

EPILOGUE

Recovering Rage

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Let me start by making a confession. I have, of late, been suffering from a lack of anxiety about the world, a sense that nothing matters and nothing will ever change. What I once feared most—an acceptance of things as they are, as they have always been—is now upon me. I do not know whether this is the onset of wisdom or merely of age. I have lost my rage.

There was a time when I was always angry. I would drive around this benighted city mad as a bull in a bull-fight. The potholes, the children begging on the streets, the garbage that remained uncollected all drove me into a frenzy. I would curse the corruption, the ineptness, the unrelenting poverty. Not anymore. Perhaps it is because I have spent too much time attending conferences such as this, in places such as this.

Don't get me wrong. I have no doubt that efforts to build a consensus on the rules of the game are important. I have no argument against initiatives to try to get governments and other sectors together in the fight against corruption. But the gatherings tend to treat issues such as governance, corruption, and accountability as abstract constructs, far removed from the world out there—a world of shadowy deals, unremitting greed, and large-scale thievery of the people's money. There is no occasion at such events to be moved and to get angry.

The problem is not that there is so little to be mad about. In many countries, including the Philippines, corruption is woven into the fabric of the culture; it is a way of life. Two months ago, I was editing a book that has just been published by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ): *Robbed: An investigation of corruption in Philippine education*. It describes an education bureaucracy ridden with graft from the lowest to the highest levels, and a network of corrupt officials that extends from Manila to the school on the remotest island of this archipelago.

We found forms of corruption that ranged from the petty—such as clerks who sit on papers until suppliers fork over a few thousand pesos in grease money—to grand corruption, where high officials bend the rules to favor suppliers who pay bribes in tens of millions of pesos. Corruption, we found out, exists wherever discretionary power is exercised—by those who have the authority to sign contracts or appointments, who are in procurement and hiring, and who release payment, including cashiers who get \$10 or \$20 to release a check.

Money changes hands from the moment suppliers are accredited to the time they are paid. Cash—sometimes the equivalent of one to three months' salary—or jewelry, or, in the provinces, even livestock (a goat, a cow), is given out when a teacher applies for a job and every time she applies for a change in assignment or a promotion.

Some months ago, PCIJ sent a reporter and a camera crew to Samar island in central Philippines, one of the poorest areas of the country. There, they found students walking to school, bringing with them their own stools or chairs because the desks that were supposedly allocated for them never got there. The students were from a poor fishing village where families barely eked out a living from the sea. Yet they showed such thirst for learning and a willingness to make do with the little that was left after the grafters had taken their share.

Today, 3.5 million of 15 million Filipino schoolchildren do not have a desk or a chair. Many do their lessons squatting on cement floors or sitting on the trunks of trees. This is because as much as 30–60 percent of the goods specified in contracts are never delivered, with the difference ending up in the pockets of officials.

In addition, the public school system lacks 70 million textbooks. At the grade-school level, six students share one textbook. In high school, the ratio is one book for every eight pupils. One major reason for the shortage is that pay-offs eat up 20–65 percent of textbook funds.

The problem is not the lack of money. In the last decade, education has been getting the biggest chunk of the national budget. In addition, the education sector is adrift in a sea of foreign funds. For nearly 30 years, lending institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have contributed millions of dollars to Philippine education. The results are there for every one to see: Tests have shown that Filipino schoolchildren learn less than 50 percent of what they are supposed to. In a 1995 test done in 45 countries, the Philippines ranked third to the last in elementary math and second to the last in elementary science. This in a country that once boasted one of the best school systems in Asia. But how can it not be so? Without books or chairs, with school buildings that leak during the monsoon or which are never finished at all because the funds have been stolen—how can even the most determined student be expected to learn?

I could use up the next hour talking about the woes of Philippine education, but I will spare you the details. The point is that this thievery has been going on for decades, right under the noses of a succession of presidents, legislators, ombudsmen, and all sorts of official investigators, not to mention foreign lending institutions. To be fair, there have been sincere attempts to reform the system. But they have

been overwhelmed by a culture—and structure—of corruption that is so deeply entrenched.

The education sector is not unique. The police and the agencies that implement public works projects are in similarly dire straits. Neither is the Philippine situation so extraordinarily egregious; on the global scale of corruption, it is not the worst case. I have been told that the situation I have just described could very well have been Mexico or Pakistan, or nearer to home, Indonesia.

But the story I want to tell you, that I hope you will remember, is not just one of villainy. This story has heroes as well. One of them is Corazon Obsequio, the high-school principal in that same town in Samar with the school with leaking roofs and insufficient desks. Mrs. Obsequio was so determined that her students get the most of the little there was available that when her pupils won a computer in a science contest, and they found out they could only claim the prize if they had electricity, the principal moved heaven and earth to make sure they got it. She begged the mayor and the electric company for a connection, and raised money from raffles and contributions to pay for the monthly electric bill, for which there was no allocation in the school budget.

The surprising thing is that there was no anger in Mrs. Obsequio's heart. She had stopped expecting any help from the Government. She knew she could rely only on herself and the resourcefulness and generosity of the poor fishermen whose children were hungry for an education.

The struggle against the odds is truly heroic. But how are things to change when there is no rage? When there is such calm acceptance that the system is unable to deliver? Corruption persists because of acquiescence, because citizens believe that nothing can be done. The grafters and the corrupt flourish because we are no longer capable of righteous rage.

How did we lose the capacity for anger? When was it that we lost our ire? I was on the highway where this building now stands, 13 years ago, when hundreds of thousands of Filipinos rose up against a regime famous for its corruption and abuse. We were angry then but also full of hope. What happened afterward was a slow erosion of our faith. Our leaders proved to be fallible, we discovered that they were not above the temptations of power and money. After Ferdinand Marcos fell, we realized that democracy in itself does not ensure that government officials and institutions are immune to the virus of corruption. We have become cynical. We are no longer shocked or indignant that those we elected to public office are corrupt, although they still sometimes surprise us with their insatiable appetite for thievery.

Filipinos are not alone. In many countries undergoing a democratic transition, hope soon gives way to cynicism and despair. The system seems incapable of reform, or even of delivering minimum needs: education, health care, law and order. Filipinos, like citizens of other developing countries in the region, do not demand that their Government explore Mars or find the cure for cancer. We only want the garbage to be collected, our children to have books and chairs, our roads to be paved, especially if it is our money that is being used to build them. Unfortunately, in some countries, it seems that if the Government runs at all, it is only because it is being oiled by the lubricant of corruption. Without payoffs, bureaucrats do not do their work. Or else their energies are consumed by the prospect of making illicit gain.

Corruption is not, as some would have us believe, a harmless, victimless crime. It does more than enrich those in public office. The toll that corruption takes is evident in an entire generation of badly educated Filipino schoolchildren. Corruption is obvious to anyone who drives down

Manila streets: It is there in the potholes that make the roads barely passable, and in the faces of children who beg on the streets because the money for welfare programs goes instead to the pockets of officials.

But Government alone is not to blame. Corruption is a two-way street and businessmen and citizens are often themselves active participants in the process. Road contractors, for example, wangle Government contracts by offering bribes to officials. A PCIJ study on congressional pork barrel-discretionary funds given to legislators every year—found that contractors paid congressmen 12-20 percent of the project cost. Newly elected legislators are soon initiated into the system of bribes by unscrupulous contractors and suppliers who have perfected the art of doing business with Government.

The trail of payoffs from pork barrel funds does not stop at Congress. We found that for public works contracts, heads of implementing agencies received 10 percent; the provincial or city engineer, 10 percent; the mayor, 7 percent; and the village head, 3 percent. The result was half-finished bridges, roads that fell apart with the first rains, and farmers or fishers mired in poverty because they could not transport their produce.

I will not even talk about corruption at the highest levels involving presidential cronies and multibillion-peso contracts. In these cases, judging from the investigations that we've done, the amounts are staggering. But the trail of payoffs also becomes murkier, especially when they involve businessmen with close connections to the presidential palace. Everything becomes hush-hush, and it is difficult to get the documents to prove that corrupt deals have been made.

Suffice it to say that corruption exacts a cost on all of us. When public office is seen as a tool for plundering the national treasury, then the political system becomes totally

warped, the most corrupt deal makers buy their way to high office, and we end up suffering their exactions.

Corruption kills. When, for example, real estate developers bribe local officials to rezone land so they can build golf courses on watersheds or housing projects on fragile slopes, citizens end up suffering from floods, landslides, and other consequences of environmental abuse. Last August, 57 people died when a housing estate built on an unstable hillside collapsed. The project could only have been accomplished by bribing regulators to sign the required building permits and environmental clearances.

Three years ago, 160 young people perished in a fire that razed a crowded disco in a Manila suburb. The place had been packed six times its allowed capacity on the steamy summer night when the disco's electrical system overloaded and burst into flames. Investigators found that the disco had violated more than 20 provisions of the building and fire codes. Yet the establishment passed several examinations by city inspectors. The trail of greased palms was evident everywhere, but up to now, no one has been punished for this crime.

Certainly, the impunity with which the most corrupt are able to get away with their crimes perpetuates corruption and makes it more difficult to root out. When even the courts and the agencies tasked with enforcing anticorruption laws are themselves tainted with charges of malfeasance, to whom do the aggrieved turn? I have lost count of the many victims who have called our office to say, "We have tried everything. We have complained to the agencies concerned. We have filed charges in court. Nothing has happened. Please write our story. You are our only hope."

It is unfair to make the media bear the burden of nurturing hope. We are ourselves a flawed institution. We are tarred with the same brush: Accusations of corruption have

been hurled against journalists as well. Many of us do not have the skills to deal with the complexity of corruption issues. And even if we do, we often don't have the resources to conduct thorough investigations. Moreover, media proprietors are wary about exposés that may put them and their other businesses at risk from the powers that be.

Despite these limitations, we can take on a few crooks, but the task of bringing them to justice, meting out punishment, and then instituting reforms to plug the holes in the system belongs to Government. It is easy enough to talk about how the media and civil society can play a role in combating corruption. But we should remember that doing so does not mean we let the Government shirk its responsibilities.

Enough has been said—and written—about corruption. Perhaps too much. The pervasiveness and the scale of the problem make one weep. But it may be time now to go beyond talking and weeping. Together, we must muster the rage to do something about it.

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APG	Asia-Pacific Group on Money Laundering
AAB	authorized agent bank
ACOS	Automated Customs Operating System
ASYCUDA	Automated System for Customs Data
BIAC	Business and Industry Advisory Council
CCAF	Canadian Comprehensive Auditing Foundation
COSO	Committee of Sponsoring Organisations
C & AG	comptroller and auditor general
CY-CFS	Container Yard-Container Freight Station
CPI	Corruption Perceptions Index
CPIB	Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau
DOF	Department of Finance
DTROP	Drug Trafficking (Recovery of Proceeds) Ordinance
EDI	Electronic Data Interchange
ETUC	European Trade Union Congress
EU	European Union
FPI	Federation of Philippine Industry
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
FDI	foreign direct investment

FBPA	The Act on Preventing Bribery of Foreign Officials in International Business Transactions (Foreign Bribery Prevention Act)
G A O	General Accounting Office
GEIS	General Electric Information Systems
GPS	global positioning system
GRECO	Groupe d'Etats Contre la Corruption
ICTA	Income and Corporation Taxes Act
ICAC	Independent Commission Against Corruption
INTOSAI	International Association of Supreme Audit Institutions
ICC	International Chamber of Commerce
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
IFAC	International Federation of Accountants
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOSCO	International Organization of Securities Commissions
N A O	National Audit Office
NTS	National Tax Service
N G O	nongovernment organization
O P E N	Online Procedures Enhancement for Civil Applications
OLRS	on-line release system
O E C D	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OSCO	Organized and Serious Crimes Ordinance
PBEC	Pacific Basin Economic Council
PNG	Papua New Guinea
PVS	payment verification system
PCIJ	Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism
PCCI	Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry
PAS	Project Abstract Secure
PAC	Public Accounts Committee
PAC	Public Affairs Centre
PSC	Public Sector Committee
SEC	Securities and Exchange Commission
SAR	Special Administrative Region
SAI	supreme audit institution
TUAC	Trade Union Advisory Committee
UNICE	Union of Industrial and Employees Confederation of Europe
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VANS	value-added networks
VFM	value for money
WTO	World Trade Organization
W	won