

Fighting Corruption through Nonviolent Action

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There is a quiet revolution now in the international struggle against corruption and for greater transparency in government.

Two years ago, I attended my first International Anti-Corruption Conference (IACC), sponsored Transparency International and other groups, which takes place every other year. The location was Guatemala City, a country where the per capita annual income is only slightly more than the registration, hotel and air fare of most participants. Sponsors included Rio Tinto, Royal Dutch/Shell and other corporations whose own record of upholding legal and ethical standards is far from pristine.

There were a number of sparsely-attended workshops during the four-day conference featuring participants who emphasized the importance of grass roots struggles to fight corruption: Walden Bello, Alejandro Bedana, Shaaazka Beyerle, Giorgi Meladze and a handful of others spoke about the successes of grassroots movements in such countries as the Philippines, Nicaragua, Turkey, and Georgia struggling against official corruption. However, the overall emphasis at the conference was on strengthening laws, better oversight by international organizations, stricter sanctions by foreign governments and corporations against corrupt local officials, and other top-down solutions.

What a difference two years can make.

This year's IACC, which just concluded in Athens, took on a very different tone. Though the corporate sponsorship and high visibility of current and former government officials was still enough to give one pause, there were an unprecedented number of participants from civil society: human rights activists, feminists, veterans of nonviolent action campaigns, journalists from alternative media, environmental campaigners, advocates of debt relief, and – despite the European location – and unprecedented number of participants from the global south.

In contrast to the final declaration from the conference in Guatemala, which stressed that the central issue was “respect for the law,” there was a far greater emphasis this year on the role of ordinary citizens. It is difficult for people to respect law unless there is some kind of enforcement mechanism. If the government itself is the law-breaker, however, who then provides the enforcement?

Coming out of this year's conference was a growing awareness that corruption can never be completely overcome unless it is recognized as an issue of social justice and is pressed by popular movements from below. Indeed, IACC Council Chairman Barry O'Keefe stressed the need to expand the anti-corruption movement to include new stakeholders from civil society

Though still in the minority, there were a record number of sessions this year stressing the role of civic action to fight corruption. Activists from Armenia, Egypt, India, Russia, Uganda, the Philippines, South Africa, Thailand, the United States and many other countries shared narratives of creative uses of nonviolent action to challenge corrupt officials, illicit activities by private corporations, and irresponsible local, regional and national governments. These included not just efforts in relatively peaceful societies, but stories of some dramatic victories by movements challenging corruption in areas of extreme violence, like the Niger Delta of Nigeria and the highlands of Guatemala.

The dramatic growth in democratic governance in recent decades from Latin America to Eastern Europe as well as large parts of Africa and Asia rarely came from outside forces or top-down initiatives, but primarily from democratic civil society organizations engaging in strategic nonviolent action. There appears to be a growing recognition that endemic corruption needs to be addressed the same way.

A number of the democratic experiments which have emerged in recent years from the global south and the former Soviet Bloc will remain fragile if the legitimacy of elected governments is questioned as a result of their corrupt behavior. The global anti-corruption movement is beginning to recognize that it may be up to the very forces which made free elections in these countries possible to also ensure that these new democracies live up to their promise and, if not, to be prepared to take to the streets once again. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephen-zunes/fighting-corruption-throu_b_149249.html