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Corruption: Causes and Ways to Fight it

About APPRO:

Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization (APPRO) is an independent social research organization with a mandate to promote social and policy learning to benefit development and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and other less developed countries through conducting social scientific research, monitoring and evaluation, and training and mentoring. APPRO is registered with the Ministry of Economy in Afghanistan as a non-profit, non-government organization and headquartered in Kabul, Afghanistan with five regional offices. For more information, see: www.appro.org.af

APPRO is the founding member of APPRO-Europe, a network association for disseminating applied research findings from conflict environments, conducting training, and carrying out evaluations. For more information, see: www.appro-europe.net

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A major conviction about why and how corruption has taken such a systemic hold on Afghanistan's political economy is that corruption in Afghanistan is the product of government irresponsibility and failure and neglect by the country's international donors. Research by APPRO on various forms of corruption in Afghanistan since 2010 reveals that the institutionalization of corruption in Afghanistan is the outcome of multiple, interrelated factors and actors.(1) These are:

- Weak governance mechanisms bordering on "bad governance" and resulting in multiple layers of petty administrative and grand corruption.
- A spoiled and entitled private sector that is mostly silent on corruption and largely avoids paying taxes, while demanding at every opportunity that the embattled government maintain an enabling environment for business activity – including the provision of security and protection for the wealthy business persons who are favored targets of criminal kidnapping gangs.
- NGOs and INGOs, with a few exceptions, operating on double standards of denouncing corruption while being party to sustaining it by not confronting corrupt practices in government administration, particularly in payments of their taxes.

- A traumatized general public that does not trust and fears authority and thus chooses not to contest when it is being extorted by the powerful in and out of government.
- International donors, a significant minority of whom disburse development aid funding through "projectized assistance" involving multinational for-profit businesses that tend to be more concerned about their bottom lines than paying legitimate taxes for in-country activities, or accounting for the sustainability of their massive projects.
- Monetary incentives from foreign governments for securing agreements, albeit temporarily, among conflicting political factions is by now folklore in Afghanistan though those providing the incentives and the amounts of funds serving this purpose remain largely unknown.(2)

It is all but clear that all the above elements, to one degree or another, play a role in perpetuating corruption. Despite this, anticorruption makes little or no appearance on the political agendas of political parties, in elections, or in advocacy work by civil society organizations, bar a few whose mandate is anticorruption. In addition, the role media plays in anticorruption typically does not go beyond sensationalist exposés of key individuals.

(1) For APPRO's research on corruption, see "Publications" at: www.appro.org.af

(2) For some elaboration on this issue, see, for example, Coll, S. (2018), Directorate S: The CIA and America's Secret War in Afghanistan and Pakistan (NY: Penguin Press)

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International donors, foreign governments, political parties, media, civil service, Parliament, private sector, and civil society organizations could and should play a much more pivotal role in mainstreaming anticorruption. There is an urgent need for a national dialogue on how corruption, unimpeded, threatens national security and undermines reconstruction and future development of Afghanistan. Mainstreaming anticorruption would entail:

- Transparent, verifiable, and coordinated action and accountability by international donors, INGOs, NGOs, and multinational private businesses implementing “projectized assistance” against corruption in strategy, internal housekeeping, and dealings with corrupt officials in the government.
- Political parties placing anticorruption high on their agenda and election strategy for elections at all levels.
- Donor agencies paying much closer attention through monitoring, for example, to how their funds are being appropriated, or misappropriated, by the recipients of their funds.
- Administrative reform to minimize transaction costs, particularly in tax collection and basic service delivery.
- Linked with administrative reform, wholesale replacement of the old guard, in age and habits, with younger, educated, and more committed male and female Afghans as the first step in professionalizing the civil service.
- Independent, multi-actor, civil society driven oversight of government and international donors’ budgeting and expenditure.
- Regulating the private sector and enforcement of compliance in tax payment, particularly by politically protected business interests.

Achieving these ambitious goals would need to be guided by a specific strategy and based on current empirical evidence on how endemic corruption – as a multifaceted, deeply rooted system – evolves in reaction to attempts to curb it. The empirical evidence would need to come from ongoing efforts by multiple actors to resist and ultimately fight corruption, monitoring by multiple sources, and ongoing applied research to examine different forms of corruption and possible ways toward curbing them.(3)

The latest high-level effort by the government to address corruption has its beginnings in the formation of the National Unity Government in 2014, followed by the London Conference on Afghanistan in December 2014 resulting in a joint communiqué on Afghanistan long-term commitment to root out corruption, the establishment of the High Council on Rule of Law and Anticorruption in March 2016, and the Brussels Conference in October 2016 with the government’s agreement to “Self-reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework” (SMAF), containing several provisions on developing and implementing anticorruption policies.(4)

The specific anticorruption provisions in SMAF appear under “Area 2: Anticorruption, Governance, Rule of Law, and human” and “Area 3: Restoring Fiscal Sustainability & Integrity of Public Finance and Commercial Banking.”(5)

In October 2017, the English version of “Afghanistan National Strategy for Combatting Corruption” was released, followed by the release of the Dari translation in December 2017. The five pillars of this strategy are: “Political Leadership and Empowering Reformers, Ending Corruption in the Security Sector, Replacing Patronage with Merit, Prosecuting the Corrupt, and Following the Money.”

(3) For more information on additional areas for research on corruption, see APPRO (2017), [“Reconceptualizing Corruption In Afghanistan”](#), Appendix 15

(4) [SIGAR \(2018\), SIGAR 18-51 Audit Report, Afghanistan’s Anti-Corruption Efforts](#)

(5) See: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(2015\), Self-reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework \(SMAF\)](#)

To date, participation by civil society in implementation efforts has been insufficient and those civil society organizations that do participate, do so with insufficient focus on the most relevant or urgent issue.

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... the weak relationship between the government and civil society organizations, particularly NGOs, is attributed to most NGOs focusing only on project-funded work and rarely becoming involved in unpaid work or extracurricular activity.

Given the importance of combatting corruption in Afghanistan, and with reference to SMAF goals on anticorruption and the government's anticorruption strategy, on September 5, 2018, APPRO organized a one-day Open Forum in Kabul with panel-led discussions on Peace Negotiations, Elections, Gender, and Corruption. The remainder of this brief provides a summary of the main points made by the panelists and the participants on anticorruption, followed by recommendations for consideration during the discussions on anticorruption at the Geneva Conference.

The government has established a mechanism for civil society and people to participate in policymaking. This mechanism is referenced in the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF), where the government has committed to bring foundational reforms toward good governance. Two key outcomes of ANPDF are the Anticorruption Strategy and Afghanistan's membership of Open Government Partnership (OGP).

The Special Anticorruption Secretariat, responsible for implementing the government's Strategy for Combatting Corruption, reports that in addition to the Strategy efforts are being made to implement the Access to Information Law, Whistle Blower Protection Law, and Anticorruption Law. A number of frameworks and structures have been created for inclusion of civil society in implementation efforts.

To date, participation by civil society in implementation efforts has been insufficient and those civil society organizations that do participate, do so with insufficient focus on the most relevant or urgent issue. This suggests that the mechanisms through which government authorities and civil society interact are inadequate for constructive engagement. It is also clear that there are

shortcomings in the manner in which civil society conducts advocacy and, very likely, ill-preparedness by government authorities to receive and act on advocacy messages from civil society.

In part, the weak relationship between the government and civil society organizations, particularly NGOs, is attributed to most NGOs focusing only on project-funded work and rarely becoming involved in unpaid work or extracurricular activity. The follow up on promises made from conference to conference on Afghanistan cannot rest on the government alone, particularly given the current government's preoccupation with security issues. Civil society and its organizations must fill the void between conference decisions and actions but in coordination and collaboration with the government and other actors.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Consultation opportunities granted by the government to selected NGOs must be increased in scope and frequency and include a wide array of NGOs.

Recommendation 2: NGOs can and must do more on raising awareness about different forms of corruption and their adverse impacts.

Recommendation 3: Through their actions, NGOs must demonstrate to the general public that combatting corruption is the responsibility of everyone, not just the government.

Recommendation 4: Civil society must use consultation opportunities provided by the government strategically, constructively, and when necessary, confrontationally. In all cases, advocacy messaging by civil society must be based on evidence, articulated, and with the intention of extracting concessions from the government to do better.

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Recommendation 6: There needs to be coordinated and intensified effort by state authorities responsible for anticorruption, civil society organizations, media and international donors to raise awareness of the public on the many anticorruption provisions that exist in the Constitution and various laws and policies and how these existing provisions could and should facilitate making legitimate anticorruption demands while providing some degree of protection for those who resist or combat corruption.

Recommendation 7: In terms of funding, the international donors must stop

disbursing their funding as before and expect different outcomes: Donors must stop providing funds that end up in the hands of the major perpetrators of corruption in Afghanistan, who may be government officials, I/NGOs, or multinational corporations that act as aid contractors in Afghanistan.

Recommendation 8: Aid provision through "projectized assistance" must be re-evaluated and fundamentally overhauled to eliminate opportunities for corrupt and corruptive practices by private sector development corporations.