

Opinion

Two myths hinder the global fight against corruption

To root out corruption in places like Afghanistan and Haiti, we must first recognize that corruption is not cultural. And well-publicized arrests won't do anything unless they are coupled with economic incentives.

By Frank Gunter / May 6, 2010

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Corruption hinders economic recovery in Haiti, Afghanistan, and other post-disaster or conflict countries, but it doesn't have to.

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In order to fight corruption effectively, we must first debunk two myths: First, that corruption is cultural. Second, that all that is required to defeat corruption are well-publicized arrests.

Corruption, the abuse of public power for private gain, can take the form of bribery, nepotism, theft, fraud, or extortion. And widespread corruption severely limits a country's living standards. Comparing per-capita income (adjusted for the cost of

living) and Transparency International's annual survey of corruption reveals that few countries are honest and poor; none are corrupt and rich.

Although New Zealand, the Scandinavian countries, and Singapore have reduced corruption to very low levels, no country is immune.

Any developing country that doesn't make a serious attack on corruption can expect slower economic growth. However, almost all attempts to reduce corruption fail because political leaders tend to deal with the myths rather than realities of corruption.

One of the most pernicious corruption myths is that it is primarily cultural in origin. While it is true that countries distinguished by harsh living conditions, histories of colonial occupation, and certain religious beliefs have a tendency toward corruption, it is also true that rational policies can offset these tendencies.

For every country in the corrupt bottom third of nations – such as Iraq, North Korea, Somalia, Ukraine, and Haiti – there is a country from the same region at least somewhat successfully employing such regulation and consequently in the honest top third. Examples include the United Arab Emirates, South Korea, Botswana, Slovenia, and Chile.

Another damaging myth is that the best way to conquer corruption is to loudly announce an anticorruption campaign while arresting a group of officials who lack political influence. Whether at the national or departmental level, experience shows that the impact of this type of narrow anticorruption strategy is temporary.

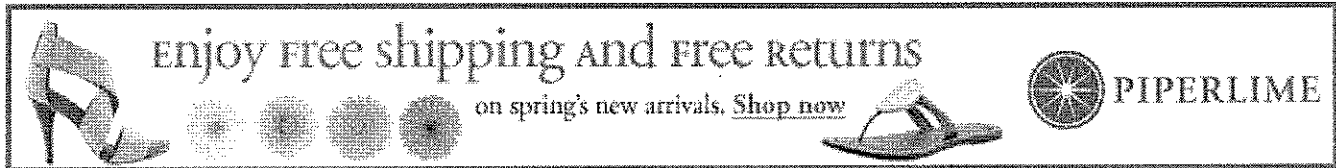
There is a saying among police who work in internal affairs: "Getting rid of a rotten apple without getting rid of the rotten barrel means that you'll have to do it all over again next year." Improvements in law enforcement and public relations are necessary parts of a country's anticorruption strategy, but if they are the only components then the whole strategy will fail.

The experience of countries that have succeeded in dramatically reducing corruption shows the importance of improving the quality of government and reducing the economic incentives for corruption. But improved governance should include more than a new code of conduct and mandatory financial disclosure by officials.

Without a free press and some political competition, it is difficult to achieve the degree of transparency and official responsibility necessary to prevent a revival of corruption. Even more difficult is reducing the economic incentives for corruption.

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