Stalling the Pandemic of Corruption

ASIA'S PATH FORWARD

By Sujeev Shakya
INTRODUCTION

On June 6, 2020, a frustrated young Nepali started a Facebook page entitled ‘Enough Is Enough.’ His frustrations were with government apathy towards the COVID-19 pandemic and continuous political wrangling, nationalistic jingoism in the form of redrawing maps, and corruption in government finances. The group quickly swelled in numbers. After just ten days it counted more than two hundred thousand members, and spontaneous protests sprung over all across Nepal. In a June 22 press release, the group made the following statement:

“In response to the Government of Nepal’s lack of urgency, transparency, and accountability concerning Covid-19 management, a series of non-violent, citizen-led, non-partisan protests have been catalyzed across the country. In the last 10 days, independent protests have been organized in Kathmandu, Pokhara, Biratnagar, Dhangadi, Chitwan, Surkhet, Birgunj, Dhankuta, Bhaktapur, Butwal, Dang, Palpa, Hetauda, Lalitpur among other places. These protests have been self-organized, leaderless and spontaneous”.

Citizens have come out in the streets to protest government decisions in the past and they have been successful on pushing major changes. In October 2016, a rogue anti-corruption body chief who abused his power to make money and victimize those who did not agree with him was removed through street protests. Similarly, government officials have resigned facing corruption charges. Practically every police chief or army chief has become embroiled, knowingly or unknowingly, in dealings that have led to corruption allegations and investigations.

International organizations were quick to remind Nepal of how it squandered the USD $4 billion aid committed after the April 2015 earthquake. Meenakshi Ganguly of Human Rights Watch urged the government not to repeat this with Covid-19 aid:

“Nepal had been suffering from corruption and inefficiency, long before the coronavirus crisis hit the country. In the woke of the 2015 earthquake, donors had committed over USD 4 billion to the humanitarian response, but reports have claimed that corruption, marginalization of vulnerable communities and inefficiency left millions in desperate need and deprived of their basic rights. Now, with the coronavirus pandemic, an opportunity of not overlooking the vulnerable group again is created. However, there are already allegations of corruption in the
procurement of medical supplies to combat the pandemic coupled with reports of food prices being manipulated, farmers being deprived of their income and workers strand hundreds of kilometers from home."

THE PANDEMIC PERPETUATES CORRUPTION

The government formed a high-level committee to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic at the Federal level, but its conduct has been questioned by the public. An ailing Prime Minister who underwent a second kidney transplant in March 2020 found sought to distract public opinion by various means, including issuance of a new map of Nepal, keeping the polarized debate on US support through Millennium Challenge Corporation going, issuance of a new Citizenship bill, orders to gag media freedom and other issues. The issuance of a new map and changing of the national emblem through a Constitutional Amendment was asking for direct confrontation with India. These deflections helped to keep attention away from the conduct of the government and financial accountability on how the government spent close to $1 billion on handling the pandemic. While Nepal is divided into seven provinces in a new federated structure since 2017, the Federal government chose to form the Coronavirus Crisis Management Committee (CCMC) on the basis of 77 districts, making the Chief District Officer (CDO) the most powerful person. These CDOs, who are generally appointed through political patronage since the 1950s, found new ways of perpetrating graft. From procurement to providing vehicle passes to deciding on what can operate and not operate during a lockdown, they found the pandemic to be a windfall gain.

The procurement of medical supplies became the biggest source of government graft. Not a day went by without reports of graft in procurement of masks, PPEs, aircraft charters or transportation contracts. When the government presented the national budget, there were allegations of nepotism and favoritism to the groups that have been active in supplying the government. Despite many investigative reports on graft and citizens demanding the details of the $1 billion pandemic budget, the government launched no inquiries. The Health Ministry became the center of controversy.

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The Prime Minister has been openly blamed for the mess by many in the media. His handpicked Deputy Prime Minister, appointed to lead the government effort on the crisis, became the subject of a parliamentary committee hearing on graft. In response to government apathy, Dr. Sameer Mani Dixit, a scientist who has been providing citizen education on pandemic, and I challenged the Prime Minister through a tweet to send someone from the government to a virtual debate. After agreeing to send a government representative to the virtual debate on Kantipur television, they shied away and instead, twenty-five experts including Dr Dixit were invited to a discussion with the Prime Minister on June 3, 2020. Experts who attended the meeting compared it to those hosted by King Gyanendra during his year-long autocratic rule: a primitive mode of discourse in which all attendees speak, followed by the Prime Minister making a speech without any reference to what has been said. No major decisions emerged after this meeting, making it clear that the Prime Minister was not willing to mend his ways, including turning a blind eye to graft. While some apologists argue that the Prime Minister is unlikely to be involved in corruption, lacking children of his own to support financially, his megalomania did give enough opportunities for graft by people perceived to be close to him.

GOVERNMENT IGNORES MEDIA REPORTS

The English Daily, The Kathmandu Post, reported, “ever since Dr. Khem Karki was appointed adviser to the Health Minister, Bhanubhakta Dhakal, in March, the existing chain of command has been dismantled and Karki has involved himself in every decision made by the Ministry, say multiple officials, both former and current, that the Post spoke to.” No investigation has been made by the government as the health minister is seen as one of the Prime Minister’s favorites. He has been able to raise funds for the party and some Nepali language news portals continuously reported this, but the government was clear that it was not interested in responding to media outlets that were weakened due to layoffs they had to make, closure of some of outlets and the businesses hit by the pandemic both in terms of

2 Thapa, Deepak, Is Oli Lying Or Clueless https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2020/06/24/is-oli-lying-or-clueless, The Kathmandu Post, 24 June 2020
advertisement revenue and sales. Some international wire agencies did report on this issue but with no
staffers on the ground, international media became dependent on a few local stringers. In the piece
‘Disaster After Disaster: The Nepali Government’s Response to the Coronavirus Outbreak’, Fiona
Fenwick of The Organization for World Peace wrote, “On a more sinister note, the government has
been accused of a number of oppressive practices in attempting to control the spread of information
relating to the virus. The Prime Minister’s political and press advisors allegedly pressured a software
company to hack an online news portal. They wanted to delete an article relating to the PPE
procurement scandal. Additionally, a retired bureaucrat has been detained for ‘cybercrime’ after he
made corruption allegations against Oli’s government. Some independent fundraising and aid groups
claim to have had veiled threats made against them.”

The media reports brought out names of children of political leaders for the first time with evidence,
but apart from rubbishing the remarks, nothing much was done.8 The government also took advantage
of the weakening media, as media outlets had to shut down amid the economic slump.9

WHAT CAN BE DONE

The pandemic has exposed how corruption remains a major challenge in Nepal.10 However, the
emergence of youth questioning the status quo during the pandemic provides an opportunity to
address this issue. The solution lies in a multipronged approach to tackle this systemic issue and find
solutions in the short term. It will take building a value-based society to really root out corruption in the
long run. Like the #meToo movement questioning treatment of women, the movements in Nepal
against atrocities towards people supposedly belonging to lower caste and questioning of male
dominated panels (‘manels’) at meetings, asking such questions will stem the proliferation of
corruption, even if it cannot be eradicated. For instance, the media platform BojuBajai is building a

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7 Fenwick, Fiona. “Disaster After Disaster: The Nepali Government’s Response To The Coronavirus Outbreak”, The Organization for
the-coronavirus-outbreak/

8 “Kathmandu Press accuses its site developer of removing a news article without consent”, The Kathmandu Post, 2 April 2020.
Retrieved from- https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/04/02/kathmandu-pressure-accuses-its-site-developer-of-removing-a-news-
article-without-consent


nepal-in-crisis/ retrieved on 27 July 2020
crowd-sourced database of Nepali women and gender minorities who are breaking ground in their respective fields. However, there are some policies that could produce tangible results in the short run. These could be grouped into three distinct areas.

First, there has to be strict due diligence from development partners, multilateral and bilateral organizations that support Nepal. They should not be the ones perpetuating corruption and should take a strong stance in ensuring funds will only be disbursed if Nepal behaves! Further, from grants to travel visas to scholarships to other financial support awarded to Nepali individuals, the recipient’s history of corruption should be an important criterion of judgement. There are opportunities for international institutions like CIPE to facilitate this. This issue has direct linkages to how the Nepali economy recovers from the pandemic, as it will be investment and aid from multilateral and bilateral agencies that will help Nepal recover post COVID-19.

Second, there must be systemic changes to ensure institutions are not subject to the whims of individuals. It is important that there is more transparency in the system. Initiatives like Civic Action Teams (CivActs, a new name for their Citizen Helpdesk model) which gather rumors, concerns and questions from communities across the country to eliminate information gaps between the government, media, NGOs, and citizens by providing the public with facts should be supported. This initiative, begun during the COVID-19 pandemic, can continue to operate after the pandemic has passed. Strong institutions can only stem reliance on individual action and the concentration of power. Institutions like CIPE can play a role in areas that concern the private sector.

Third, it is important that societal transformation to take place to stigmatize corruption. It can begin with social boycotting at the individual level of people who engage in corrupt practices. For instance, in the institutions I am associated with, we have a strict policy against allowing any person known to have engaged in graft to sit on a panel for our programs or write for any of our publications. These campaigns need to widen and proliferate. CIPE can support and encourage these initiatives to help in tackling the proliferation and acceptance of corruption.

Finally, the discourse on corruption has to get bolder, with naming and shaming of corrupt officials,

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8 Nepali Women in Computing, Twitter Post July 19, 2020 retrived on 20 July 2020
https://twitter.com/nepaliwc/status/1284722233886019727?s=20

from websites that blacklist people, to educational programs to teach the young about the ills of corruption. These could be based on some of the specific issues that have been emerged during the pandemic. Businesses and individuals need to take up more anti-corruption practices and require certifications like anti-bribery compliance training voluntarily and push for more vendors and employees to go through such certifications. International agencies can help to bring such practices to Nepal. CIPE can help bring these international practices to Nepal.

While a vaccine against Corona will ensure containment of this disease, only a multipronged approach will stem the corruption pandemic. The deep-rooted issue of corruption has been exposed by the pandemic. As the public realizes how pervasive and deep-rooted corruption has become, this has resulted in youth groups speaking out against this pandemic of corruption. This could be the moment to initiate action and programs that will help not only expose and tackle COVID-19 related corruption issues, but eradicate this societal problem in the long run.

This Asia’s Path Forward paper addresses **Combating Corruption**. Visit [CIPE.org](https://CIPE.org) for further Asia’s Path Forward papers on the six essential themes for an economic recovery roadmap:

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- Diversifying Supply Chains
- Combating Corruption
- Authoritarianism and Challenges to Democracies
- Economic Challenges for Women and Marginalized Groups
- Chamber and Association Responses and Strategies
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