

Global Corruption, Global Protests: The Odds of Success Against the System

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LAURENCE COCKCROFT, JUL 22 2013

Corruption has featured heavily in the rounds of street-led protests over the last three years, and in some cases much earlier. Sometimes the protesters have focused directly on the corruption issue (as in Indonesia, Egypt and Russia); in other cases there has been a stronger focus on issues such as profligate public expenditure (as in Brazil), or the lack of a functioning democracy (as in Yemen and Bulgaria) where the foundation issue has been the corruption which characterises the political system. In either case, what are the chances that these huge street based protests will really roll back corruption in both a specific (appropriate anti-corruption legislation) and broader sense (the end of entrenched and corrupt political networks)?

Numbers may not equate to strength. In Tiananmen Square in 1989 more than a million massed in a giant protest which had the corruption of the Chinese party leadership at its heart. It is often forgotten that the protests extended to four hundred other cities and had extensive support amongst those who were not on the street. But the lives of the several hundred who died were rewarded with a severe clampdown on protest of all kinds and by forms of corruption which were about to take off to unprecedented levels. In fact, at a lower level, anti-corruption protest has continued, with a reported 80,000 demonstrations against corruption per year in the recent past.[1]

What has been the narrative surrounding the recent giant protests across the world with major anti-corruption content? In Egypt one half of public opinion has clearly decided that there was every reason to believe that corruption – clearly a primary issue in the Arab Spring of 2011 – was not going to be defeated by Mohamed Morsi, the victor of a more or less free election in 2012. But deposing him required collaboration with a military establishment whose business networks guarantee that they will not tear down Egypt's finely honed edifice of corruption any time soon. In Brazil in 2013 one million have massed on the streets of most large cities in a reaction against huge outlays on public expenditure with only marginal public benefit (for which even the World Cup did not provide sufficient justification) and have focused on an anti-corruption message. President Dilma Roussef could with considerable justification claim to have already confronted corruption particularly through allowing the 'mensalao' case to go the courts and see prison sentences passed on 39 ex-Senators and members of the House of Deputies. But it was not seen as enough by the public and the protests have not yet defeated the overhang of political corruption at the federal and state levels in Brazil. In Bulgaria mid-2013 has seen massive protests demanding political change after a messy election in May, particularly because the new 'leftist' government of Plamen Oresharski was clearly hostage to well-established corrupt networks spanning business and the security services, symbolized by the appointment Delyan Peevski as head of the State Agency for National Security, later revoked. In Turkey the extraordinarily hostile reaction to Prime Minister Erdogan's plan to exchange Gezi Park for a retail complex was seen as both arrogant and representative of a capitulation to corrupt business interests on a wider front. The proposed national referendum on the issue is far from a measure which will address the underlying corrupt networks in Turkey, or offset Turkey's position as the world's leading jailer of journalists.

What are the limitations on real success for these large scale movements? Social media has been a very powerful tool for convening and mobilising protests. In India in 2011 the mass demonstrations in central Delhi in support of the anti-corruption campaigner Anu Hazare were convened through social media, but have so far not achieved their legislative and institutional objectives (for an independent Ombudsman and the toughening of the Corruption Bill) for

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which he campaigned. A recognition of the limits of this approach are reflected in the fact that Hazare's right hand man, Arvind Kejriwal, decided this year to enter party politics and his Common Man's Party (Aam Aadmi) will fight for the mayoralty of Delhi in November. In terms of popular protest it may be the case that the web-based campaign/ *paid a bribe* with its nearly one million respondents has had a bigger impact than that of Anu Hazare. In Russia, Alexei Navalny achieved a huge turnout for street protests in relation to the election results announced in February 2012 but had decided by mid-2013 that more could be achieved by running for the Mayor's office in Moscow, and maybe ultimately for the Presidency, than by sustaining popular protest. Apparently Putin disagreed and let him out of jail on July 19th.

The real limit to the effectiveness of mass protest in relation to corruption is the depth of the system which the protests confront. In Russia dissatisfaction with the current political regime is offset by all those who are locked in what Professor Alena Ledeneva[2] powerfully describes as 'sistema' – an economic system dependent on personalised reciprocal deals. In Brazil, long established and intertwined political and business relationships have seen almost incredible electoral survival: for example former President Fernando de Collor (once impeached by Congress for corruption) was elected as Senator in 2009 (and continues in that office), reflecting the strength of traditional networks. In China, intensive criticism of corruption on the website Sina Weibo – with 100 million users – has yielded some scalps (for example Liu Zhijun, Head of Railways, condemned to death in July 2013 for corruption), but attacks on some sitting targets (GlaxoSmithKline and other pharmaceutical companies) have not yet achieved a real breakthrough in curbing corruption. The strength of the system can never be underrated.

The fact of mass public protest against corruption on an unprecedented scale is a milestone in the 'war on corruption[3]'. It faces the power of entrenched networks which have already shown their strength and ability to morph but survive where confronted. Some protest leaders have concluded that the acquisition of elected political power is essential to success. In fact, real progress will come when entrenched networks recognise that real reform is essential to their personal survival.

Laurence Cockcroft is a co-founder of Transparency International and author of 'Global Corruption : Money, Power and Ethics in the Modern World', published in 2012 by I.B. Tauris in the UK and PennPress in the US and in 2013 by Cite Publishing in Taiwan.

[1] Fenby, J. The Fall and Rise of a Great Power, 1850-2008. p 978, (Allen Lane, London 2010)

[2] Can Russia Modernise ? Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance' Alena Ledeneva, CUP, 2013

[3] The War on Corruption, Frank Vogl, Rowman and Littlefield, USA, 2012

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