How to Combat Corruption During COVID-19 in Pakistan

ASIA’S PATH FORWARD

By Nida Qasim Khan | 04 November 2020
INTRODUCTION

At no. 32 on Transparency International’s 2019 Corruption Perceptions index, Pakistan is considered a high-risk country for corruption during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even before the pandemic, Transparency International estimated that corruption in the health sector cost at least USD $500 billion a year globally and killed hundreds of thousands of people worldwide. With such a large number of lives at stake, combating corruption is not merely necessary, but essential.

At the onset of the pandemic, Pakistan’s federal government set aside a total of Rs.1240 billion (USD $7.5 billion) for emergency relief services to combat Covid-19. This budget included - but was not limited to - funds set aside for the emergency procurement of medical supplies, relief packages for vulnerable groups, relief measures on essential food items, gas subsidies, payment of wheat, and relief to exporters and small and medium businesses. However, due to emergency provisioning of goods during this time, rules of public procurement have been compromised. Allegations of a lack of transparency were made evident in several statements by the Supreme Court in their hearings on suo moto action regarding the coronavirus. The Supreme Court also questioned the quality of quarantine services provided by hospitals, after learning that quarantine centers lacked basic facilities including running water and clean bathrooms. The Chief Justice observed that there are ample resources available, but that they are not being fully utilized to help the public.

Combating corruption in Pakistan will require many different sectors to come together to fight the normalization of graft. Through education, civic involvement, legal action and the digitization of information, Pakistan can ensure greater transparency and improve its standing in the global Corruption Perceptions Index. This article enumerates five steps the country can take to tackle corruption during COVID-19.

1. **Enforce public procurement rules**

   All public procurement contracts should be released and published immediately. Procurement rules have been compromised during the emergency, and by making emergency contracts accessible to the public, civil society organizations and the media can monitor the real prices of goods and remain vigilant over any signs of price gouging or corruption. Transparency International – Pakistan (TI-P) recently submitted a case to the Supreme Court (as part of the suo moto action case), in which it reported with grave concern the lack of transparency in federal and provincial government utilization of COVID-19 funds. The case report drew attention to a direct violation of Rule 47 of the Public Procurement Regulatory Authority (PPRA) regulations for both the federal and provincial authorities.
Rule 47 stipulates that “as soon as a contract has been awarded the procuring agency shall make all documents related to the evaluation of the bid and award of contract public.” TI-P concluded that PRRA’s failure to implement Rule 47 while executing direct contracting for COVID-19 supplies indicates a lack of transparency. TI-P requested to join the apex court as amicus curiae to help ensure that the PPRA posts all of their contracts with quoted rates on their website, withdraws the deletion of the Rule 47 from the draft PPRA rules for 2020, and restrains other government agencies from attempting to delete Rule 47 in the future.\(^1\) By making information public on government websites and other platforms, the administration would demonstrate its commitment to public health and accountability, which would bolster trust with citizens.

2. Regardless of the process, ensure that public procurements are made auditable

A public audit should be a compulsory for every emergency fund, loan or grant made available for emergency spending during such a pandemic. Auditing is the best way to track expenditure, spot unusual spending, and is also a great tool for transparency in general. An example of a large-scale audit is the “IMF Covid-19 Anti-Corruption Tracker”, overseen by Transparency International, which tracks how IMF funds are spent in each of the countries to which it provides relief, highlighting which funds include anti-corruption measures and which do not. When the IMF offered USD $1.386 billion in financial assistance to Pakistan on April 16, 2020, the country committed to conducting a COVID-19 specific audit and to publish the results.\(^2\) The Auditor General of Pakistan also agreed to perform a COVID-19 audit, which is yet to be published. In particular, Audit Officers (FAOs) were tasked with covering all the possible areas of COVID-19 related expenditure, including procurement of goods and services, advertisements, storage, relief funds, quarantine centers, services by hospitals and public health institutions, testing, ration procurements and distribution. A similar approach should also be applied to government distribution of emergency economic stimulus packages and support programs for businesses and households affected by the pandemic. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime has also

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outlined useful guidelines and best practices on [this](https://worldjusticeproject.org/sites/default/files/documents/Corruption%20Design%20File%20V4.pdf), drawing on standards established by the UN Convention Against Corruption.³

3. Prepare for the digitization of government and public services

This pandemic has emphasized the need for better digital infrastructure to keep citizens informed. In this crisis, technology has emerged as the greatest ally of transparency and an important tool against corruption. As the [WEF has noted](https://worldjusticeproject.org/sites/default/files/documents/Corruption%20Design%20File%20V4.pdf), digital infrastructure investments must be protected in order to strengthen countries' “digital resilience” and ensure universal access to public services during crises. Carlos Santiso, Director of Digital Innovation in Government at the CAF Development Bank of Latin America, was quoted as saying that the crisis highlights the need to accelerate the digital transformation of our governments. Information and Communications-based Technology (ICT) has a major role to play in combating corruption by providing civilians with digital tools to aid them in this process. **Eight kinds of ICT tools** that hold potential for preventing corruption include: Transparency Portals, Open Data Portals, Service Automation, Online Services, Online right-to-information Requests, Crowdsourced reporting, Online corruption reporting, and Issue reporting. These are a sum of ICT interventions among which the first half are led by the government, and the other half by civil societies.

In Pakistan, where the digitization of services and government operations has stalled, COVID-19 has brought about a boost in e-commerce and in the digitization of private and banking facilities. However, much more work still needs to be done in terms of digitization. Digitizing information makes it easier to share publicly and supports civil society efforts to establish greater levels of transparency in Pakistan.

4. Encourage and legalize whistleblowing by citizens

Giving civilians the opportunity to legally perform public audits of supplies can empower them to monitor corruption for themselves. This not only gives civilians the power to monitor how funds are spent but makes them accountable and responsible for their own actions. Through this change in the public mindset, the scale of corruption can be brought down to a personal level and be reasoned with on an individual basis. It is important to note that in Pakistan, whistleblowers are legally protected by the 2019 [Whistleblower Protection and Vigilance Commission Act](https://worldjusticeproject.org/sites/default/files/documents/Corruption%20Design%20File%20V4.pdf), which guarantees non-disclosure of

³ Corruption and The Covid-19 Pandemic, World Justice Project, 2020
the whistleblower’s identity. Additionally, in the event funds are recovered, the act also promises a reward equal to twenty percent of the recovered amount to the whistleblower.

In collaboration with its partners, Global Integrity has developed useful transparency tools to combat corruption during the pandemic. One such tool developed is Account4COVID, a collaborative project between BudgIT, Global Integrity, PSAM, Accountability Lab, Afroleadership, and CRECO. This is a knowledge-sharing project enabling civil society organizations across Africa to learn from each other’s experiences, approaches, practices, and transparency tools concerning the use of public resources to combat COVID-19. Another useful tool is the COVID-19 fiscal governance database, a comprehensive database of resources for civil society and government, containing resources on documented corruption cases, tools for transparency work, and ways to combat such issues during the pandemic. This database has been successfully used by the Transparency and Accountability Initiative in order to develop their COVID-19 Monitor. Developing such collaborative tools for South Asia and for Pakistan in particular will help civil societies collect and access information regarding corruption scandals, gaps in transparency, transparency tools, and other useful information. This could create a common platform for organizations to share, collaborate and make this information accessible to local communities.

5. Support media freedom

Unfortunately, the Pakistani media is no stranger to censorship. Under the current government, the media has had many of its freedoms curtailed and is often subject to political pressure. This, in turn, impacts the quality of news that the public receives about COVID-19. Writing for the nonprofit organization International Media Support, Pakistan consultant Adnan Rehmat has suggested that while these are hard times, there are also opportunities: “Despite these challenges, mainstream Pakistani media has responded with innovation. This has somewhat enhanced the credibility of the media since the public does not seem to be getting useful information directly from the government.”

By overcoming censorship, the media can play an indispensable role in keeping the public informed, and in keeping corruption in check. As the bridge between civilians and the government, the media has a critical role to play in building trust and combating corruption in Pakistan, if allowed to participate freely.

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In conclusion, corruption is a systemic problem that affects every individual and institution in Pakistan, and only brings short-term benefits to the ones that engage in it. Corruption has become entrenched in a number of different contexts and beating it will require a large-scale reinvention of how our government and society works. Changes to public procurement rules, audits, digitization, whistleblowing mechanisms and free media are a start. Before another pandemic strikes, we must accept our hard-earned lessons and prepare the ground for greater accountability in the future.

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

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Nida Qasim Khan is the Communications Lead for Accountability Lab Pakistan. She formerly worked at Ethnic Media Services, in the capacity of a researcher and outreach specialist targeting marginalized communities in the US Census 2020. She’s had experience writing for various local organizations and wishes to contribute towards the literature around prevalent issues in Pakistan.