

WHAT ARE WE IN POWER FOR?: THE SOCIOLOGY OF GRAFT AND CORRUPTION

Jose Veloso Abueva *

The intriguing title of this paper was assigned to me ready-made. Its first part, as the reader may recall, are the words used by Senate- and Liberal-Party-President Jose Avelino to scold President Elpidio Quirino for the embarrassing investigations made into graft and corruption, the results of which implicated the Liberal administration.

Linked to the words "graft and corruption" found in the subtitle, the now classic Avelinism suggests a one-tracked, cynical view of using power for personal and party aggrandizement at the expense of the public interest. On the other hand, the complete subtitle suggests an ambitious scholarly analysis of the incidence, causes, and consequences of corruption in the Philippines, and perhaps also of the ways by which the phenomenon may be reduced. That this analysis is beyond my ken and resources became very clear to me upon my reading a whole monograph that attempts merely to explore the subject in its universal aspects: *The Sociology of Corruption: the Nature, Function, Causes and Prevention of Corruption*, by Syed Hussein Alatas (1968).

Fortunately for me, the expansive title of my paper has been delimited by the organizers of this seminar. They posed the following guide questions:

*At the time he gave this talk, Dr. Abueva, who is a political scientist, was Assistant Dean of the College of Public Administration, University of the Philippines. In the first week of July 1971, he became Secretary of the nation's constitutional convention.

"Is 'graft' always bad? Is 'corruption' always an un-mixed evil? Is it possible that at this point in Philippine history graft and corruption may be a *necessary* evil?" Accordingly, I was asked to present a paper "on the pros and cons of graft and corruption."

Our key concept, "graft and corruption," is a catch-all Filipino-English term which refers to illegal and, from a Western-derived ethics of public service, immoral conduct benefiting government officials. It connotes an abuse of one's office, a betrayal of the public trust. In fact, for many years the Philippine penal code has included bribery, dereliction of duty, frauds and illegal exactions, and malversation of public funds as "crimes committed by public officers." In the mid-50s, the Unexplained Wealth Act was enacted to penalize any official for unlawfully acquiring property clearly beyond his means. Then in 1960 Congress passed the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act which formally defined what most informed Filipinos would associate with the term "graft and corruption." Although nepotism, or the illegal appointment by an official of his close relatives, is not among the practices catalogued in the Act, a number of transactions between an official and his close relatives are proscribed therein. So nepotism and its variants may also be regarded as forms of "graft and corruption."

In much of the English literature on the subject, the single word "corruption" is used rather than the local compound "graft and corruption." We shall therefore use the first (corruption) for its universal or general meaning and reserve the latter (graft and corruption) to refer specifically to the Philippine setting.

Alatas (1968) has carefully defined corruption. He differentiates it from other criminal behavior or mismanagement, the effects of which are also against the public interest. According to him, corruption includes three types of phenomena: bribery, extortion, and nepotism. Their common denominator is "the subordination of public interests to private aims involving a violation of the norms of duty and welfare, accompanied by secrecy, betrayal, deception and a callous disregard for any consequence suffered by the public" (Alatas 1968:12).

How prevalent is graft and corruption in the Philippines? Many thoughtful and informed citizens believe and assume that it is both widespread and persistent. A critical observer concerned with public affairs, who travels around the country while residing in Metropolitan Manila, is likely to feel that graft and corruption is pandemic. This is the word used in public health to refer to an epidemic of unusual extent and severity, the disease occurring over a wide geographical area and affecting an exceptionally high proportion of the population.

In a 1966 survey of middle-level civil servants from some 25 agencies (Abueva 1970), respondents indicated the things or aspects they could not be proud of and what they perceived to be the most important problems facing the country.

The results (which are ranked in Table 1) suggest that, in the opinion of knowledgeable and experienced career officials, graft and corruption is serious and pervasive.

Space permits us only a sampling of the ample admission by officials themselves that graft and corruption is rampant. The grip of graft and corruption on tax and regulatory agencies is well-founded in fact, according to confidential official reports. One of these states: "The existence in the Bureau of Customs of an in-bred, self-perpetuating cycle of graft and corruption, not sparing but rather all embracing, cannot be denied. It is strongly felt in all aspects of the customs work. . . ." Another report says, "Many of the Bureau of Internal Revenue people do not deny the existence of corruption in the Bureau . . . to them it is . . . an integral part of the organization's administrative culture." A third report begins with this remark: "Corruption in the Bureau of Forestry is pervasive and affects the Bureau in the performance of practically all its functions."

It should be stated, however, that in a number of agencies whose functions are of a service nature, rather than of a financial, revenue, regulatory, or licensing nature, graft and corruption tends to be much less, if not totally absent (Abueva 1970).

Table 1
Objects of national shame and national problems as perceived
by 00 Filipino middle-level civil servants (Manila, 1966).

<i>Objects of national shame</i>	<i>Most important national problems</i>
<i>Rank</i>	<i>Rank</i>
1. Graft and corruption	1. Economic problem
2. Political partisanship and interference	2. Graft and corruption
3. Lack of civic-consciousness, national discipline and nationalism	3. Lawlessness and criminality
4. Laziness and aversion to manual labor	4. Political partisanship and interference
5. Lawlessness and criminality	5. Inadequate public service and community facilities

Politicians testify to the high incidence of graft and corruption. In every national election and in many local elections, the main issues against incumbents and the ruling party have to do with their alleged venalities in office. Accordingly, opposition leaders usually promise to restore honesty and integrity if voted into power, only to be subsequently accused of the same offenses during and after their terms of office. For their part, many voters rank honesty and sincerity high among the qualifications they would like to find in their candidates. While a great deal of ritualism, hypocrisy, and cynicism are undoubtedly involved in these matters, they nonetheless tend to support the general impression regarding the ubiquity and rise of graft and corruption.

Journalists contribute to this impression by their frequent reports and commentaries. On December 9, 1970, *Business Day* contradicted President Ferdinand E. Marcos in his praise of government officials as he proclaimed Government Employees' Week.

In government offices and agencies, rare are the employees from top to bottom who do not engage in some form of graft and corruption, ranging from petty to big time. . . . Although there may be some honest, hardworking employees in the government, they seem to be outnumbered by those who regard their positions as nothing more but sinecures and springboards for dubious deals.

In a pooled editorial on January 4, 1971, the *Manila Times* and the *Manila Chronicle* echoed the foregoing description in their damning criticism of the Marcos administration. In part the two newspapers said:

Businessmen are bitter over shakedowns, administration pressure, crony-monopoly, and a squeeze play that has paralyzed industry, manufacture, and commerce. . . . Graft has become organized, administered from above, extensive and deep-reaching, from the smallest tong, to rampant smuggling, to the high-financed kickback.

In his review of corruption in Asia, Gunnar Myrdal (1968:943) observed: "In the Philippines corrupt practices at all levels of business and administration were common in colonial times, but it is generally assumed that they have increased substantially since then." For years foreign correspondents covering the country have

made similar observations based on their short visits, which shows the extent to which the Filipinos themselves talk and write about graft and corruption.

In order to understand why widespread perception of the pervasiveness of graft and corruption among Filipinos has not led to effective remedies, it is necessary to distinguish between the people's level of awareness of a problem and the relative importance they assign to it. The latter influences the intensity of their demand for and support of any measure to check the occurrence of the perceived problem. Perla Makil (1970) measured the level of awareness of graft and corruption among a selected stratified sample of 1664 respondents, and related this finding to their judgment of the importance of graft and corruption compared with other national problems. "While there is general agreement that graft and corruption is among the important problems that face the Philippines today," according to Makil, this problem is mentioned by only 15 per cent of the respondents. Eighty-five per cent of those who freely mentioned problems did not include graft and corruption. She discovered that even among respondents with better education and higher economic status, graft and corruption is regarded as a secondary problem. The less educated and poorer respondents rated the problem far below high prices, unemployment, and lawlessness. Makil concluded that "graft and corruption" as a legal concept and standard of public morality is alien to Filipinos and that the practices so defined are traditional, "a regular part of life to be accepted as ordinary and matter-of-fact — *talagang ganyán*." This Filipino expression of resignation is the rough equivalent of the American's "That's the way it is," or the Frenchman's "C'est la vie."

However tempting it is to theorize about the "causes" of rampant and persistent graft and corruption — to be scientific, we should only speak of "the factors correlated with" the phenomenon — we can here only summarize some overlapping theories that have been advanced. These are as follows: (1) that graft and corruption is traceable to Spanish, American, and Japanese

colonialism (Corpuz 1957:78-92); (2) that graft and corruption is functional, in the sense that it serves certain societal or institutional needs and purposes (Van Roy 1970; Abueva 1966:46; Romero 1970:11); (3) that it is both cause and effect of social changes; (4) that it is sustained by customary values, concepts and practices, such as the desire for social acceptance, reciprocity, *utang na loób*, *pakikisama*, *hiyâ*, *awâ*, *lamangán*, *palakasan*, familism and compadrazgo, and gift-giving; (5) that it is related to a political culture with a weak "subject orientation," marked by lack of clear differentiation between "public" and "private" spheres, by weak loyalties beyond one's primary group, and by weak compliance with laws and other impersonal rules; (6) that it is consistent with custom and tradition, whereas the laws and ethics that make it illegal and immoral are alien, imported and superimposed (Corpuz 1900:91; Makil 1970); (7) that, therefore, sanctions behind the modern public morality are ineffective, thus affording impunity to corruptors and corrupted alike; (8) that graft and corruption is related to conditions in the country, such as unemployment, widespread poverty, subsistence living; (9) that the environment and practices in the government itself, such as the greatly enlarged powers, authority, and discretion of officials, low salaries, political interference decisions on personnel, lack of moral leadership, faulty organization structures, and inefficient procedures, lack of professionalization of civil servants; and (10) that its very existence, in the absence of strong countervailing forces, promotes greater corruption in a kind of circular causation.

A perceptive layman, Eddie Romero (1970), has comments on graft and corruption that deserve to be quoted at length, for they are more insightful than most commentaries one encounters and they illustrate some of the hypotheses offered above.

For political corruption, far from pitting Filipinos against each other, is still the glue that holds them together, the principal operative element in the unwritten contract which defines the relationship between the government and the governed, the Establishment and the masses.

For most of us, politics is still largely a personal matter; we see our political system as a vast market dealing primarily in the exchange of personal favors. We are not really sure that we would be better off if it were changed into something else. We have thus fallen into a vicious cycle: political corruption impedes our efforts to extend more tangible benefits of nationhood to the masses; and the limited effectiveness of the state encourages the masses to cling to the personalistic ties that nourish corruption.

As a matter of fact, we do have a "responsive" political structure, a working democracy in which a predominantly self-seeking electorate votes predominantly self-seeking men into public office. x x x There may, indeed, be a crying need for far-reaching social reforms in our country, but it should be clear enough that the masses are not doing much of the crying.

Now we turn to the effects of graft and corruption on Filipino society as a whole, the people, and their institutions. Some of the effects may have been suggested earlier, in the summary of factors hypothesized or believed to be correlative with the widespread occurrence of graft and corruption. Here we shall hypothesize the "bad" effects first, then the possibly "good," or saving, consequences of graft and corruption that make it a somewhat mitigated evil in the country's present circumstances.

Widespread bribery, extortion, and abuse of authority erodes the public's trust in and respect for the Philippine government and its leaders and functionaries. Consequently, it is and will be more difficult for the government to impose taxes, to obtain public cooperation in government programs, and to secure compliance with its laws and rules. Some citizens become alienated to the point of leaving the country or rebelling against constituted authority. The government's reputation for corruption spreads to other countries. This undermines the respect of foreigners for the Filipinos as a people and the trustworthiness of the government among foreign leaders, bankers, and businessmen.

By and large, widespread bribery, extortion, abuse of authority, and nepotism lower the efficiency and effectiveness of the entire Philippine government: not only the national bureaucracy, but also the presidency, the government corporations, Congress, the courts, the military, and local governments. This means that the go-

vernment will have a low or lower capabilities for extracting revenues and support, for regulating the conduct of citizens and aliens, for distributing welfare and opportunities, for fostering national consciousness and loyalty, and, generally, for responding to the many, varied, and unending needs and demands of the people.

Graft and corruption contributes to the rising costs of goods and services, because those engaged in their production and distribution will normally pass on to the consuming public the added cost of bribes and kickbacks and delays in their operations. Most citizens who have to pay "tong" or grease money in order to obtain government services and benefits to which they are already entitled are in effect absorbing an additional burden which they cannot pass on to anyone else.

As noted above, the very prevalence of corruption tends to spread outward to more spheres because it fosters the habit of buying one's way illegally. In the words of Myrdal (1968:951), "the spread of corruption, in turn, gives corrupt politicians and dishonest officials a strong vested interest in retaining and increasing [corrupting] controls..." The rise of vote-buying-and-selling, the dependence of many citizens on politicians for a variety of favors and assistance, usually of a material nature, sometimes illicit and irregular, and the escalating costs of elections are good illustrations of the widening circle of corruption in Filipino society.

What "good" or "functional" effects on our society may be said to result from graft and corruption? Here, again, I would hypothesize where I cannot offer conclusive proof. As I wrote elsewhere (Abueva 1966:51-52),

In the early stages of politico-administrative development, particularly where a democratic political system is consciously desired, nepotism, spoils, and graft may actually promote national unification and stability, nation-wide participation in public affairs, the formation of a viable party system, and bureaucratic accountability to political institutions.

Our bureaucracy tends to be rigid and cumbersome and self-defeating in its rules and pro-

cedures. Often it is unable to recruit, transfer, or advance civil servants on the basis of merit and fitness. Where valid achievements criteria cannot be evolved and applied, seniority and formal civil service "eligibilities" become the determining criteria for assignment and promotion. Officials are often self-defensive in their anxiety to maintain status and lessen competition. Many are prone simply to control rather than to motivate subordinates, to lord it over rather than to serve the citizens, especially if they are of lower status, unknown, or without influential connections. The modern egalitarian and service orientation is not yet widely shared in the officialdom.

In this condition, nepotism and patronage may be the only way to infuse the bureaucracy with imaginative, vigorous, development-minded, and politically-sophisticated individuals. "In short," if I may quote once more from my 1966 article, "nepotism and spoils may very well be the potent stimuli needed by a powerful, rigid, unrealistic, outmoded, unresponsive, and irresponsible bureaucracy." Wider access to government jobs, services and resources, especially among the many who are poor and less educated, will make them feel closer to the government. They can more readily identify with it as a tangible and beneficent institution, and thus feel they owe it their allegiance and support. The active participation in government of Filipinos from all regions and walks of life, as workers, clientele or voters, because they regard it positively, helps to unify and integrate them into one body politic.

In our keenly competitive party politics, nepotism and spoils provide partisans with much of their motivation and reward in the costly and risky rivalries for power. Our parties, which are "capitalist" rather than "mass" parties in their composition, have to depend on nepotism and spoils, and even on graft and corruption, for their survival and functioning as necessary political institutions that mediate between the citizenry and the government. The prospect of capturing power from the incumbents gives hope to aspiring elites who need not despair and resort

to extremist ideologies and tactics. The party system, like the bureaucracy, also serves as a political stabilizer and social escalator.

In this situation it is hypothesized (Abueva 1966:50) that

the more viable the parties become, partly due to spoils and graft, the more effective they would be in mobilizing the citizenry for political participation, in articulating and aggregating interests as they shape public policy, in channeling public services to citizens, in holding bureaucrats and the bureaucracy politically accountable, and in fostering national unity.

Moreover, spoils and graft, along with patent political discrimination, has enabled ethnic Filipinos to wrest control of industry and trade away from their alien competitors.

This brief essay has attempted to define corruption in the Philippine context, to present some indicators of its perceived prevalence and persistence, and to offer hypotheses concerning its "causes" and its consequences, "bad" and "good." My purpose is to help stimulate an analytical and dispassionate discussion of the phenomenon of graft and corruption in order that we may better appreciate its varied and complex aspects. A deeper understanding is necessary if we are to evolve some workable ways of counteracting it, even as we realize its seemingly intractable nature, given our stage of history and level of development.

I am fully aware that my mode of analysis makes me vulnerable, but this is a risk I willingly assume. Some readers may even think of me as the devil himself rather than merely his "advocate" if only for argument's sake. I do hope, however, that this essay will provoke a little more inquiry and enlightenment in the midst of so many moralistic, polemical, and ritualistic approaches to graft and corruption.

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COMMENT ON THE ABUEVA PAPER

Meliton C. Salazar*

Dr. Abueva has stated that personalism is in our society a deeply ingrained cultural trait; further, that it is at the root of our propensity to indulge in practices that Westerners or western-oriented Filipinos frequently label as "graft and corruption." For my own understanding I shall attempt to reduce his argument to a simple model with some variations of my own.

The great majority of us grow up in a specific family structure typical of our society, or perhaps typical of many other societies at the same stage of economic development as our own. It is an institution that caters to all our needs, whether physical, psychological, or moral. To retain its ability to perform this function for its members, the Filipino family must have a clear-cut structure characterized by well-defined lines of authority and succession. Roles and status levels are unequivocally defined. Interpersonal solidarity is required. Unquestioning individual loyalty is demanded. Like an ant colony, every member exists to serve the group and the group exists to serve its members. There is much certainly in this structure, much security, and little anxiety. If we have clung to it we have done so because it is a comfortable arrangement.

Fewer people in our society, it is said, become insane. However, because we are "programmed" so expertly and intensively in our early and most vulnerable years, patterns of behavior and their supporting attitudes are difficult to shake off in later life. Wherever we go afterward we look for family-substitutes. The local parish becomes a family. The manufacturing shop becomes a family. The Nacionalista Party becomes a family. Large institutions such as the labor movement or the student movement eventually

break up into distinct "families." Each "family" takes care of its own, each member works for the preeminence of his family.

It is within these family-substitutes that the western concept of "graft and corruption" and Filipino family norms come into conflict. If I have worked hard for my party—my family substitute—and helped it into power, then its gains are partly mine. My job becomes a dukedom from which I can levy taxes on strangers (those requesting favors of my family). Part of these taxes I will pass on to other members of my family-substitute, much of it I will keep. *This is graft and corruption?*

I believe, however, that structure is a response to environment, behavior a requirement of structure, and attitudes are naturally-evolving "supports" for behavior. If these patterns of behavior have persisted it is because they are still functional for our characteristic family structures. If you go to the countryside you will see how relevant and how powerful our traditional family structure still remains. How much have the family's traditional functions, its traditional services to the individual member, been supplanted, much less supplanted, by other institutions? Economically, the family is still the largest employer in our society; it is still the largest educational system we have; it is still the most effective mental hospital and the coverage of its welfare, old age, and personal-security programs far exceeds the combined outputs of the Social Security System, the GSIS, and our insurance companies. Given this role in our society, can we wonder that the influence of family-based value systems is still so strong and so pervasive?

Does this mean, however, that change cannot take place? My experience in the private sector indicates otherwise. Except in its interfaces with government, the business enterprise is largely

*Mr. Salazar is Associate Professor of Management, Asian Institute of Management, Makati, Rizal.

free of "graft and corruption" as we understand it. There is little evidence of "intentional delays," of employees' receiving bribes to expedite their work, of widespread misappropriation of stockholder funds, of influence peddling, or of wholesale injustice. Perhaps we can make the statement with some confidence, that our private sector, in its values and attitudes and in its demonstrated behavior, is about as "honest," in the western sense, as the private sectors of more developed societies. I will expressly exclude from this general statement dealings with

government because in that interface we still have much to be ashamed of. The point is, however, that where the structure requires what you may call "western" behavior and "western" sensitivities, those attitudes and behavior patterns arise, naturally and without much resistance. For if we have many values that block more rapid industrialization we also have two characteristics that will facilitate our efforts to change: we are an extremely adaptable people (a characteristic also made possible by our family system) and we are blessed with the gift of imitation.