

Afghanistan Corruption No Gaffe

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13 May 2016

Hague Institute Commentary

<http://www.thehagueinstituteforglobaljustice.org/latest-insights/latest-insights/commentary/afghanistan-corruption-no-gaffe/>



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United Kingdom (UK) Prime Minister David Cameron made [international news](#) during the recent London Anti-Corruption Summit by characterizing Afghanistan and Nigeria as “fantastically corrupt countries,” and “possibly the two most corrupt countries in the world.” His comments were certainly undiplomatic, but he is right: corruption is a major problem there and elsewhere. More than scolding will be required to eliminate this problem. The UK and the broader international community have long turned a blind eye to corruption. If Cameron’s comments spur a more serious fight against corruption, his words will have made a real contribution.

As Cameron noted, these issues are particularly acute in Afghanistan. Since the refounding of the country after the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, Afghanistan has been notable for its extraordinary level of both financial and political corruption. Indeed, former President Hamid Karzai (2001-2014) established a regime predicated on rent extraction and patronage.

Afghanistan has a new president, Ashraf Ghani. For his part, Ghani states he has [no issues](#) with Cameron's characterization as it is a "legacy of the past." Ghani stresses he was "elected on a mandate to make transparency, accountability and the rule of law the imperative", but little has improved since he came into power. Every aspect of the current Afghan state features appalling levels of corruption. The system runs on patronage and kickbacks far more than statutes and regulations. The justice sector, charged with upholding the law, is one of the most corrupt. Indeed, it is widely seen as predatory and rent seeking. Afghanistan ranks second to last in Transparency International's [corruption rankings](#). Moreover, a recent [major survey](#) from the Asia Foundation organization reported that 89.9% of respondents believed corruption was a concern in their everyday lives. Corruption is not merely administrative. It permeates the public and private spheres. The election system is so [compromised](#) that the last presidential vote tallies were not even released. No one believed the election authorities were honest brokers – an international agreement was required to break the deadlock, declaring Ghani President, but no final vote count was ever published.

The staggering corruption of the Afghan state has enabled a burgeoning Taliban insurgency and undercut counter insurgency efforts, despite massive international investment. Indeed, corruption is a major driver of insurgency. [Taliban justice](#) has thrived despite its brutality and disregard for human rights norms because of its perceived lack of corruption compared to state courts. The Afghan state must offer a better justice venue to ultimately triumph over the Taliban. Corruption and the flow of illicit funds is a major problem in Afghanistan, but also a major transitional security concern. The international community needs to realize that its failure to be a consistent advocate for anti-corruption helps corruption to flourish.

In short, the Summit's comprehensive approach makes sense, but there is a need for implementation. The Summit should tackle these issues in a straightforward way. Domestic and international observers cannot turn a blind eye. The international community must expose and eliminate corruption and the culture that enables it. Western states must ensure that aid does not spawn corruption and enable rentier states. Furthermore, Western financial institutions must be vigilant in ensuring that they serve as bulwarks against corruption.