Feeding at the Public Trough

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Corruption has been – and continues to be – a permanent feature of public life. As have efforts to cure it. Towns in medieval England weighed public officials before assembled crowds, with excess avoirdupois deemed to be a measure of greed and graft. In 1730, in the British House of Commons, Sir Robert Walpole asked whether it was “a crime to get great estates by great office” – and answered his own question: “What else could anyone expect?” More recently, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan deemed corruption “an insidious plague,” especially destructive to developing countries and poor people.

In *The Corruption Cure*, Robert Rotberg, founding director of the Program on Intrastate Conflict at Harvard’s Kennedy School and president emeritus of the World Peace Foundation, provides a painstakingly detailed survey of corruption in dozens of countries around the world. By highlighting best practices, Rotberg hopes to help policymakers and ordinary citizens promote good governance. That said, his book also demonstrates how daunting the task actually is.

Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway and Switzerland, Rotberg reminds us, are among the ten least corrupt nation-states in the world. The Scandinavian countries transformed themselves over several centuries, he points out, because political leaders made concerted efforts to build a culture in which graft and extortion became “shameful rather than commonplace.”

Rotberg also reads into the record more recent evidence of success. In Singapore, Lee Kuan Yu drained the swamp, so to speak, by implementing a zero-tolerance policy toward corruption, with “no exceptions.” Lee sacked Tan Kia Gan, a close friend and director of the joint national airline; Toon Boon, an official in the Ministry of the Environment; and Phey Yew Kok, a member of Parliament from Lee’s political party. He discharged the government’s chief fire officer when he noticed at a reception that the man’s wife was decked out in expensive jewelry. Lee’s approach, Rotberg notes, was also characterized by “acute curtailments of personal freedoms.” But it worked.
Rotberg attributes the “spectacular” progress of Botswana, “especially as compared to nearly all other mainland African nations,” not only to the establishment of strong political institutions, respect for law and property, and a fair judiciary, but to the refusal of presidents Seretse Khama and Ketumile Masiri to tolerate corruption among their own political allies. It helped, Rotberg acknowledges, that thanks largely to diamonds, the per capita GDP of Botswana grew at about 7 percent for decades.

When committed leaders mobilize anti-corruption sentiments “behind a vision of positive change,” Rotberg emphasizes, they can (sometimes) “break communal molds and begin a process that clean cleanse societies.” He acknowledges, however, that such leaders “are born, not made.” And that some countries may well have to wait “until a person randomly comes along who subscribes to ‘the big bang theory’…and decides to uproot prevailing practices of corruption.” Intending to encourage readers, he adds that with such a leader in place “battling corruption to a standstill can be a matter of decades, not centuries.”

Rotberg suggests that twenty-first century China is a litmus test. Xi Jinping, he suggests, believes that it is in the interest of his country, the Communist Party, and himself (as supreme leader) to reduce graft. But Rotberg leaves open the possibility that the primary motivation of his anti-corruption drive is “the elimination of enemies.” And Rotberg’s hope – that if his campaign persists “the long-entrenched impunity of corrupt behavior” in China “will have been removed or at least reoriented – may be, well, faith-based.

Even so, Rotberg should be commended for laying out an anti-corruption framework – and for helping citizens in democracies understand what to look for in the next generation of leaders.

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