

COMMENT

Technology can help us win the long war against corruption**Frank Vogl**

The writer is co-founder of Transparency International and author of 'Waging War on Corruption – Inside the Movement Fighting the Abuse of Power'

The arrest on Sunday of the Indian cartoonist Aseem Trivedi for “insulting” his country in his work, highlights the dangers of lampooning corruption, not just in India but across much of the world. Corruption is not a single event. It is perpetrated every day against citizens by crooked politicians and civil servants consumed with greed and hubris. However, as the case of Mr Trivedi shows, in the age of instant communication, it is also becoming much harder to hide.

In scores of nations, corruption is a major cause of poverty and human rights abuses and leads to justice systems that serve only the powerful and the rich. It is an affront to the proper functioning of a market economy. And it threatens our global security – the trade in illicit weapons, for example, is facilitated by bribes.

This is far from an issue exclusive to poor and developing countries. No government can claim that it does not harbour officials who abuse their office for personal gain. The more than \$2bn that will probably be spent in this year’s US elections has a nasty smell to it – who can believe that so many special interest groups are pouring tens of millions of dollars into the campaign if they do not believe that they will extract major benefits if their candidates succeed?

Formidable as anti-corruption challenges are, it is wrong to suggest that nothing can be done, or to be sceptical and assert that all well-intentioned efforts are destined to be holes in a vast tapestry of graft. The Arab uprisings that began last year in Tunisia were the product of many complex forces but the economic and psychological impact of decades of corruption was one of the most important.

Indeed, never before has the global anti-corruption movement enjoyed as much energy and momentum. In an internet-driven age, the universal values of self-respect and justice are promoted via social media, which in turn encourages a vast array of new public campaigns. An increasing number of people are uniting against venality and graft – from the tens of thousands who faced the security forces in Cairo to the multitudes who have joined protests against corruption in Iran, Belarus, India, Pakistan and on Wall Street, too.

It has invigorated and encouraged civil society activists everywhere and increased media attention on all aspects of corruption. I believe that these factors have in turn encouraged legal systems to become more assertive.

Public prosecutors in a growing numbers of countries are increasingly sharing information to investigate alleged international bribe-paying and money laundering. The UK Serious Fraud Office is investigating allegations of graft payments by EADS, the European defence contractor; the US Department of Justice is pursuing investigations into the alleged bribery of Mexican public officials by Walmart, the world’s largest retailer; US financial authorities are reviewing evidence collected by a US Senate committee that highlights alleged illicit money laundering by HSBC, the UK bank. Almost every day sees news of new corruption cases.

In an earlier era, the bribe-payers and the bribe-takers were able to keep most of their nefarious dealings in the dark. Now, through the combined forces of Twitter, Facebook, WikiLeaks, and solid investigative journalism, the general public is learning about the vast sums stolen by corrupt officials, from China and Russia, through the Middle East, to Africa and Latin America. The internet has opened the door to an era of transparency, strengthening civil society activists and public prosecutors alike, as they, in their own ways, make it ever harder for the bribe-payers and the bribe-takers to hide.

It is time for governments to take the actions that they have pledged. They need to implement the anti-corruption conventions of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the UN, and act on the Group of 20’s Anti-Corruption Action Plans. If the fine rhetoric of politicians is at last followed by action, there will be a formidable impact on reducing poverty, promoting justice and advancing democracy.