



Akaash Maharaj

CEO, Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against
Corruption

I Addressed the United Nations on Political Corruption

Posted: 10/04/2015 6:27 pm EDT | Updated: 10/04/2015 6:59 pm EDT



The following article is adapted from Akaash Maharaj's address to the United Nations.

Your Excellencies, I am grateful for the opportunity to address you in the United Nations General Assembly Chamber on behalf of the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption, or GOPAC.

Our members come from different cultures, speak different languages, profess different faiths, pursue different political philosophies and have been on opposite sides of history and warfare. But we are united by a common conviction: that corruption is now the single greatest threat to the development of societies, to the security of nations, and to the rights of all mankind.

Political corruption now kills more people than war and famine combined.

The means of thwarting political corruption is seductively easy to describe, but fiendishly difficult to implement: a vigilant, relentless and fearless coalition of citizens and parliamentarians standing between the corrupt and the levers of power.

We believe that there are three critical areas where legislators and citizens must press forward together: enforcing integrity amongst public officials, establishing transparency in public institutions and ending impunity to bring the worst offenders to justice.

Akaash Maharaj
Address in the UN General Assembly Chamber

SOUNDCLOUD

9:14

614

In our experience, effective systems for public integrity share common features.

They are initiated by a public call for change, often prompted by a crisis but sometimes flowing out of a broader social movement. They build political will through wide public debate on the ethical principles a nation believes should be embedded in public institutions. They are embodied in written rules that meet international norms and that bind public officials, and which cover issues such as conflicts of interest, declarations of assets and income, and limits on political contributions. They are enforced by an independent body empowered to identify and discipline those who break the rules. They are no respecters of rank, and cast aside any notion of immunity for wrongdoing.

However, the effectiveness of integrity systems is intimately tied to the transparency of their broader political systems. Corruption breeds in the dark, and withers under the glare of public scrutiny.

Effective systems for state transparency also share common traits.

They are grounded in legal and enforceable rights of citizens and legislators to access to information. They require the state to produce timely data on revenues, expenditures and contracts, published in intelligible open formats. They have autonomous courts or regulatory bodies able to compel the production of state records and independent audit institutions able to test the veracity of those records. They have meaningful parliamentary public accounts committees able to review, rebuke and restrain the government. They are situated in a broader context of a free and independent media and free association of citizens.

But all the integrity and transparency in the world comes to nothing if the laws that bind the weak and the powerless do not also bind the great and the powerful. The hard reality is that around the world, public institutions are most apt to forfeit public confidence because of a culture of impunity that has accreted around political and economic leaders, in both wealthy and poor nations.

This impunity has enabled forms of corruption so grave, whose effects on human life, human rights and human welfare are so catastrophic, that they should shock the conscience of the international community and mobilize the will of nations to act across borders.

Too often, the perpetrators of grand corruption are able to use their illicit wealth and power to co-opt the national institutions that should call them to account. As a result, the worst offenders are the least likely to face domestic justice. In such cases, when national authorities are unwilling or unable to act, we believe that the international community has a responsibility to step forward.

GOPAC's last global conference was the single largest anti-corruption gathering of legislators in history. It included parliamentarians from India and Pakistan, from Iran and Iraq, from Russia and Ukraine, from countries that have a history of agreeing on almost nothing. Yet they voted unanimously for GOPAC to seek to establish grand corruption as an international crime, to enable international institutions and alliances to apprehend, prosecute, judge and sentence the guilty.

We are now pursuing four parallel tracks to give effect to their declaration.

The first is to expand the number of national courts asserting universal jurisdiction over grand corruption. The second is to make use of regional courts in Africa, Europe and Latin America. The third is to press for an expansion of the jurisdiction of international institutions, or the creation of a new international anti-corruption court. The fourth is a series of civil actions beginning in 2016 against identified kleptocrats, to compel them to surrender the assets they have pillaged, and to make an example of them that will chill the spines of their fellow travelers.

Each of these approaches has its strengths and weaknesses, and each strikes a different balance between the ideal and the feasible. We know that the path will be hard, that the journey will be long, and that we will be beset at every step by those served by the status quo.

And I know that several of the kleptocrats we have in our sights are watching the broadcast of this session. To them, I have a simple message: enjoy the money and the power while you can, because we are coming for you.

The world is littered with women and men who feed on the misery of entire societies, who have grown fat in their spoils and comfortable in their impunity, sheltering behind national jurisdictions and national institutions they have been able to twist to their benefit.

But there is a higher law. There is a deeper justice. And we will stand up for it.

Akaash Maharaj is CEO of the [Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption](http://www.Maharaj.org). His personal web site is www.Maharaj.org.

Follow Akaash's [Twitter](#) tweets, [Flickr](#) photographs, or [LinkedIn](#) profile.

MORE ON HUFFPOST:

 *Global Corruption Index*