

At long last, Indians revolt against corruption

By Frank Islam

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In the first 63 years of its independence, India's attitude towards corruption had been two-pronged: while one half of the nation displayed a remarkable level of tolerance for graft, the other was largely apathetic to the issue.

Though front-page story after story had been exposing corruption that pervaded the country's political system from top to bottom, the electorate's response has been large yawns. Historically, few governments have been voted out on account of corruption, even though ministers and bureaucrats lost their jobs for all kinds of other reasons.

Perhaps the only time a Union government was punished for corruption was in 1989, when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was voted out of power after getting embroiled in the Bofors scandal. That was perhaps the only national election when corruption was at the front and center. Several high-ranking government officials and businessmen were accused of receiving bribes from the Swedish arms manufacturer, which won a contract to supply its 155 mm howitzer.

Many thought the launch of market reforms in the early 1990s and the end of license raj would reduce corruption. Instead, with the creation of additional wealth and circulation of more money in the economy, what one witnessed was an increase in scale of corruption.

Though the country has grown impressively since the reforms began, the growth would have been even more remarkable had corruption been not a factor.

With the government not doing enough to crack down on graft and the civil society not acting strongly enough to build a movement against it, corruption has had a diabolic effect, especially on those Indians that did not have the wherewithal to move the system in their favor.

Overall, besides remaining an obstacle to creating a fair amount of free enterprise and more growth, corruption has also significantly weakened the country's institutions.

But, now, all that seems to be changing, and changing utterly.

This past fortnight, Indians of all hues and colors, led by septuagenarian Gandhian Anna Hazare, joined an expansive, nationwide a movement against corruption. Taking a page out Mahatma Gandhi's playbook, the 72-year-old Maharashtrian went without food for nearly 100 hours, forcing the government to institute a panel to draft an anti-corruption law.

Hazare is a veteran of many civil society campaigns, best-known among which is a movement that turned his native Ralegan Siddhi into a self-sustained model village.

The broad and intense support for Hazare showed that Indians are serious about fighting corruption this time around. That it came just days after India lifted a world cup cricket trophy in Mumbai also indicated that it's for real. In the past, a sporting victory of this magnitude, which boosts the nation's mood, would have pushed such a grave and "uncomfortable" issue to being a side story.

Backing for Hazare's cause was even more passionate on the internet, where college students, young professionals and even Bollywood actors tweeted to voice support for him and express indignation against corrupt politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen.

So, finally, what forced the Indians to shed the apathy and indifference towards corruption? What was that proverbial final straw?

Indian pundits have been coming up with theory after theory on it these past few days. However, it may be two recent scandals of epic proportion that turned out to be catalysts.

The first one was around last year's Commonwealth Games, held in Delhi. The event, which may have cost India as much as \$13.3 billion, was supposed to be a coming-out party for the country, but it turned out to be a national embarrassment. Just days before the grand opening ceremony, several of the venues were still not ready. It was found that Olympian-scale kickbacks were involved in nearly every aspect of the games-hosting.

Soon India's biggest-ever corruption scam would unfold. It was revealed that taxpayers may have lost tens of billions of dollars when the telecom ministry gave away 2G spectrums to a few companies at a vastly reduced price. According to one estimate, the country's exchequer lost as much as \$39 billion because of the scandal. To put that amount in context, it is more than twice the size of the neighboring Nepal's economy and it roughly equals the combined GDP of 10 poorest Indian states.

These two scandals outraged a significant section of the country to act. Instantly, public distrust in the government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh soared. Though Mr. Singh, the man who kick-started India's economic reforms, himself has not been accused of graft, the cloud of corruption cases has badly tainted his government.

Aware of the potential dangers of a mass movement, Singh was shrewd to quickly meet Hazare's demands. One was the formation of a panel that would draft an overarching anti-corruption law. The committee consists of five federal ministers and five members of the civil society, including Hazare.

The reason the vocal middle class, which now forms the backbone of Hazare's movement, has sprung into action is the growing realization that the bounties of the market reform may not be reaching them because of all-pervasive corruption.

Now all eyes are on the newly formed panel and the law it's considering.

One likely component of that legislation would be an anti-corruption authority named Lokpal, which was one of Hazare's main demands. One hopes that the new institution will have enough enforcement power. Unless it works closely with investigative agencies such as the Central Bureau of Investigation, who themselves need to work in more independent environments without interferences from political masters, rooting out corruption will remain a goal. These agencies need to be given the power and resources to prosecute those who give bribes, including businesses, as well as government employees that receive them.

It is important that the current outrage against corruption is used to create a culture where, not just paying bribes, but even offering them is also discouraged. Along with a tough new law, a change in people's attitude is also necessary in cleansing the society of corruption. (Global India Newswire)

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