$1 US per day, the burden on families is enormous. A staggering sum of \$100-250 million USD is paid in bribes every year. To put it in relevant terms, this is equivalent to half the national development budget for 2006. Rupert Colville of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reported, "The main conclusion is that the abuse of power is the key driver of poverty in Afghanistan". The report says the majority of Afghans live in poverty despite the fact that some \$35 billion US (£23 billion) in aid was poured into the country between 2002 and 2009. The BBC online news reported that "widespread corruption further limits access to services for a large proportion of the population". It blames Afghan officials for advancing their own interests at the expense of the general public.

Kai Eide, the new UN Special Representative in Afghanistan, said at an event, "Corruption in Afghanistan is endemic, it hurts the poorest people disproportionately, pushes people away from the state and undermines our joint efforts to build peace, stability and progress for Afghanistan's peoples." He also went on to say that government corruption must be tackled from the bottom up with the people, Afghan civil society and the media having a crucial role in supporting government efforts.

Widespread corruption is systemic, structurally deep rooted and has gone unchallenged for years. It is systemic and structural because it not simply a few individuals taking bribes, but the entire governmental structure seems to be operating using bribes, whether it is the legislature, bureaucracy or judiciary. To illustrate the extent of the corruption, in 2008 Toronto Star columnist Rosie DiManno quoted Attorney General Abdul Jabar Sabet as saying: "They are in the central government, the provincial governments, the district centres, police stations, army garrisons, the banks, the aid agencies – not a sector of Afghan society is without contamination of corruption".

No doubt there are a few people in the system who refuse to take bribes. But the refusal of a few, though courageous and praiseworthy, will not have much of an overall impact or bring about the desired reform.

Corrupt leaders and people of position in the system are much more dangerous than a police officer asking for a couple of dollars at the airport check-in or low-ranking

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official asking for a few hundred Afghanis to move your file up. Many of us get annoyed and shout at these small fry and often ignoring the big guns who are the main culprits. Those in high places have money, arms and connections, so people naturally fear for their lives when it comes to challenging high-level corruption.

Government knows who is engaging in corrupt behaviour, but it will not be easy for it to take these people to task. After all, it is difficult to hurt one's own, isn't it? Corrupt enemies can be easily targeted, but what about friends who are corrupt? These are the ones you call upon when you need a favour. To eliminate a person is no big deal in this part of the world and it can easily be covered up with a bribe. Exposing these people through print and electronic media requires tremendous courage. It is a risky business but are there other options?

Democracy is still young in Afghanistan and not adequately comprehended by a larger population; and politicians and bureaucrats are no exception. By and large the politics here is feudal, patriarchal, concentrated with the elite class and family network. A political system based on ideology and development discourse has yet to emerge. For a civil society to flourish it must be nurtured in a democratic climate which at the moment is largely hyped by the international community in Afghanistan. This civil society barely exists in this country, and where it does it is weak. Academia is not free from corruption and nepotism either, and those in academic circles often lack the courage, commitment and leadership required to address these issues.

The civil society and the news media can be a big help in fighting corruption that is if the state allows sufficient freedom to these entities to play their role. But when the state players have such a stake in the bribery and corruption, why would they want to allow civil society and the media to be the spoiler? The media and civil society will have to begin to realise that rights are often not freely given, but have to be taken. Unless these actors collectively exercise their right to expose corruption and pursue follow up, hardly anything will change and the masses will continue to suffer.

Academia can help in the process of transformation of the country but then academia and educational institutions need to act without engaging in what is called party politics. They cannot remain apolitical and mute spectators. They need to provide some leadership through their research-based data through seminars, workshops and campaign against corruption nationwide. Let their studies support the civil society in highlighting the nature of corruption that exists and how it has violated the *right to development* of the masses here in Afghanistan

Unless ordinary Afghan women and men make their voices heard, corruption and nepotism will persist. In the process, hundreds of millions of dollars will be siphoned off in corruption, money that was intended for the development of the people of Afghanistan.

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