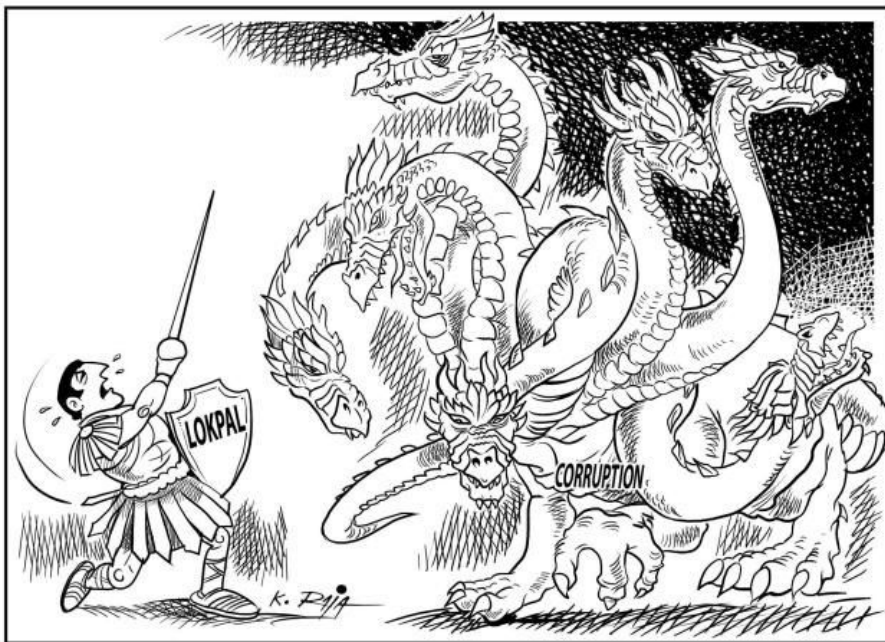


Fighting corruption needs more grit

Dr. Bhaskar Balakrishnan



While the Lokpal can play the role of an independent regulator for setting ethical standards, the vigilance branch in departments must be beefed up to tackle graft head on.

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The procession of major corruption scandals — CWG, the 2G and other cases — has rightly led to public outrage and disgust and demands for effective means to punish the wrong-doers and root out the menace of corruption. The focus is now on an effective and strong super Lokpal, but the process is likely to be long and complicated.

In India we often give up on existing mechanisms and look to new mechanisms to deal with problems. Like a knight in shining armour, the Lokpal is seen as a veritable Kalki come to behead the corrupt plaguing our society.

Why not look at the existing mechanisms, and rectify defects and strengthen them? After all, this can only add to the struggle. We need to work hard, pay attention to detail, and be relentless in follow-up if we are to succeed. We tend to give up too easily.

In each government agency there is a vigilance branch which is tasked with maintaining high ethical standards.

This not only means looking into complaints against corruption, but also being pro-active in preventive vigilance, such as eliminating the avenues and processes that can lead to corruption, and monitoring the ethical behaviour of employees.

However, the vigilance branch is too often understaffed, headed by part-time officers who see it as a dirty job. The Secretary in charge may not have the requisite commitment or be supportive of the drive for ethics by pro-active officers.

Beefing up vigilance

The vigilance set-up in government agencies should be strengthened and made completely independent, reporting only to the Central Vigilance Commissioner, but keeping the Head of the agency informed. It should be staffed by separate group of full-time trained officers and staff, with specialised expertise in the administrative, investigative, and legal aspects of vigilance.

The recommendations of the vigilance branch should normally be implemented by the agency, as is the case with the finance branch.

The vigilance branch should be consulted on key operations such as procurement processes, personnel movements, and of course complaints. Annual plans of action and reports on progress in vigilance and anti-corruption measures should be published.

After preliminary investigation, complaints may lead to charges and a quasi-judicial inquiry. The inquiry should be concluded quickly and if necessary the services of retired personnel of appropriate seniority should be used.

Very often, serving officers try to avoid this duty for various reasons and the inquiry gets delayed.

Independent inquiry officers would speed up the process and make it more effective. Strengthening vigilance mechanisms would of course involve costs in terms of manpower and resources, but for too long we have tried to do vigilance on a shoe-string budget with minimal staff and part-time manpower.

The debate over the Lokpal Bill has focused almost exclusively on punishing wrong-doers. This is like treating the symptom, and not the disease of corruption.

We must pay equal attention to the root causes and conditions that enable corruption to flourish and grow. Otherwise it will rear up again as the Hydra, or the demon Raktabeej of legend. This means subjecting all major processes for procurement, spending to independent expert scrutiny, and making decisions and the reasoning thereof public.

The greater the transparency, the more is the likelihood of corrupt practices being detected early.

Preventive action

We must heed the wise saying 'prevention is much better than cure' for the disease of corruption. The cost in terms of manpower, resources, to bring to book the corrupt after the act is much greater than what would have been required to prevent the act in the first place. The corrupt can be depended upon to move heaven and earth to save themselves even if it means destroying the society.

Preventive measures will also lead to a much healthier society based on a foundation of solid trust and confidence between civil society and government. While corruption in government agencies is the main focus, let us remember that this human vice is present in all organisations – the judiciary, legislature, media, business, academia, political organisations, NGOs etc.

We must encourage each sector to develop and put in place the most appropriate mechanisms for attaining the highest possible standards of ethical behaviour not only in theory, but also in practice.

The Lokpal can play a useful role of an independent regulator for setting standards for all sectors of society including the very highest echelons of state, and monitoring compliance with them.

But to turn it into an investigative agency with a judicial function would be duplicating existing mechanisms, giving rise to conflicts and diminishing its potential considerably.

(The author is a former Ambassador of India and had served as Chief Vigilance Officer in the Ministry of External Affairs.)

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