

# VULTURES AND THE CARCASS

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One wonders why, despite the great deal of wringing of hands and the quiet gnashing of teeth, corruption marches on. Media coverage of the incidence of corruption has evoked no positive action to eliminate it. Ask anyone, even the proverbial man on the street. Everyone will quote facts and figures, recount stories, rumours and incidents to assert its prevalence.

Corruption is on everyone's lips. But if you ask about adopting measures to eradicate corruption, you discover that people merely pay lip service to these. There are private murmurs about the evil of corruption and cover ups, but no public activism against it. Clearly there is no agitation about the need to eliminate fraud, kickbacks, bribery, nepotism, and illegal and undemocratic actions in public affairs. One can almost ask whether rules that guide public life exist at all. Are there recognised norms of good government? If there are, how can corruption be rampant? And why do corrupt practices not outrage public morality?

If the incidence and even tolerance of corruption is the prevailing mode of public life in some quarters, how do we explain public apathy? The perpetuation of illegal, immoral, undemocratic actions with impunity surely calls for an explanation.

Corruption can be pervasive because those in positions of power and privilege are linked to these malpractices. One could argue that if those in power protect and condone these malefactors, aren't these by the same token corruption? The use of strong arm tactics, even acts of terror to preserve privilege creates an environment of fear, submission and silence. The use of a secret police, and death squads to silence criticism and protest, induces both terror and apathy. Such a regime is itself an embodiment of corruption, and uses various means to suppress and subvert the public conscience.

Without the means to express public criticism, without the possibility of acting on the basis of the individuals' conscience in Parliament, without means for citizens and the electors to convey their criticism or indignation through a member of Parliament, there is no method of voicing or organising criticism of public figures. The politicians now are not guided by democratic norms of responsibility and Accountability. Politics has become an exercise in naked power, immune to public criticism. Politicians now have power but not authority — certainly not legitimate authority.

We have to ask ourselves where this state of affairs is leading us to? We should pay heed to possible unacceptable consequences.

Two kinds of messiahs may appear to deliver us from the evils of corruption. First the one we have already seen in the recent past, so called liberators who follow undemocratic practices and set themselves up as the removers of corruption, but at the point of a gun. We have had enough of them. The other possibility lies in the armed forces, who may aim at eliminating corrupt politicians and malpractices. Though this possibility seems remote in Sri Lanka — who knows what the future holds. Corruption could provide the pretext for the suppression of freedom and human rights.

But in democratic terms who will take the initiative to bring legality, fairness and justice to our country? In the meantime our dying democratic society is fast becoming a carcass over which great vultures hover and around it scavenging hyenas stalk for putrid morsels.