

Corruption

An Evil Arab Gov'ts Are Sticking to

Are economic and political reforms an effective way to combat corruption, or do changes such as privatizing state industries actually increase opportunities for corruption? There is not a single answer to the question, but a closer look at the types of corruption that are endemic in various Arab states and the nature of current reform policies can help explain how reform and corruption interact.

There are three types of corruption in the Arab world. The first is petty corruption such as that of a policeman in a country such as Syria taking a bribe to forgive a traffic offence. The second is massive corruption, which plagues the economies of many countries in the region, especially in the Persian Gulf. This type of corrup-

tion takes place during multi-million-dollar contract negotiations between state officials and business leaders to secure business deals. A good example of such corruption is arrangements by BAE Systems PLC, Britain's biggest and most influential arms company, during the Al-Yamamah arms deals in the 1980s with Saudi Arabia. British Prime Minister Tony Blair intervened directly to stop a probe under the pretext of protecting British national interest—an example of how Western powers reinforce corruption in the Arab world.

The third type is political corruption, which is difficult to pin down but plagues the economic health of most countries in the Arab world. Political corruption is the use of economic deals and benefits to reward political allies, which

invariably leads to massive diversion of public resources to unproductive activities. It also leads to elite resistance to reform programs that would level the business playing field.

The causes of corruption vary across Arab countries, but are often linked in one way or another to state intervention and the nature of relations between the government and the economy. The Khelifa Bank case, the largest corruption probe in Algeria's history, involving some \$2 billion, is an excellent example of corruption in state institutions. Corruption in Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon is also caused by the lack of proper standards of good governance, low salaries for civil servants, and the failure to introduce substantial institutional reform in the executive and legislative branches of government.

Ultimately it is the nature of reform efforts that determines whether

laws but weak state enforcement. A similar problem exists in Iraq.

In the Levant and North Africa, large-scale bribery, embezzlement, and fraud are linked to the structure of the public sector and the nature of relations between the government and the economy. The Khelifa Bank case, the largest corruption probe in Algeria's history, involving some \$2 billion, is an excellent example of corruption in state institutions. Corruption in Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon is also caused by the lack of proper standards of good governance, low salaries for civil servants, and the failure to introduce substantial institutional reform in the executive and legislative branches of government.

Ultimately it is the nature of reform efforts that determines whether

they will inhibit or facilitate corruption. Thus far, many governments have opted for uncontroversial programs that aim to promote regime stability rather than transform economies or politics. Within such limited reforms programs one cannot expect that corruption will be significantly reduced; rather, corruption may increase and hinder the effectiveness of reforms.

Fighting corruption requires a real change in the distribution and disposition of institutional power to prevent the people who benefit from the current economic and political arrangements from using their political power to gain privileges at the expense of the public interest. As yet there is little evidence that Arab governments are willing to go that far.

Sufyan Alissa
DALYSTAR.COM

Land of the Rising Shun

When Shinzo Abe met Dick Cheney in Japan, a special kind of chemistry was probably in effect. The hawkish Japanese prime minister and the bellicose US vice president, self-described friends, have more in common than declining poll numbers. They both have war on their minds.

What we have on the one side is Mr. Abe, a historical revisionist, glorifying the losers of the last world war to reshape the past. On the other side you have Mr. Cheney, a hard-line unilateral-

The US occupation of post-World War II Japan, along with a unique "peace constitution," was designed to make a former warrior nation allergic to war, and it largely succeeded. It is not only Japan's neighbors who get upset when Japanese polls visit the Yasukuni war shrine, which honors Japanese war criminals among the war dead; in fact, more than half of those polled in Japan are against such visits as well. From time to time, US voices, such as former Rep. Henry Hyde of Illinois, remind us that official



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (r) meets with US Vice President Dick Cheney at the premier's official residence in Tokyo, Feb. 21.

ist who has been one of the biggest planners and defenders of the American-led war in Iraq.

Cheney visited Japan, according to the White House, to thank officials there for "their efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan." Japan has sent noncombat troops to Iraq and has supplied logistical support in Afghanistan. But even as backing for the Iraq war continues to slip at home, Cheney arrived in a Japan rolled by its own debate about rising militarism.

The latest example came when Japanese Defense Minister Fumio Kyuma suggested that the war in Iraq was a mistake. He was criticized roundly by Abe's people, and Cheney then snubbed the defense chief. The message: Friends don't criticize friends.

There was no rational reason for Japan to get entangled in Iraq.

However, Cheney appears bent on whipping up support for a reluctant Japan to continue to follow the Bush administration's lead in the war-torn Middle East. In refusing to meet with the defense minister, Cheney seemed to be saying that a silent nod to the wise is sufficient.

But the Japanese can say no, and why shouldn't they? Is it really in the interest of the Japanese people to bind their fate to the declining fortunes of the Bush-Cheney team? Or might this be a good time, as opposition leader Ichiro Ozawa belatedly suggested a few weeks ago, to point out the obvious folly of US ways, as a friend would, helping a friend? Japan has yet to finish apologizing for the mess it made the last time it went to war, so why drag it into a new one?

visits to a shrine that makes a mockery of Pearl Harbor and Nanjing do not serve US-Japan interests, either.

Likewise, Japan should listen carefully to what other American statesmen have been saying. A motion by Rep. Mike Honda of California calling for an apology on the off-denied issue of Imperial Japan's "sex slaves" and other wartime injustices, is not bullying but a nudge—from a friend to a friend—saying we need to agree on basic facts for the relationship to go forward.

The widespread Japanese commitment to peace, after the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, extends to an understandable abhorrence of nuclear weapons. Yet military analysts say that US ships armed with nuclear weapons routinely pull into Japanese ports such as Yokosuka and Okinawa—making a sham of Japan's "three nonnuclear principles" (not possessing, producing, or permitting nuclear weapons into the country).

Cheney took part in a photo-op aboard the US aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk during his visit—an insensitive move that might well come to be regretted as a "mission accomplished" moment for the vice president. Tokyo's flamboyant mayor, Shintaro Ishihara, had primed the public by asserting—without apparent evidence—that the Kitty Hawk is nuclear-equipped.

Instead of posing on the carrier, Cheney should have taken the time to hear what Mr. Kyuma and other Japanese critics of the Iraq war had to say.

Philip J. Cunningham
CSMONITOR.COM

British Departure

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani has welcomed the announcement by UK Premier Tony Blair that 1,600 British troops will be withdrawn from southern Iraq in the next few months, leaving some 5,000 in and around their core operations center in Basra. The question is: Have the British done enough to undo the instability into which the invasion plunged this predominantly Shiite region?

Operation Sinbad was supposed to clean up the local police who had been widely infiltrated by members of two rival local militias, the Mehdi Army and the Badr Brigade. The exercise seems to have been a modest success in that the violence has declined and the number of gangland killings has dropped. But this could be a lull before another storm of civil unrest. There are concerns that as the US-led clampdown against both Sunni and Shiite militias in Baghdad continues, prominent Shiite mili-

itants have been moving south to Basra.

But British officers, speaking unofficially say the situation still remains highly volatile. The local police may have been purged of some militants, but the ability of these people to threaten and terrorize serving police officers and their families must not be discounted. An Iraqi government spokesman talked airily of the need to do a little bit more reorganization and "cleaning up" of the Basra police, as if this were the work of a mere afternoon or two. The reality is that since the chaos that followed the invasion, Basra has been turned into a modern-day Chicago in which honest men walk in fear of the gunmen. It is not all bad. The economic life of the city has revived but a significant part of this is based on smuggling and therefore inevitably involves the militias. To function at all, most businesses, if one faction or another does not back them, have to pay a high price in protection

money.

Blair, however, will be gratified by the rapid Iraqi endorsement of his decision to run down the British military presence. Regardless of the reality on the ground, he is looking for a plausible excuse to disengage from a military adventure that has long been deeply unpopular with the majority of Britons. As long as the British can keep some sort of lid on further violence, he will try to extract some paper-thin triumph from his slavish following of President Bush's deeply flawed lead.

Too many armed and ruthless factions, both sectarian and criminal, now have a vested interest in prolonging the chaos that George W. Bush brought to the country. Decent "Baswaris" who long only for an end to violence already know that when the British go, the divisive bloodshed will almost certainly continue.

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Neoliberalism and War in Italy

The states of Western Europe continue to resist harmonisation. On the same day that the chicaneries of every antiquated careerist vying for the New Labour deputy leadership were made public, each justifying his/her grotesque decision to support the war and occupation Iraq, the centre-Left Italian government—not yet a year old—fell after a debate on foreign policy in the Upper Chamber.

It was not Iraq that was at issue here. Unlike New Labour (protected by undemocratic electoral laws), the whole of the Italian Left and 80 percent of the population opposed that war. The dispute concerned two issues: Operation Enduring Freedom—the satirical self-description of the NATO/UN occupation of Afghanistan—and the expansion of the US military base in Vicenza in Northern Italy.

Two leftwing Senators voted against the government in the Italian Senate after Prodi and his Foreign Minister D'Alema had made the vote an issue of confidence, arguing that

Afghanistan was a legal war because it was supported by the United Nations. He meant, of course, the Security Council with its iron-fisted monopoly of power still firmly under the control of five countries who were victorious in the Second world war. His arguments failed to sway two dissenting Senators from the left.

As a result, a weakened Romano Prodi, the prudent spokesman of an immature bourgeoisie, has resigned. His popularity was on the wane (36 percent as against 44 percent who backed the coalition) as was that of his neo-liberal Finance Minister, Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa (30 percent) whose attempts at casualisation and short-term contracts for workers have also divided the government, many of whose supporters and a few Ministers participated in the mass protests of last November in defence of universal, publicly-financed social services and against any restriction of social rights.

Could it be that they wanted to be defeated so as to re-jig the coalition

by attracting a moderate Centre-Right party to join their ranks and dumping the Refounded Communists? It's a risky operation, especially as the RC leader, Fausto Bertinotti has kept their principles under heavy wraps, but the next few weeks will tell.

Prodi had explicitly forbidden any member of the Cabinet from participating in the mass demonstration (100,000 according to La Repubblica) protesting the extension of the base. Now the crisis within the Left is out in the open. 62 percent of Italians and 73 percent of the government's supporters want to withdraw all Italian troops from Afghanistan. Like centre politicians elsewhere Berlusconi, Prodi and D'Alema are united in ignoring public opinion.

Were it not for factional divisions on other issues (especially patronage and corrupt commissions) the Opposition would have voted with Prodi. But Italian politics remains volatile and unpredictable while grandees of the centre-Left and their equivalents on the

Right exude the stench of putrefaction, the muck of their fatherland. The EU is too weak a political entity to provide any serious assistance and Latin

America where new alternatives are being discussed and implemented is geo-politically remote.

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World Gripped by Flu Pandemic

A major wave of influenza is approaching from the Far East," an article published almost 50 years ago in the British journal New Scientist began ominously.

The experts, it said, were "keeping their lips sealed and their fingers crossed."

But neither silence nor prayer could prevent the 20th century's second major flu pandemic from sweeping across the globe.

By the spring of 1958, what came to be known as Asian flu had claimed two million lives and reminded scientists how little they really knew about one of Man's most lethal, mutating predators.

Even today, half a century later, there are lessons to be gleaned from that outbreak as the world warily eyes H5N1 bird-flu, wondering if—or when—it will mutate into a form that spreads easily among humans.

"1957 was the first pandemic in the modern era of

virology," explained David M. Morens, a medical epidemiologist at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in the United States.

"One thing we learned is that pandemic viruses can be the descendants of previous ones."

Born in the southern Chinese province of Guizhou in late February 1957, the H2N2 virus of Asian flu at first travelled south, east and southeast, taking two or three months to reach the fringes of Asia.

At that time, jet travel was in its infancy and reserved for the wealthy elite, and it took the virus several more months, transported by ship and train, to gain a foothold in America and Europe.

Edward Kilbourne, emeritus professor of microbiology and immunology at New York Medical College, remembers 1957 as if it were.

"I was working at Cornell New York Hospital when

the first patients were admitted—they had very serious symptoms and there were some fatalities," he recalled in an interview.

In performing autopsies on the victims, he and his colleagues noticed that the lungs bore a striking resemblance to descriptions of those infected during horrific Spanish flu of 1918, which by some estimates slew 50 million people.

Most flu fatalities stem from underlying medical conditions, typically heart conditions, or secondary infections such as bacterial pneumonia. In 1957, women in the third trimester of pregnancy were also especially vulnerable.

Like the 1918 strain, Asian flu originated in an avian virus.

But in a critical difference that was not understood until very recently, it found another way to infect human beings.

In 2005, scientists

sequenced the 1918 influenza "A" virus, recovered from tissues frozen for more than eight decades in Alaskan permafrost.

What they discovered was both startling and alarming—the strain, their research indicated, had jumped directly from a bird flu and adapted itself to a human host, spreading like wildfire from there.

Another key difference between 1918 and 1957, experts say, is the fatality rate: Spanish flu killed approximately one out of every 40 people it infected.

The 1957 flu provided some sobering lessons for today.

Among them: the need to swiftly identify an outbreak and contain it by isolating patients, quarantining those in contact with them and establishing bor-

der checks people with fever or other flu symptoms.

Instead of taking months to cross an ocean, a flu virus these days would take hours, hiking a ride with an infected corporate executive, vacationing family or backpacker.

Stacked in our favour is the power of the Internet to inform, and the power of genetics and Big Pharma to identify a new killer virus and devise a vaccine against it.

But making a vaccine quickly and distributing it to the people who need it most are tasks as relevant today as in 1957. Then, vaccine production hit its stride after the flu peaked, and very few vaccines were distributed in poor countries.

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