

Thinking about Corruption

by

Ethan S. Burger, Esq.¹
Scholar-in-Residence
School of International Service
American University
Washington, D.C. 20016

&

Adjunct Professor
Georgetown University Law Center
Washington, D.C. 20001

At times it seems that there is little to learn from reading the general literature on corruption. Occasionally, there is an interesting report or case study, but in recent years has knowledge in this area really been advanced to the point that it can be successfully operationalized? I am skeptical. Yet, considerable work has been undertaken by governments, international institutions, and non-governmental organizations studying this subject since the World Bank began to use the “C” word.

Many people who work on corruption issues are so-called “area specialists,” who unfortunately examine the problem as if it were a phenomenon unique to a limited number of countries. This can lead to misleading conclusions since such persons lack extensive knowledge about other parts of the world.

Alternatively, many “anti-corruption” specialists do not possess the language skills and sufficient country-specific knowledge to fully appreciate the phenomenon they are observing. I believe that corruption exists in every country – the principal variables being the form it takes, its scope and its impact on the relevant country’s population. Essentially, the question is does it operate as a “tax” or result in government’s ability to provide essential services to the population it rules – assuming that persons in the government indeed have a desire to provide the relevant services?

Many analysts use developed OECD countries as their starting point for conducting comparisons of levels of corruption throughout the world. While moral relativism should not be used as an excuse for unacceptable behavior, an understanding of history, political and economic differences are essential for properly analyzing corruption’s scope and

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