

Corruption Control: What Works?

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1 Post independent Singapore has transformed itself from a corruption-infested city-state to one that has been consistently rated by independent survey agencies to be amongst the least corrupt countries in the world. We have been placed amongst the 5 least corrupt countries in the world by the Transparency International in the last 2 years (not mentioning even 3rd in 1995). The Political and Economic Risk Consultancy (PERC) on the other hand, has placed us, since the inception of the survey in 1996, as the cleanest in Asia.

2 It may sound immodest but I must hasten to say that this is certainly not due to some fortuitous circumstances, or some quirks or accidents in history. The Government was determined, through sheer political will, to reverse the trend of the colonial and the immediate post colonial days. It has made corruption control very much part of its national agenda, viewing corruption control as inextricably tied to good governance.

3 Enough have been said publicly by government leaders about the need to maintain a corruption-free Singapore. It would do me well, however, to recount some of the more significant ones:

First. The mood for a strong anti-corruption policy and the resolve to curb corruption was struck by the government as early as in 1960 in Parliament when it declared that:

"The Government is deeply conscious that a Government cannot survive, no matter how good its aims and intentions are, if corruption exists in its ranks and its public service on which it depends to provide the efficient and effective administrative machinery to translate its policies into action Therefore, this Government is determined to take all possible steps to see that all necessary legislative and administrative measures are taken to reduce the opportunities of corruption, to make its detection easier and to deter and punish severely those who are susceptible to it and who engage in it shamelessly."

Second. The strong anti-corruption refrain was heard again and again including this one, made in 1979 by the then Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, when he explained the need for a corruption-free Singapore in the following way:

"The moment key leaders are less than incorruptible, less than stern in demanding high standards, from that moment the structure of administrative integrity will weaken, and eventually crumble.

Singapore can survive only if Ministers and senior officers are incorruptible and efficient ... Only when we uphold the integrity of the administration can the economy work in a way which enables Singaporeans to clearly see the nexus between hard work and high rewards.

Only then will people, foreigners and Singaporeans, invest in Singapore; only then will Singaporeans work to improve themselves and their children through better education and further training, instead of hoping for windfalls through powerful friends and relatives or through greasing contacts in the right places.”

Third. Corruption control is not viewed simply as just a moral issue. Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew explained as recently as in 1999 that Singapore's tough stand against corruption was "not a matter of virtue, but of necessity". This is consistent with an earlier statement he made. As Prime Minister, he said: "Staying clean and dismissing the venal is one of the six guiding principles of the PAP Government."

4 What of this? How does this explain what works and what does not? How much does all the political will translate into success? I shall attempt to explain how political will, in my personal opinion, is almost everything, in this long and arduous road to relative success.

a Political will provides the foundation for all anti-corruption efforts. It forms that all important sub-structure, upon which, all the super-structures of anti-corruption work rest. It provides the soil and the nutrient which allows the seeds of anti-corruption work to germinate and grow; first into a strong sapling, then into a sturdy tree;

b But genuine political will has to be more than some pious rhetoric, some empty sloganeering. Words must match deeds and there has to be the all important display of personal example. Recognising this, political leaders have unflinchingly submitted themselves to scrutiny and demonstrated much verve and vigour fighting corruption. Knowing that if they were to live in glass-houses they cannot throw stones, they set personal examples and established the much needed moral authority to stamp out corruption. It is simply a question of honest men and honest deeds. Honest deeds, surely, are the ultimate expression of the political will for corruption-control;

c Fired by a consuming political will, the government then set out to remove all obstacles that are in their way. Weak laws were strengthened when they could have easily been exploited by the ruling elite for their corrupt ends. They mobilised the public, the entire civil service and all apparatus of the state, including the judiciary, to fight corruption. Nobody works at cross-purpose. All efforts are harmonised. There is unity of action as much as there is unity of purpose. Everyone is galvanised by like-mindedness, almost as if they were swept by some royal or imperial edict;

d Spurred by a grand political purpose, the Government created the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau or the CPIB as we are sometimes called, out of the ashes of an ineffectual anti-corruption agency left behind by the colonial masters, to help it fight corruption. We became but one of the many instruments in the government's arsenal to fight corruption. CPIB, however, could just be a still-born idea if not for the fact that political will and blessings allowed it to flourish. CPIB was never born out of a need to fight a corrupt government. We were created by an incorrupt government to fight corruption. We are not a civil movement that was started to fight a corrupt government. If so, we would not have gone far. Unlike many agencies which grew out of a need to fight a corrupt establishment, we never have to work antagonistically against the Government and the entire public service. But are civil movements or NGOs essential for the successful fight against corruption in Singapore? No, in fact, it would be an indictment of the effectiveness of CPIB if such organisations were to take root. After all, NGO is just a euphemism for lobby groups or pressure groups, established by those disenchanted or dissatisfied with the state of corruption;

f Driven by an intense political will, there was an almost obsessive desire to succeed in the anti-corruption effort. The Government signalled this by taking complete control and ownership of the entire anti-corruption movement. It made CPIB report directly to the Prime Minister so as to block any undue interference from any quarters. Under the wings of the Prime Minister's Office, CPIB was able to truly operate without fear or favour. In fact, by 1992, CPIB's independence of action was more or less guaranteed constitutionally. With such independence of action, CPIB took action against Ministers and some top civil servants.

5 The burden of my thesis is that it is far easier to have a good, clean government administering a good, clean system than it is for a good anti-corruption agency to clean up a corrupt government and a crooked system. In the latter case, the result is almost predictable; the anti-corruption agency is likely to come off second best. Clearly, most governments will possess enough fire power to overwhelm even the most intense, well-meaning anti-corruption agency. They can make or mar the efforts of any anti-corruption agency. So, we in CPIB can only be as effective as the government wants us to be. CPIB has the structures, systems and processes that were allowed to work, given the right operating environment created by a strong political will. We have to a large extent, executed the Government's will. We helped create a strong anti-corruption ethos and the accompanying odium attached to corruption. This, however, does not mean that we have arrived, given the fact that mankind is fallible, not infallible. By nature man is acquisitive, almost covetous. While the majority falls in line, there is always the offending few who will find it necessary to satiate either their greed or their needs.

6 So is there a simple formula in corruption control? An ancient Chinese official once said that corruption is the product of bad men and bad laws. If this be so, the formula must then be a frightfully simple one: have good men and have good laws. Let there be good men in government. Let them be blessed with the necessary political will. They will then have sufficient motivation, as standard bearers of anti-corruption, to enact good laws which are sufficiently deterrent against the wayward.

If the bad strayed from the straight and narrow, they could be straightened and recycled through good laws so that they may become good again.

7 Is there yet another formula? For this, shall we lay prostrate in worship before this great edifice, this great architectural wonder called the "Temple of Incorruptibility", which could only have been designed and constructed by the high priest of incorruptibility. Looking at the stupendous structure, one's attention is almost immediately drawn to the fact that "Political Will" forms the foundation for this august temple. On this firm foundation rests 3 pillars, those of "An Effective Anti-Corruption Agency", "Effective Laws" and "Effective Adjudication".

8 We took anti-corruption action over the last 40 years or so (and perhaps, not too unsuccessfully) within this framework consisting of these 3 Pillars of Action. This framework is not exactly a rehash of that proposed under the ADB/OECD initiative; consisting of "Effective and Transparent Public Service", "Anti-Bribery Action and Promoting Integrity in Business" and "Supporting Public Involvement". These two frameworks are not quite identical, yet not too dissimilar either. To some extent, they could be the same gift in different wrappings. If you could forgive my audacity, I want to propose "Political Will" as the foundation for the 3 Pillars of Action conceived by ADB/OECD.

9 Finally, may I add that the OECD framework is a good one. Potentially, it is the formula for success. We have every reason to commend it to you.