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India Blog Series: Corruption and Its Discontents ^[1]

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NEW DELHI --- Today the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of parliament passed the Lokpal bill by a voice vote. This high-profile piece of legislation has been advocated by Anna Hazare, a social activist whose movement has recently come to symbolize Indian citizens frustration with government corruption. India ranks 87 out of 178 in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perception Index, which measures the perceived levels of public sector corruption, and 134/183 in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business survey.

Recently, a series of scandals have ravaged the country: a telecommunications scandal, a housing loan scam, and the disastrous Commonwealth Games. Amplified by a feisty media, the result was India's reputation abroad being tarnished and Indians at home being disheartened. Not surprisingly, then, in February 2011, a public opinion poll carried out by the *Hindu Times* found that 41% of Indians thought corruption was the biggest problem facing the country.

Corruption in India is entrenched to the point that corrupt action is often looked upon with nonchalance. For example, in his book, *India: A Portrait*, Patrick French interviews a "facilitator" or semi-professional person hired to dole out a "Montblanc pen here, a bottle of Blue Label there," as situations—and voters—may require. According to one senior election facilitator in Mumbai, "a 'big' candidate would have trouble spending less than \$2-3m to win a constituency in the 2009 election (officially, each candidate was allowed to spend \$55,000)." **Yet it is more than power-hungry politicians that engage in bribery.** From a student slipping a 1000 Rupee note to the registrar in order to get his transcripts expedited, to a mother paying off a police officer when caught for a traffic violation, these sometimes-small and oft-bigger acts have become the norm in India. (For some intriguing stories on bribery, check out www.ipaidabribe.com, a citizen-powered initiative.)

If India is perceived as corrupt on international indices as well as amongst its own people, then her credibility is damaged, and her ability to conduct public diplomacy is diminished, if not demolished. And without that ability, India's capacity to assert herself as a major global power is compromised. Preliminary evidence already shows this: according to a Goldman Sachs report published in 2007, *India's Rising Growth Potential*, corruption was rated as one of the top ten restraints on investor confidence, scoring just higher than the developing country mean. Before coming to India, it was my opinion that if the country wants to continue to enjoy its high rate of economic growth, or assert world leadership, then it must face up to its problem of corruption. Yet in the past few weeks, I am seeing this challenge in a more nuanced light.

Corruption is a problem that has not gone unacknowledged by government leadership. Prime

Minister Manmohan Singh said of corruption in February, “it dents our international image and it demeans us before our own people.” After our conversation with **Abhishek Singh**, Director of E-Governance programs in the Ministry of Communications & Information Technology (Department of Information), and Vineeta Dixit, Principal Consultant for the National e-Governance Plan, it seems **India has positioned itself to actually export tools of anti-corruption**. The Department is working to leverage information communication technologies to increase transparency, accountability, fairness, and citizen trust in government as an individual bureaucrat’s level of discretion decreases.

Examples include the **Bhoomi Project**, which makes proof of land ownership available in kiosks throughout rural areas, and the **eSeva** initiative, which provides government to citizen services and is a project of the Government of Andhra Pradesh. A total of 27 Mission Mode Projects provide a myriad of services to citizens, and initiatives like the network of 100,000 Internet enabled Common Services Centers (kiosks) makes the National e Governance Plan the “largest program of its kind in the world,” according to Abhishek Singh.

What’s also promising about these programs in terms of public diplomacy is that the Department of Information Technology is doing tremendous international knowledge-sharing around ICTs, such as the Pan-African e-Network Project, which creates linkages in tele-medicine and tele-education between India and Africa, or partnerships like the Ghana-India Kofi Annan Centre of Excellence in ICT, which supports research and practical application of ICT4D. In these ways, India is demonstrating leadership in the field, and frankly, playing to its strengths. Continuing to build international partnerships in this way is smart public diplomacy. If these techniques are also applied to address India’s problem of corruption, I would be optimistic for its future.

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