

## **The Need for an Anti-Corruption Culture**

The conventional wisdom in regard to pacts and agreements, whether regional or international, including the United Nations Anti-Corruption Convention, is that the acid test is in the implementation rather than in the text. So is the case generally with legislation of any kind.

The text of the United Nations convention is quite elaborate and cogent. Its full implementation should always be a vital target. We at the Arab Anti-Corruption Organization are striving to persuade all Arab countries that have not yet signed the convention to join in. The fact is that corruption remains rampant in the Arab region and in the world at large. Perhaps corruption would have been more endemic and more pernicious than it is now had it not been for the endeavors mounted in combating it at the national, regional, and international levels. Its full eradication, however, does not seem in sight here or anywhere in the world.

Experience has invariably demonstrated that an effective campaign to combat corruption presupposes the sway of a particular culture in society, namely one exalting transparency, integrity, and accountability. The problem in our part of the world is that this kind of culture is still largely deficient or lacking. Rather, the dominant ambience is one of laxity, condonation, and tolerance vis-à-vis acts of corruption. The outcome is reflected in the absence of public accountability for undue acts or deeds. The public, via the press, through polls, or by any other means, does not censure or condemn misdeeds, infractions, or misbehavior characterized as corruption. Only too often an opulent individual is revered for his wealth regardless of how he had made it.

An anti-corruption culture would only develop and be enriched over time with vigilant and determined action in both the private and public domains. The dawn of an anti-corruption culture, however, is not likely to emerge as long as the structure of authority in a country is not amenable to effective accountability.

Accountability in governments may generally be achieved only if and when the principle of separation of authorities is properly observed. More particularly, the executive authority is supposed to be completely apart from the legislative authority so that parliament may exercise an effective measure of accountability over the government. In that context the situation in most Arab countries leaves a lot to be desired. In the same vein, the judiciary - the justice apparatus generally - is supposed to enjoy complete autonomy from the executive branch of government. Any subordination of the judiciary to the executive authority, as in matters of appointment, reshuffling, assignment of tasks, or otherwise, risks costing the judiciary its prowess and effectiveness in meting out accountability in society. Unfortunately the judiciary in most Arab countries is not adequately independent from the executive authority which in a number of cases is practically a one-man show or a family affair beyond the reach of any kind of accountability.

Democracy as a system of governance is universally identified with accountability and hence with anti-corruption mechanisms. In our endeavors to combat corruption in our part of the world - in my country Lebanon as well as in other Arab countries - we miss the safety valve of real democracy. An anti-corruption culture would inexorably be a close collateral to a democratic culture.

We have come to learn from Lebanon's experience that an overall reform has an evident gateway - political reform - which in turn has a patent clue: a fair and effective electoral system.

In the absence of real and effective democracy, the ruling class is liable to be infested with creeping corruption. Hence any serious bid to fight corruption in our part of the world would necessarily call for a concomitant drive to democratize our systems and our societies. We are still at the beginning of the process. In a nutshell combating corruption is a major reform issue which cannot practically be dealt with in isolation of the system of government in application nor in disregard of the cultural standards of society. The context of legislation or a convention would not in itself be sufficient in terms of accomplishing the desired objective.

In my country Lebanon we suffer from rampant sectarianism or confessionalism. It turned out that there is indeed a starkly close affinity between sectarianism and corruption. In one sense the fanaticism connected with sectarianism tends to dim and blur one's perception of social values and virtues, and to obstruct one's vision of truth and justice. In another sense it also too often serves as a bulwark for corruption, precluding the prosecution of sectarian leaderships for corruption-related perpetrations, as any charges are effectively portrayed as assaults against the sectarian community of the culprit. Conceptually what applies to sectarianism in this regard in one country applies almost equally to racism in other countries. Racism is in our view also a feature of corruption.

From my vantage point at the helm of the Arab Anti-Corruption Organization, I should admit that the obstacles we are encountering in performing our mission are indeed formidable. We recognize the immense challenge and the necessarily long perspective ahead, hoping that our modest efforts will help over time in enhancing the public's awareness of the ravages of corruption and hence in evolving a pervasive anti-corruption culture.

**Salim El Hoss**

**- Keynote address at conference in Kuwait, November 17, 2008**