


Euphemism for Corruption in Ethiopia

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March, 2016

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Introduction

ORRUPTION: What actually is corruption and what does it constitute? An *English Oxford dictionary* [9] definition of corruption and a corrupt behavior is given as “dishonest or fraudulent conduct by those in power, typically involving bribery”. In the words of *Transparency International (TI)*, “Corruption is one of the greatest challenges of the contemporary world. It undermines good government, fundamentally distorts public policy, leads to the misallocation of resources, harms the private sector and private sector development and particularly hurts the poor” [1]. The *World Bank* [3] on the other hand defines corruption as “the abuse of public office for private gain”. Even though this definition invites all sorts of questions (such as, What does “abuse” mean? What counts as “private” gain? etc.) I don’t think there is much benefit to wasting a lot of time debating definitions, as long as we have a rough sense of the sorts of misbehavior we are mainly worried about. For more detailed analysis on the arrays of corruption and its constituents, please read the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [4] and *Global Infrastructure Anti-Corruption Centre (GIACC)* [5]. As in so many countries around the world we see from experience today, corruption is mainly linked to bribery, single party dominance when a government’s political power is miserably personalized for personal advantage or gang violence, criminal and malpractices, etc.

THIOPIA, as one of the fastest growing economies in the world, has shown a tremendous growth since the ruling *EPRDF* government came to power and yet corruption in both the public and private sectors remains to be a very serious problem throughout the country. Viewed from the context of the aforementioned definitions, there is an enormous amount of evidence for corrupt activities which clearly implies that there absolutely is no sign that any of this is getting better in all of these years. I am not a political scientist but I don’t think I need to be such an expert so as to voice my opinion on such issues that matter to all. The 2016 Republican Presidential candidate *Dr. Ben Carson* once made a statement, “We have been conditioned to think that only politicians can solve our problems. But at some point, maybe we will wake up and recognize that it was politicians who created our problems.” which simply is right. Hence, in this short article, I am going to argue about the euphemism for corruption in Ethiopia and its damaging effects on the political and economic development of the country and the way we can go about fighting against it and address some of the critical challenges associated with it.



The real problems with corruption and mismanagement

Corruption and corrupt behaviors in Ethiopia are utterly shocking phenomenon; just about everywhere but it is even worse in some regions of the country, for example, *Tigray* as a state and its leadership are the perfect examples where the culture of a coordinated grand corruption of privileged figures seems unlikely to end, which in turn has devastating effects *in the whole country*. *Tigray* state is an ideal example for dishonest and incompetent leaders who abuse the public trust thereby diverting the resources of the state for their personal advantage.

The real problems of corruption in developing countries like ours are highlighted by the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon in his 2009 speech for the international anti-Corruption day as: “When public money is stolen for private gain, it means fewer resources to build schools, hospitals, roads and water treatment facilities. When foreign aid is diverted into private bank accounts, major infrastructure projects come to a halt. Corruption enables fake or substandard medicines to be dumped on the market, and hazardous waste to be dumped in landfill sites and in oceans. The vulnerable suffer first and worst.” [7, 2]. These are all the problems we witness in *Tigray* today. For example, water supplies, weak institutions and injustice in *Tigray* are some of the main problems I can address in this short piece. This 2009 study from *Columbia University* [8] suggests a critical assessment of water supply and sanitation for *Mekelle* city. And yet residents of the capital city who are the direct victims don’t have enough water supply for about 24 years and this is so saddening. The government gives false promises during election seasons that they would solve this problem right away – they do it all for the votes and they knowingly deny later without even listening to the very people who vote for them. Another example, we see officials who have an extensive incompetence and corruption record being fired from one zone and allowed to work the same or an equivalent position in a different zone without punishment no matter how many times they are exposed by the community. Hence, it is very easy to infer how poor and corrupted the system in *Tigray* is. Everyone can see its effect on the leadership and both on foreign and local investment opportunities. Corruption by its very nature undermines good governance, democracy, human rights and suppresses economic development [2, 6].

What do the corrupt officials need?

As it is mentioned previously, the only thing these corrupted officials care about, in my humble opinion, is to stay in power as much as they can regardless of the moral and interest of the people. Not being able to solve such problems is the weakness of the government. Why is the Ethiopian government not doing something about the corrupt officials in the country that the society is tired of? When the government lets corrupted and highly incompetent state governors, zone administrators, police officers, university presidents, multi-million government project leaders, city administrators etc. to stay in power while they have a strong moral disapproval from the people, it is a public mockery. I don’t think most Ethiopians are missing such nonsense government gesture. When the government intricately allows corrupt officials to stay in power, it is an euphemistic way of saying to corrupted individuals as, “Hi folks, you are in safe heaven now as long as we are in power and as long as you support our government policies no matter what.” This very much tops the essence of a corrupted government that the Ethiopian people are suffering of for a couple of decades now.



What are the practical approaches to fight corruption?

How do we go about fighting corruption? In my opinion, I do assume that this question is very important because the effects of corruption and its immoral elements are very damaging for any country as it is stated above. Fighting corruption is literally a long-time endeavour and may take generations to, eventually, bring a solid social change. Typically, all sectors and stakeholders of society need to be engaged to achieve lasting results. Media and, in particular, civil society (using, *inter alia*, *social media*), however, may make the difference, trigger and drive processes which may be the starting point for further developments. A lot of countries including some in our continent have, in fact, provided valid examples and evidence in this regard (e.g., *Tunisia* and *Egypt*).

The practical approaches and strategies to combat corruption, in my opinion, depend on the circumstances. In [10], the authors have argued that one of the best strategies to fight corruption is a very tough implementation of the anti-corruption laws, which I personally think is right. So many of the established anti-corruption measures we read about today are based on the assumption that essential institutions are already in place, even if they need to be improved. A legal binding instrument adopted by the *UN General Assembly* to fight and minimize both corruption and injustice is found at [11]. The right strategy might range from calling for curricular reform to demanding the overthrow of the core institutions of oppression. But my own view is that gradually creating an environment that enables people to begin to advocate and defend their own interests is the best. That means, in many places of Ethiopia just bringing more voices into the political discussion forums, even if the people do not challenge corruption directly for quite some time. Then, this can open up a safe and valued space for citizens to act on the issue. Only then does it make sense to mobilize citizens against corruption and then continuing the pressure for accountability and good government performance will need some basic requirements; an active Ethiopian citizenry, strong, open, and fair institutions; and of course a very strong civil society. This involves political contention; otherwise, those steps will not likely occur without contention. This again tends to be the outcomes and results of that long-term process of contention and of broadening the political arena. I believe, trying to put those sorts of modern institutions in place prematurely is like pushing on one end of a string. But I, as a concerned individual, am very hopeful that the youth along with other members of the society and other individuals from the governing body who are willing to fight corruption will have an opportunity to deal with it. The youth, in particular, should have the courage and conviction to stand by the people and fight the corrupted officials.

Higher educational institutions, including universities, colleges and schools have an important role in fighting corruption and injustice by exposing, analyzing, conducting research in improving anti-corruption approaches and educating the community so as to shape the values of a society. As Nelson Mandela once said, “*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.*” and yes education plays a fundamental role in combating corruption. No matter how high or low their education level of attainment is, the officials I am talking about in this piece and their behaviors to a very great extent are a product of the higher educational institution in which they receive their degree from.

How do the Ethiopian people go out and speak about corruption?

Who should the people put the blame on anyway? On the government or the corrupt officials? Of course the people should blame the government in power, not the officials. Creating a conducive ground for economic growth and stability whereby officials can be held liable for any corrupt activities should be a very clear stand of the government. The notion of being a government of a developing country can't be used as an excuse for corruption. When it comes to talking against the corrupt officials or scandals of any kind, we hear a lot of complaints about people being arrested with no due process of law and no evidence of any kind presented in every parts of the country. This is horrible but I would personally argue that the early stages of that process will often have to stay under the radar precisely because any direct challenge to the regime or members of the corrupt elites could well end in tragedy. In many ways, the most important thing might be to stand on the side of concerned people to show them that they are not alone in having the problems and hoping to solve them through time. In most parts of Ethiopia, I am very pessimistic about direct assaults on corruption (or corrupt officials in general sort to say). Indeed, as it is known, in many of today's liberal market democracies the process of controlling corruption is indirect, long-term, and open to many reversals. For that reason, when I hear Ethiopian commentators (be it on TV or social medias) saying that "*now Ethiopia should change the system to tackle corruption*", I had to shake my head – the system is not a problem, it is the corruption. Before anyone "*tackles*" anything, a very long process of building social and political foundations has to take place to fight corruption – just as it did in all of the developed countries in the world we know of today (and we, of course, need to look to our own system and be aware of all the problems we have got in our own country too).

In fact, we can imagine a realistic scenario in which reformers don't even say the word "*corruption*" publicly for a very long time, but instead build support around issues of say, good governance, competency, better utility services, youth initiatives, education etc.. The full argument of what I am trying to convey is not that reformers should never talk about corruption, but rather that depending upon the syndrome of corruption in question, and in fragile/coercive settings, the risks associated with a serious direct attack on corruption can be great. Thus, from the standpoint of building support for reform in early stages it might be better to talk about things like better public utility services, fair tax collections, better public facilities and schools, hospitals, etc. all of which can involve dealing with corruption but all of which again offer citizens the prospect of specific benefits for themselves rather than attainment of corruption control as a public good. Later on, make corruption a central issue in and of itself. I am very optimist for the long term, but a realist when it comes to what people in Ethiopia can and should/should not do today, this week, and next year.

Seeing the Ethiopian government high level officials led by Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn openly discussing corruption and issues of good governance recently as a national agenda of high priority is refreshing and of course very encouraging. However, we all know translating this very talk into action or as they say, "*walk the talk*" is the bottom line. Nonetheless, this is a good start.

Conclusion

So what do we synthesize out of all this? To sum it all up: the effect of corruption and injustice for any country is immense. Fighting corruption with a firm anti-corruption stance, upholding the rule of law, and safeguarding human rights is a stony and lengthy paths especially in developing countries like ours; and yet, a path that is worth going. I think what we are seeing in China and Brazil right now sets a powerful precedent. Grass roots movements, enabled by social media, have succeeded in putting pressure on the governments, and they have responded by enacting meaningful reforms. What does that mean for our country, Ethiopia? It means that concerned citizens talking to each other, raising awareness about corruption and injustice is potentially powerful. Ethiopian higher educational institutions, including universities, colleges, schools and their leadership should play a very important role in fighting corruption and injustice by exposing, conducting research in improving the skills and strategies to combat corruption, organizing workshops in the fight against corruption and creating awareness, training leaders and future policy makers on ethical principles, analyzing and educating the Ethiopian community for the benefits of the country. Therefore, it is very crucial if higher educational institutions and their leadership could join the government in stepping up the fight against corruption in the country. I want to leave the readers of this piece with the following quote of my favorite, which I think everyone who is against corruption and injustice should live by.

“There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest”.

– Elie Wiesel

Let's fight corruption and injustice together!

Long Live ETHIOPIA!!!



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