

Foreword

by *Oscar Arias Sánchez*¹

I am grateful for the opportunity writing this Foreword affords for me to comment on one of the most compelling issues of our time: the need to rally individuals, communities, and nations to the cause of combating corruption. Corruption will always flourish in the obscurity of totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and dictatorships—regimes that limit power to an unaccountable few. By definition, absolutism and dictatorship are bound by fewer ethical exigencies than is democracy.

Under totalitarian regimes, corruption is often directly linked to human rights violations. In Latin America, many dictators justified their governments for years by pointing the finger at corrupt regimes of the recent past. These same dictatorships were often fronts for thieves and embezzlers. And in each of these cases, citizens and journalists were deprived of the legal resources necessary to expose the presumptuousness and corruptness of their government to a competent and credible judicial system. But, at the same time, corruption is best exposed, and best attacked, in a democracy. Corruption can only be examined and eradicated in an environment of pluralism, tolerance, freedom of expression, and individual security—an environment that only democracy can guarantee.

This is not to say, however, that democracy is immune to corruption. Let us not be so ingenuous as to believe that corruption only pervades organizations that operate outside the law. Nor is corruption limited to the arena of international espionage. It is undeniable that such criminal activities often invite the talons of corruption. But these talons have also penetrated the power structures of governments from both the developed and developing worlds, from Europe to Latin America. Large private organizations have also taken advantage of a respectability gained from the formal legality of their activities. They violate the public trust by relying on bribery as a standard and accepted business strategy. It is a strategy that wins them an unfair financial advantage. We must also remember the near-constant diversion of public funds to the private bank accounts and estates of government and military officials.

Also common is the misappropriation of foreign aid and donations meant for development and the alleviation of suffering provoked by war or nature; at least a portion of these funds is often dedicated to the financial enrichment of corrupt officials. One of the saddest faces of corruption appears in the poorest countries, where misery and socio-economic inequality abound. And yet, the corruption of public office continues to thrive. In these nations, the bribery of public officials is also a theft from the poor. The immediate effects of corruption include not

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only the further impoverishment of the people, but also the weakening of democratic institutions. When Latin America was ruled predominantly by dictators, the soldiers of democracy aroused public resistance by arguing against the corruption prevalent in the autocratic regimes of the time.

The fall of many Latin American dictatorships was due in large part to the public's fury over the corruptness of their regimes. But, on occasion, the same people have been so disenchanted with the prevalence of corruption in democratic regimes, that they have even welcomed a new dictatorship. In fact, many of these dictatorships were installed as a result of palace coups or military rebellions hypocritically claiming the corruption of democratic regimes.

A nation emerging from repression may be unaware of the extent of corruption in past regimes that did not permit investigation and public information. At the same time, the novelty of democracy may be overshadowed by scandals exposed by a free press. The lack of transparency in antidemocratic regimes has given citizens the mistaken impression that democracy is fundamentally vulnerable to corruption. Democratic leaders are faced with the responsibility of addressing, and correcting, this misperception.

Democracy must be characterised by transparency, and by dedication to transparency. But the most effective guardianship of transparency must be in the hands of the citizens organised themselves for this purpose. Their organizations must raise awareness and argue for transparency both within and across borders. Powerful financial organizations have globalised corruption as an accepted tool of business; the fight against corruption must be globalised as well. If the people do not act to preserve their democracy, if they lack civic virtue and commitment to their government, then democracy will certainly fall prey to the vulture of corruption.

The majority of nations maintain their commitment to repudiate any attempt to depose a constitutionally legitimate government. Gradually, we are solidifying our internal and external peace. Legitimate governments are now able to initiate the institutional reforms necessary for the modernisation of our societies, and to stimulate human development. Unfortunately, the continued scandals of corruption are discouraging our people.

Expectations of popular uprisings or coups d'état are about to re-emerge in some countries. Political parties, the traditional strongholds of the democratic system, are being shattered by disrepute, increasingly condemned by the citizens who are distancing themselves from political decision-making. As the political parties are abandoned, democracy runs the risk of becoming an ambivalent and impotent formality.

Modern technological culture places an inordinate value on consumption and the possession of goods. More and more, personal success and prestige are measured by material wealth, rather than by an individual's contributions to society. This leads our civilisation to an ethical deficiency that can only be remedied through education. We must awaken the spirit of civic duty, especially in the young people. In classrooms and board rooms, we must teach the responsibilities of citizenship and cultivate the dedication to be socially useful. Material wealth must be presented to the young as a value subsidiary to the wealth of citizenship. Social capital must overcome financial capital, for a culture dedicated only to the accumulation of material wealth is fertile ground for the weed of corruption.

In many places, courageous leaders are providing the vision and dedication necessary to channel public demands into organised action, calling out for open, accountable government. Praise and active support must be lent to those who struggle for open and honest government,

often against powerful and established elites. Somehow, they seem powerless Davids fighting against overwhelming Goliaths. But, as have been shown recently in many countries, David's spirit and will continues to triumph over Goliath's intimidating might. When citizens call for a more accountable and decent government, they are expressing their anger about corruption, a practice that humiliates the poor by forcing them to bribe minor officials to do their job; that bankrupts the honest trader; that empowers the partnership of unscrupulous captains of commerce and dishonest officials, and spreads like a cancer to infest all that is decent in society.

We must not despair of arresting the cancer of corruption. As much as we speak of the globalisation of corruption, we must also welcome the global tidal wave of public demands for good government. Today, national leaders are beginning to accept that corruption must be discussed on the domestic and international stages. After the end of the Cold War aid flows are more closely watched and humanitarian assistance is now meant to help people, rather than to buy friends—even corrupt ones—in the Third World.

But our most important weapon in the war against corruption will be the growing number of democracies and, consequently, free presses around the world. Without the freedom to ask questions, or to effect change, people are not empowered—they are, instead, caught in a system of superficial democracy. One of the most important freedoms in a democracy is the freedom of the press. When the voice of one man or woman is suppressed, all voices are in danger of being silenced. When even the smallest part of truth is hidden, a great lie may be born.

Every right of citizenship, though guaranteed by law, can be violated by incompetent or corrupt leaders. But the protection and restitution of rights is much more likely where there is a free press to denounce such leaders, and open a debate on their competence. Freedom of the press is the “eternal vigilance” of which Thomas Jefferson spoke—the endless duty to guard our government against corruption.

Our future directions must include a struggle for transparency, truthfulness, and ethics in our political and economic leaders. But let it be clear that corruption is not just the use of political power for personal gain. It is much more than the collusion between public servants and business people in order to gain illegal or immoral advantages. Corruption has many other dimensions that are not subject to legal sanction and which are not always, in every place, subject to the scrutiny of public opinion.

For one thing, there is corruption in the failure of political and governmental leaders to carry out the educational function that falls to them in a democracy. Double talk, telling people only what they want to hear, and not calling things by their name for purely electoral reasons, are practices that corrupt and degrade individuals, societies, and the democratic systems.

But double talk can be heard too in the realm of international relations. And that means corruption in a wider sense. There is a kind of corruption by means of which confidence among nations is weakened.

It is corrupt to gauge the success of a political career on elections won, when those elections are won only by hiding the truth or holding it back until the electorally opportune moment. There is corruption when officials and politicians use the distribution of privileges and sinecures to divest political parties and other organizations of their ethical principles and intellectual vigour. It is corrupt to forget that participation in politics or in government demands preparation, selflessness, the willingness to serve others, and consistency between what is practised and what is preached.

But we must not forget that elected officials are not the only ones guilty of corruption. There are forms of corruption arising from misunderstood loyalty, from extreme acquiescence, and from the opportunism of subordinates. We must ask ourselves about the possible consequences of the corruption found in secrecy and in false loyalty.

It must be recognised that there exists a voter's responsibility to seek in a future government official honesty, aptitude, capability, veracity, and respect for those attributes. For one who lacks values, but not political ambition, will always be willing to pervert the tools of democracy in his or her thirst for power. Not all destroyed democracies were buried by coups d'état or insurrection.

Voting is a right, but many citizens forget their obligation to exercise that right with responsibility. In the parliamentary elections held in March 1933 in the homeland of Beethoven, Goethe, and Thomas Mann, the National Socialist Party legitimately obtained a crushing majority, thereby opening the door for Adolf Hitler to the most corrupting of powers, absolute power.

In seventeenth-century Mexico, one of that country's great poets, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz², asked:

Whose is the greater blame in a shared evil?
She who sins for pay, or he who pays for sin?

The poet meant to expose the hypocrisy of men who scorned the moral character of the women with whom they sinned. I believe her words ring true even today, in a world where sinners often retreat into havens of wealth and power. Corruption requires two parties—the corrupter and the corruptee. When industrialised leaders condone bribery in other nations while condemning bribery at home, they are guilty not only of corruption, but of the application of a double standard for the developed and developing worlds. The existence of this double standard is dangerous to all parties involved—to the rich nations who reserve ethics for the domestic stage, and to the poorer nations whose institutions are subject to a process of corrosion through corruption.

The perpetrators of corruption in developing nations are not always citizens of the Third World. During the past few decades, several industrialised countries have interfered with the political processes of countries in the developing world by supporting, maintaining, and even installing corrupt leaders. Many wealthy nations have followed a double standard in their foreign policy, promoting democracy at home and autocracy abroad. This double standard is also manifest in the tendency of Western nations to ignore the anti-bribery laws of developing countries, even allowing their corporations to make the payment of bribes tax deductible. Such actions blatantly disregard the needs of fragile new democracies to prove the value of the democratic system to people who have lived for years under totalitarianism.

Double talk—another type of double standard—can be heard in the realm of international relations. And that means corruption in a wider sense, a type of corruption that weakens confidence among nations. When governments of powerful states offer moral arguments to justify acts which are in reality dictated by self-interest, they commit an act of corruption. There is corruption when democratic governments, very often declared pacifists, permit their countries' industries to supply arms to repressive governments that violate human rights or to countries embroiled in civil wars or international conflicts.

² A Mexican nun, not only was she one of the greatest poets and playwrights of her time, she was also the first person in Latin America to argue for the rights of women to receive an education.

Transparency International has taken important steps to combat double standards of corruption. I applaud these actions. But we must still do more. This Source Book will, without question, be an invaluable tool in this further work, helping to build standards and providing civil society no less than policymakers and implementers with a host of examples of best practice that any country will ignore at its peril.

As well as building an alert and empowered civil society, we must fight corruption by educating our children against abuse of power. We must fight corruption by becoming champions of civic virtue, that quality of citizenship that seems to have been lost with the passing of the years. As we approach the new millennium, we need the help and support of every one of us in order to reach this goal. We must remain confident that we can stop the cancer of corruption. As much as we speak of the globalisation of corruption, we must also welcome the global tidal wave of public demands for good government. Today, national leaders are beginning to accept that corruption must be discussed on the domestic and international stages. Since the end of the Cold War, aid flows have been more closely watched and humanitarian assistance is now meant to help people, rather than to buy friends—even corrupt ones—in the developing world.

In the mind of any student of politics, Europe evokes images of the age of Enlightenment—of great philosophical debates about the merits of democracy, the constitution of liberty, and the obligations of citizenry. Let us see the dawn of a new and global enlightenment. Let us work for a renaissance of the ideas that gave birth to our democracies and shaped our governments, for our futures will only be secure by a sustained commitment to these same ideals.

If we can rediscover our passion for liberty, truth and justice, we will realise our dreams and surpass our goals. The hour has arrived for us to live up to our potential and to shun the temptations of corruption. Let us then be true to our history and begin to prepare for the future.

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