STEPS TO END ARMENIA CORRUPTION

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> *Garbis Korajian of Vancouver trains people in developing countries, mostly on topics of good governance, ethical leadership, anti-corruption, and social accountability. His work has taken him to Zambia, China, Ethiopia, Armenia, Nagorno-Karapagh, to Europe and to the United States. He has consulted various governments, the United Nations, the World Bank, the Canadian International Development Agency, and the United States Agency for International Development. Korajian has a Bachelor of Science degree (Royal Roads University), a diploma in Conflict Resolution and an MA (Harvard University). Below is Garbis Korajian's speech at the "Corruption in Armenia" symposium organized by Armenian Renaissance in Montreal on June 7.*

Garbis Korajian, Montreal, 7 June 2104

Creating Citizen Awareness as a Tool in Combating Corruption

Implementing a strategy to combat corruption is time-consuming and evolutionary. Comparative country models indicate that combating corruption is a multi-faceted task. Creating a citizen awareness is one of the most vital tools required. Although the tool is often underestimated, neglected and taken for granted, nevertheless it is effective, relatively simple and cost effective.

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Corruption is not a social phenomenon that can be explained by a simple cause/effect model. It is a

complicated issue, often the result of many contingent circumstances which produce varied and wide-ranging effects.

Corruption in Armenia, as in many nations, is rooted in numerous complex historical, social and economic factors and in the country's traditions and politics. Corruption, defined as "the illegal use of public or private office for private gain" negatively affects the lives of its citizens in various ways: it hampers economic development, diminishes investor confidence, increases the cost of doing business and lowers credit rating. It damages societal self-esteem and diminishes confidence in the rule of law and the institutions that support government. Corruption also undermines the legitimacy of the government by weakening the structure of political organizations. In Armenia corruption has become one of the nation's biggest problems and has reached a level where the survival of this nation is in jeopardy.

Some of the many further definitions of corruption are as follows: breach of law and moral standards by those in government; a process by which the virtue of a citizen is undermined and eventually destroyed (Machiavelli); betrayal of trust and violation of fair play; a cold-blooded commercial transaction and, among many others; when "moral" or "public interest" considerations are replaced with "private interest maximization." In Armenia there is no distinction between private and public interest as some public servants are the owners or proxy owners of the wealth of the country. As it stands, the concept of "conflict of interest" does not exist in today's Armenia.

Corruption comes in many forms and shapes. In bribery (institutional in nature where it is well structured and treated as a business within the public sector), kleptocracy, political corruption, and outright theft.

During the 70 years of Soviet rule corruption became a way of life. Upon becoming independent the country organized itself on a democratic platform and started functioning as an independent state, albeit, often through the same party rules. It is therefore commonly believed that corruption continues to this day as a consequence of habits inherited from the former Soviet Union.

Whatever the past might indicate, corruption is carried on as a result of poor governance, lack of exemplary, ethical leadership, and having the wrong people at the helm of government. In Armenia the government is hijacked by the oligarchy whose preoccupation lies in enriching itself by robbing the country. Any form of serious opposition to the rule is squashed, as we witnessed with the massacre of civilians in a peaceful protest in Yerevan during the presidency of Robert Kocharyan.

Lack of accountability and transparency are bent or reinvented in favor of the ruling class. Blurred distinctions exist between private and public interests where high government officials, including Prime Minister Hovik Abrahamyan (arguably one of the wealthiest men in Armenia) have enriched themselves during their tenure as public servants. One needs to ask how it is possible for a public servant with a basic government salary to become one of the richest persons in Armenia.

The large and poorly-paid civil service, the rise in food prices, clothing and accommodation, a

regulatory regime which imposes excessive burden on the private sector and an unfair and undemocratic electoral system are all factors that have contributed to the high levels of corruption in Armenia.

What are the consequences of this menace.

The consequences of corruption and its catastrophic implications are not hard to see. Today's Armenia is best described as a bleeding person who needs immediate attention. Hopelessness, despair and poverty have become a way of life. People have lost confidence in the leadership and the country they once considered home.

Citizens are leaving the country because they have given up on Armenia. Misery has created by an "unlevel playing field," which is compounded by lack of adequate housing, proper health care, sanitation, and lack of food or high prices. Those who stay behind have to struggle to survive, often with the help of loved ones outside Armenia, while the oligarchs and their cronies live a lavish life.

This is happening under the leadership of the government and its cronies. By avoiding or ignoring the problem, the current government of Armenia continues to run the country on a platform of corruption. As a result, the government has lost legitimacy and has weakened the structure of political organizations and the bureaucracy. Their conduct has opened gaps to public unrest and possibly civil disobedience. Consequently, foreign and domestic investment incentives are diminishing.

Armenia under President Serzh Sargsyan has lost its reputation as a fair and free country, where the shame factor has stripped away the dignity and pride of the Armenian people.

Based on the problems we are facing we have no choice but to create awareness within ourselves and continue to organize in groups, including the formation of a coalition with relevant stakeholders. We should undertake the following important tasks to increase private and public awareness.

* Realize that corruption is not a normal practice

* Educate ourselves in the dangers of corruption

* Stop making excuses that justify corruption

* Stop glorifying the myth of corruption

* Stop participating in any form of corruption

* Use social media to achieve goals similar to Kim Kardashian and Turkish Airlines, etc.

* Encourage reporting of corrupt practices to the media

* Deplore individuals who have enriched themselves through corrupt practices

* Publicize acts of corruption to shame the corrupt

* Provide anti-corruption education in schools and higher institutions

* Teach the public that it is its duty to identify corruption and turn in corrupt officials

* Organize grassroots organizations to identify corrupt practices and report perpetrators

* Develop a source book that stipulates guidelines and methods citizens can use to fight corruption

* Hold regular meetings and invite the public to attend

* Identify “heroes” and reward them for their brave actions

* Recruit well-known and respected citizens to get involved as role models, attend events and do commercials on radio and television

* Involve grassroots and indigenous traditional community based organizations

* Encourage international organizations such as transparency international to open offices in the country and educate the public

* Create dialogue among civil society, donor county representatives, the private sector, and media

* Empower citizens to demand more participation in the way the country is run

* Allow stakeholders to feel a sense of ownership

* Support honest public officials in important places

* Choose strong lead agencies to advocate and adopt the anti-corruption agenda

* Make the anti-corruption program home grown

* Make sure the program is genuine and is not put together to appease donors

* Make sure that an anti-corruption strategy has long term goals

* Support community level voluntary organizations

* Provide training workshops on corruption

* Initiate support programs at community level (traditional institutions) and use these institutions to embark on an awareness program

* Distribute educational materials, including leaflets, posters, bi-annual publications on the themes of corruption and civic responsibilities

* Send a clear signal against corruption through public demonstrations in and outside of Armenia, preferably in front of Armenian Embassies, including major international institutions

* Do not send money to corrupt organizations

* Always support groups that are ready to fight corruption

We should engage our traditional political parties, civil society organizations, charitable and benevolent foundations as well as smaller civic groups in and out of Armenia to fully condemn corruption and make their assistant conditional to transparency and accountability.

We should summon international pressure onto corrupt leaders and governments

* Lobby international organizations and governments to make conditional their assistance to anti-corruption measure.

* Lobby donor countries through the embassies and the Diaspora to apply pressure on the government to take serious measures in combating corruption.

* Make sure foreign governments deplore grand corruption and prosecute leaders who have large amounts of cash in foreign banks.

* Work with host governments to repatriate stolen government funds and expel perpetrators from their country.

* Be a signatory to international anti-corruption conventions.

Creating awareness starts by making personal attitudinal change. Change will take place only by rejecting commonly held beliefs about corruption and not accepting it as a normal socio-economic phenomenon. Corruption should not be assumed to have benefits. One should not make any excuses to justify the habits of corruption. Attitudinal change happens when we educate ourselves about forms of corruption, its causes and consequences. However, most importantly, awareness should be passed to others through personal and social means, such as social media. Corruption in Armenia under the rule of Armenia's President Serzh Sargsyan should be exposed on a global scale and civic action taken. The task of exposing corruption should be undertaken by all Armenians, and done in such a way that it will force our leaders to make concrete changes.