

Integrity in Governance in Asia
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First of all, allow me to congratulate the organizers for gathering such a distinguished group of people from the Asian region to deliberate on an important topic. To counter corruption is not only critical to good governance but it is also central to an equitable, balanced and sustainable development. Simply stated, corruption needs to be challenged, curtailed and in the long run, hopefully eradicated. For corruption not only depletes our already limited budget and resources, but it also demoralizes the spirit of a nation and its people. Corruption, if allowed to persist unchecked, would inhibit and dwarf the moral integrity of a society.

The current economic crisis in Asia has inadvertently brought much attention to economic problems and their solutions. This rather single-minded focus on the economy may have overshadowed other urgent issues that need to be addressed in the region. Typical of conventional approach and thinking, the trend to divide problems and issue into segmented categories would propel us to deal with them in a disjointed manner, as if realities can be neatly divided into compartments where one could systematically prioritize them and deal with them one at a time.

At least in the Thai situation, our economic woes are closely intertwined with failures in our political and social-cultural institutions. Many Thais have wondered aloud that if the first signs of financial mismanagement were taken seriously and immediately and properly dealt with, perhaps our economic woes might have been lessened. Other might hasten to add that the fact that the economic ills were allowed to escalate and worsen indicated suspected acts of “cover-up” and “favoritism” in return for special “favor” by powers that be. I would add that at the core of our “dark experience” lies the ugly truth that there was an absence of transparency, accountability, public interest and public responsibility.

Socio-cultural values which propagated consumerism, conspicuous consumption fortified by the practices of cronyism and patronage in politics and administration have invariable combined to doom the Thai economy. Because socio-economic and political factors are so inextricably intertwined, a holistic approach which focuses on their inter-relationship will serve us well.

The combat against corruption is not an individual quest nor even solely a government’s duty. In fact, it should be a joint effort of different players. Government should be an active partner in this effort. But a strong civil society where average citizens cohere to volunteer their time, energy and effort to monitor situations and persons which engender corrupt activities and behaviors

will prove to be the most enduring deterrence against corruption. Likewise, civil society organizations such as NGOs, people's group and informal associations of like-minded people will undoubtedly and unmistakably be good partners for individual volunteers and government. In reality, we will need to create an environment where cooperation and participation from the public to tackle with corruption goes beyond verbal endorsement and commitment.

Such an "enabling" environment where integrity in governance is high would need to meet certain requirements such as:

- 1) Leadership with good moral characters and high integrity. Role models aside, leadership with true commitment to foster transparency and accountability in governance and a willingness to welcome public engagement and involvement in solving social issues.
- 2) Constitution or basic law that provide the legal framework and assurances that people's voices, needs, participation and involvement in exercising their civil rights are not only guaranteed but nurtured.
- 3) A set of values that are congruent with activism, engagement and participation in public life by private individuals. Too often, in the context of many Asian countries, historical conditions were such that an average citizen is made to feel not only his/her insignificance and vulnerability vis-a-vis government and other powerful forces in society, but he/she is also conditioned to submit to authorities with silence and to endure all conditions, however onerous, with patience and tolerance.

I would like to draw your attention especially to the last point - value system and value change for social activism. Traditional Asian values speak of loyalty to family and kins, commitment to honor and obligations, adherence to a system of integrity, and a code of business ethics built on personal trust and relationship. These values may be construed as antithetical to the values of modern society where disengagement from familiar and kinship ties and reliance on legal contracts are stressed.

However, I contend that traditional Asian values could be extrapolated to strengthen our present call for value change, for integrity in good governance. Allow me to elaborate.

Imbued in some of the traditional Asian values already stated are the virtues of a moral and integrity system which bind an individual to his social relations. Loyalty to family and kin-folks submits an individual to an immediate social group for the good of the group instead of for one's own personal ends. The requirement to honor and repay obligations serves to strengthen an individual's commitment and responsibility to social acts. It also serves to remind one that the social world is a web of interrelated exchanges and reciprocities where one could not act independently, disregarding social consequences and implications. As for the code of honor and integrity in business, the virtue of

honesty and basic trust in the goodness and integrity of other human beings are hereby extolled.

These virtues could be and should be captured for our task at hand to interpret and incorporate them into a set of values system that will counter the forces of corruption.

We could translate commitment to family and kins into commitment for an even larger social group, which is society. That an individual's obligation to society requires participation and involvement and even vigilance to fend off the corrosive effects on society which corruption inevitably incurs. The moral and integrity code of business practice easily translates into an integrity system where corruption could have no place and would not be tolerated.

In essence, through the cooperation of the media as a partner in the effort to stamp out corruption and install transparency and accountability in all spheres, the public will not be motivated to actively participate as alert monitors of wrong doings only, but they will cultivate a strong distaste and contempt for both wrong doings and wrong doers. They will also be concerned enough to act and not just to sit back and complain.

What should ordinary citizens do and how could they be effective in battling corruption? I do not presume to know all the answers, especially in the face of divergent socio-cultural economic-political contexts. I trust that you will be addressing these questions among others in the next few days. I wish you my best in your deliberations.