

CURBING CORRUPTION IN SOUTH ASIA

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Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Dignitaries,
Representatives of the Press and Media, Ladies and
Gentleman

Asalamu-Wailakum

I very much appreciate the initiative taken by Global Organization of Parliamentarians against Corruption (GOPAC) and National Democratic Institute (NDI) in arranging this Workshop among parliamentarians of South Asia Region to focus on the parliamentary instrument for curbing corruption and developing a consensus necessary for achieving this objective. We are aware that the mathematics of individual gain has directly influenced the utilization of scarce resources that ought to have been used to finance developmental projects, health, nutrition and educational programmes but were instead spent on wasteful pet projects by both democratic and authoritarian style governments with politicians, bureaucrats and military elites rarely ever being held accountable for their financial misdeeds and misappropriations.

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The states of South Asia whether is the strongest democracy or the aspiring one are plagued by corruption in their public and private sectors. The phenomenon has become an enduring pattern of public life in these countries posing a threat to meaningful democracy and sustainable development. It is also regrettable that even democratization of these countries for a considerable period of time could not change the culture of corruption; rather political corruption increased and destroyed the trust

between the leaders and the people. However, when looking at the reforms of these countries one would observe more and more governments now understand governance and corruption as a cross-cutting issue and consequently addressing them from a holistic standpoint. While foreign donors have played a significant role in development strategies of regional countries the fight against corruption has generated controversies as well. The underlying point is that foreign aid or investment has political and strategic considerations attached to them rather than having the economic needs and policy reforms of the recipients as priority issues. In some cases about 40% of these aids are spent by their consultants or experts.

South Asian states have in general devised strategies to ensure control on corrupt practices. Looking into each of their varying governance styles nevertheless exists a high level of corruption in all these countries although legal control have provided a measure of restraint in some cases which has also served to deflect public pressure. However, it is questionable whether fundamental changes are actually taking place or not. The corruption cases reported in each of these countries have ranged from financial scandals involving political figures to cricketers showing international connectivity involving ministers, opposition leaders, chief of customs, military elites and bureaucrats. The major areas of corruption have been in major defence deals, development projects, election funding, politically sponsored criminality, abuse of power, electoral malpractices, drug dealing, money laundering and human trafficking that have all involved transaction totaling billions of dollars.

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In South Asian states, corruption in public agencies and authorities, thus, remains extensive, imposing a considerable burden on the economy. Unfortunately citizens trust neither the law enforcement agencies nor the

judiciary. The public health and education sectors fail to meet the demands. Most painfully, in a country with extreme level of poverty, petty corruption imposes high costs at the grassroots level. The absence of transparency and accountability in public life can in large part be attributed to a lack of political will which is a direct consequence of the confrontational nature of politics. Political party funding procedures have been far from scrupulous and corrupt networks between politics and local businesses are entrenched and contribute to the dismal state of public affairs.

I hope that in the near future there will be collaborative efforts to eradicate corruption in a systematic and cooperative way. A similar approach has been used successfully in other countries around the world especially in the case of terrorist financing and there is no reason why such methods could not be used on a regional basis in the case of corruption. Now returning to my initial observations about the corruption scenarios in South Asia I recall seeing an interesting and highly relevant report issued by Transparency International titled 'Corruption in South Asia – Insights & Benchmarks from Citizen Feedback Surveys in Five Countries' published in 2003.

The survey as one would expect painted a dismal and depressing picture of the corruption situation in the South Asian region; one way or other affected by poor governance leading onto corruption. Corruption within the police, judiciary, bureaucracy and land administration are the most corrupt sectors across the South Asia States. The impression of ordinary South Asians at the time about corruption in their respective countries was by-and-large highly contemptuous. Government institutions and politicians were the particular targets of the publics' ire for widespread corruption. It is only through sustained economic growth and political stability and democratic accountability that a nation can emerge from the mire of corruption.

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The problem of corruption in Bangladesh has been disturbing and deep rooted that it effectively hindered all sectors of development. In several reports featured by Transparency International over the last decade corruption in Bangladesh persisted in the law enforcement agencies, local government, education, health, taxation authorities, financial institutions, forestry departments, utility services and transport. The ongoing corruption drive seems to have confirmed our worst fears and borne out the findings of the TIB surveys. Similar problems also exist in other South Asian countries and in almost all cases the problem has been tackled through reforms and instrument of the law.

In Bangladesh we are in the formative stages of creating an intricate legal network to suppress corruption in all sectors of society and the Pakistan experience will be a useful guide for us. In India the press and media appears to be the main weapons against corruption although there does exist a very efficient and effective legal framework to combat the problem. I recall how the news media in India leapt at the corruption scandals then plaguing the Indian government during the 1980s and 1990s. In recent years, India's corruption agencies have gone further afield and have tackled corruption within the burgeoning film industry with several well known film stars being brought up for criminal investigation and trial. An important innovation in the Indian context was the setting up of the Central Vigilance Commission where ordinary citizens may lodge complaints against the corrupt practices/abuse of power for personal gains by employees of Central Government and Corporations and Companies of the Central Government. In addition the Indian government has introduced an Ordinance to protect whistleblowers so that government employees will be protected from government retribution if they disclose corruption within their respective departments. In this regard, the Bangladesh experience has

highlighted the difficulties where right to information is limited making it far more difficult to uncover corrupt activity and follow through with prosecutions. I hope that in the near future the Interim Government will introduce a Right to Information Act of our own so that corrupt officials cannot hide behind the cloak of secrecy and escape punishment. Some of the salient pillars could be:

- Preventive measures should be highlighted in public sectors.
- How best the private sectors should be made accountable and the necessary legislative measures?
- Ensure greater participation from civil society, media and private sectors, which could be seen as effective non state participators.

Bangladesh following the footsteps of other South Asian countries has now embarked on its own crusade against corruption. Through resolute and determined leadership the nation will lift itself out of the morass left by the politicians. A great deal has been accomplished by the Anti-Corruption Commission and the accompanying Taskforce but more has to be done. Every effort has to be undertaken for rectification and prevention and build the system around legal basis. I would also suggest the following recommendation to further enhance our ability to fight corruption –

- To create a moral high ground against corruption.
- To ensure exemplary punishment for all those found guilty of corruption.
- To appoint a parliamentary ombudsman.
- To establish an independent and neutral judicial system.

-To boycott the corrupt socially.

-The police should be reorganized and pay increased.

-To continue the anti corruption drive against corruption and corrupted persons on a regular basis.

While some of these ideas are well on their way to being fully realized there are a few that still remain out of reach. To create a moral high ground against corruption will be a very onerous task as many people have become accustomed to underhand ways and changing attitudes is a long drawn out process requiring many years of reeducation. However, both Pakistan and India have shown what can be done where there is determination and foresight and I believe that Bangladesh is not lacking in either quality. We are an educated, conscientious and progressive people and able to overcome the difficulties now being faced in the country but with forethought and vision. Our measure of progress will be measured by the process of accomplishment we have left for our new generation.

Allah Hafiz

