The System is Down: Understanding Corruption

Farah Rasmi

29/09/2021

Living in Egypt has, for a long time now, entailed having a specific budget for daily extras. That is, slipping the man who ardently guards the street corner a few pounds so you can park your car, or slipping the woman at the government offices a few extra to get your passport renewed on time, or even while trying to get out of a speeding ticket. What some would perceive as absolute corruption, has become so normalized in our culture that it is now accepted as nothing but a daily nuisance. Some argue, however, that this is not a real form of corruption, or at the very least, it is not the most damaging kind. Corruption amongst the political elite, or the 1%, is far more detrimental to society than these minor offenses, they argue. That said, both types are believed to be so deeply rooted in society, that they are cultural phenomena, and by extension, impossible to change.

Corruption has been a contentious matter in the field of criminology as there has been very little consensus on what it exactly and universally entails. In fact, most academic works on corruption begin with the specific definition the author will use going forward in their analysis in order to avoid confusion. This extends to the very institutions that claim to combat corruption around the world, be it the United Nations, the World Bank, or the famous corruption measuring source Transparency International (TI). The most common definition nonetheless remains the one that TI had been using up to 2012 for its analysis: "the abuse of public office for private gain"(Holmes 2015, 2). After 2012, TI started using a similar definition that substituted public office for "entrusted power" in order to avoid the debates around what the former actually means. Each of these definitions satisfies the needs of different institutions, namely those who combat corruption and were limited by the former's strictness with regards to political/governmental offices, such as Interpol (Holmes 2015, 2).

The choice of words in this matter stimulates debate on a wide range of issues. Namely, questions over what constitutes 'public office' or 'entrusted power', as well as what 'private gain' exactly is. On one hand, public office is, in modern day politics, a blurred concept as public and private sectors often intermingle (Holmes 2015, 3). Entrusted power is further questionable as in many forms of government, power may not always be elected or entrusted, but rather stolen and forced. In this sense, we question whether an autocrat can, in fact, be corrupt, as his entire system stands on illegitimacy. Lastly, what 'private gain' entails could be quite vague (Holmes 2015, 4). The potential outcome of a corrupt act may remain unseen or unclear for several years, and could therefore render the act itself within these definitions, perfectly legitimate.

Regardless of the definition, it remains to be determined whether this 'abuse' is strictly economical or can be social. In other words, is corruption limited to bribery and the exchange of monetary goods? Or, are cronyism and nepotism also forms of corruption? While this debate may seem futile, or going into too many rather subjective details, it is important. Social corruption can be as detrimental to one's society as the economic one. Cronyism and nepotism, in fields where skill matters, such as medicine or engineering, can cost people their lives (Holmes, 2). Therefore, when a person does 'a favour' for an

unqualified relative and hires them for an important position, they should be equally (if not more) at fault in the eyes of the law as someone who bribes their way out of a speeding ticket.

In his work "More than Necessary, Less than Sufficient: Democratization and the Control of Corruption," Michael Johnston presents an interesting thought experiment in order to elaborate on our understanding of the corruption concept (Johnston 2013, 1240-41). The image he paints is rather philosophical, where he questions the very existence of the phenomenon when the notion of morality is absent. In other words, speaking of corruption entails a threshold of moral standards, one that determines whether a person's actions are infringing on socially acceptable norms. Social norms, by definition, differ from one society to the next, and by extension so do moral standards. It is thus understandable that ideas of what corruption is may also vary between nations and societies. In modern nation-states, the 'rule of law' and the judiciary systems, when respected and implemented, set the moral standards that populations should abide by. Corruption in this sense "refers primarily to improper behaviour linked to one's official position" (Holmes 2015, 1). Improper behaviour is thus directly linked to what the individual members of society at one end deem it to be, and on the other what the legislation describes it as.

To further understand the difficulty in asserting what is corruption, and how much perception has a role in this activity, one can take a look at two controversial topics: tips and gifts. Both of those fall into the cultural realm, whereas some cultures deem tipping an informal rule, some see it as either offensive or unnecessary (Gambetta 2015, 97). Similarly, while some gift exchanges have become sentimental cultural norms, be it during holidays or birthdays, gifts are often used as forms of bribery. Nonetheless, what one culture deems a bribe, another may deem an informal business rule (Graycar & Jancsics 2016, 1013). Cultural traditions thus become vital in the determination of what constitutes a bribe or not. That being said, culture not only determines whether an act is a bribe, but also whether this bribe is justifiable or not.

In the Egyptian case, bribes and improper conduct amongst authority figures are clearly outlawed, yet scarcely enforced. Nepotism and cronyism are daily challenges the population faces in the work force and in the government. The general discourse around the topic is that of despair and little hope that serious change can be made. Despite the government's attempts at digitizing government facilities, many of the aforementioned forms of corruption remain unchallenged. In order to fully reform the system and combat corruption, one must look at previous attempts at doing so. The most well-known of which was Georgia under Mikheil Saakashvili.

Prior to the Rose Revolution, it was inconceivable that a day would come that people would not have to bribe their way through the rest of their lives (Antelava & de Waal 2013). Nothing was accessible to the public and corruption was unrepairable, or so it seemed. Saakashvili, elected president in 2004, vowed to eradicate corruption, which was one of the leading causes for the uprising (Antelava & de Waal 2013). These anti-corruption reforms swept through the nation and were characterized by their rapidity and efficiency.

To reform the country, the new government took to a radical form of policy-making, as "[i]nstitutions and their functions were often entirely abolished rather than changed and reformed" (Eriksson 2017). This meant that whenever the government judged an institution to be deeply corrupt, it had to go. They also implemented a strategy, akin to fear tactics, where previous political elite, or corrupt officials were fined extensively in order to use their money for the costly reforms and deter anyone else from such activities (Kukhianidze 2009). Therefore, the government was able to restructure the public sector, creating a main go-to structure for any paperwork or services the people of Georgia may need (Kukhianidze 2009). From passports to identity cards, it all became readily available at set fees, eliminating any need for bribery or extortion (Eriksson 2017). The old traffic police was also completely

eradicated and restructured, once an absolute hindrance in daily life, it became a source of respectable law-enforcement (Antelava & de Waal 2013). Police departments suddenly became characterized by their transparency, literally.

The attention of the world was with Georgia as it surpassed many European Union member states on TI's statistics (Eriksson 2017). Many see the life-changing experience as a rival case to the more standard views on anti-corruption reforms. The strategies used to implement these fast reforms were "radical and entirely necessary political interventions" (Antelava & de Waal 2013). Naturally, the radical life-changing events came at a cost. Despite getting applause from the world at the impressive speed and efficiency of the anti-corruption reforms, the Saakashvili government raised some red flags, as the methods used to bring about the radical changes were not entirely orthodox and transparent. Falling directly into the paradoxes of corruption, the government was able to almost completely eradicate some forms of it, but enhanced others.

By claiming a zero-tolerance strategy towards corruption, the government swept through the ranks of the older elites. The methods that were implemented in order to conduct the arrests and collect the fines were often illegal and it was not always clear where the money went (Kukhianidze 2009). The judiciary system was also often used to pass rapid judgement on the old elite in order to get the money which undermined the fairness of the courts (Economist 2017). Corruption in Georgia thus moved from the petty to the grand, from the ordinary citizen's daily life, to the officials'. This was further proven when after different political and economic events took place (i.e., the war with Russia) and Saakashvili lost his popularity, the new government returned to familiar habits, reminiscent of the Soviet era (Cecire 2016).

Part of Egypt's Vision 2030 objectives is "Governance of state and community institutions" (Arab Development Portal, n.d.). Accordingly, much like in Georgia, the Sisi government has made fighting corruption one of its many priorities. Enforcing the rule of law and digitizing the entire government in order to combat the horizontal corruption that has plagued Egypt, has therefore been a main part of its agenda. This project that spans across Egypt's many ministries, is largely led by the Ministry of Information and Communication (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, n.d.) Similar to Georgia this step has already demonstrated significant improvement, but Egypt is much larger and its case more complex.

The ruthless approach Saakashvili had with his government and the country's elite, while mimicked in Egypt, has had its limits. Many have been fined and charged for corruption, tax evasion, and embezzlement, even ex-President Hosni Mubarak's sons were arrested for embezzlement (BBC 2018). That said, this process can only go so far, as many corrupt elites still roam freely, and even more still participate in corrupt activity. Politics in Egypt are bereft with corrupt practices which feed into the general cycle of illegal activity in the country. The social structure and general economic state of the country, while slowly changing, still has not had a big enough transformation to change the social mentality around bribes, embezzlement, and nepotism.

A simple example of how Egyptians have found ways around the transformations that were meant to curb corruption is the phrase "el system wa'e' [the system is not working]". It has become so common to hear this sentence in all sectors of Egyptian society that it has its own ring to it. Another common sentence heard in our streets is "kol sana wenta tayeb [akin to: I wish you well]". To hear this sentence anywhere is to know you have got to give some sort of financial amount to get whatever you need done. So ingrained in the system, these phrases have normalized the very concept of bribery and corruption. Using such placid terminology to extort and have absolutely no moral qualms about it exemplifies what Johnston expressed in his work.

To truly reform the country and lower corruption, we have to change the population's entire conception of it, from the top down. Indeed job opportunities, salaries, and the quality of life need to improve exponentially in the governmental sector and in Egypt in general. But also it is imperative that the moral threshold around the subject changes. Corruption does not occur in a vacuum; political and historical events affect populations and their actions. Johnston's work demonstrates that the commonly idealized concept of democracy, contrary to common misconceptions, is not enough and does not automatically entail accountability and transparency (Johnston 2013, 1237-1238). Deep and slow changes in a state are an essential way to successfully implement anti-corruption reforms. Egypt needs to change the country's discourse around the topic, impose the rule of law, and most of all, revolutionize the entire political conversation around the issue among the political elite. Simply put, reforms cannot just be limited to new buildings and better service, it has to reach the very core of the political elite's minds in order to remain sustainable in an ever-changing world.

Works Cited:

"Georgia, a Model of Reform, Is Struggling to Stay Clean." *The Economist*, June 29, 2017. https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21724407-tree-loving-oligarch-still-pulling-strings-georgia-model-reform-struggling-stay.

Andersson, Staffan, and Paul M. Heywood. "The politics of perception: use and abuse of Transparency International's approach to measuring corruption." *Political Studies* 57, no. 4 (2009): 746-767.

Antelava, Natalia, and Thomas de Waal. "Debating Saakashvili." *Foreign Affairs*, December 9, 2013. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2013-12-09/debating-saakashvili.

Arab Development Portal, n.d. "Egypt Vision 2030." Accessed September 21, 2021. https://www.arabdevelopmentportal.com/sites/default/files/publication/sds_egypt_vision_2030.pdf

BBC, 2018. "Egypt arrests ex-President Mubarak's sons for embezzlement." Accessed September 21, 2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45534138

Cecire, Michael. "Georgia's Long-Shot Democracy." *Foreign Affairs*, October 20, 2016. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/georgia/2016-10-20/georgias-long-shot-democracy.

Eriksson, Fredrik. *The rapid economic liberalisation and ruthless fight against corruption in Georgia – Interview with Dr. Tamara Kovziridze.* Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute (U4 Practitioner Experience Note), Feb 2017.

Holmes, Leslie. *Corruption: A Very Short Introduction*. Very Short Introductions. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Gambetta, Diego. "What makes people tip." In C. López-Guerra and Julia Maskivker (eds.) Rationality, Democracy, and Justice: The Legacy of Jon Elster. Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 97-114.

Graycar, Adam, and David Jancsics Gift "Giving and Corruption," *International Journal of Public Administration*, 2016.

Johnston, Michael. "More than Necessary, Less than Sufficient: Democratization and the Control of Corruption." Social Research: An International Quarterly, Volume 80, Number 4, Winter 2013, 1237-58.

Kukhianidze, Alexandre. "Corruption and Organized Crime in Georgia before and after the 'Rose Revolution.'" *Central Asian Survey* 28, no. 2 (June 1, 2009): 215–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930903043709.

Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, n.d. "Digital Egypt." Accessed September 21, 2021. https://mcit.gov.eg/en/Digital_Egypt

Zalonaya, Marina. *The Politics of Bureaucratic Corruption in Post-transitional Eastern Europe*, Chapter 3, "Fear and Transparency in the Universities of post-Soviet Belarus," 69-96.