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The origins of graft

The word “graft,” now only rarely used, is probably more descriptive of illicit office practices found in transitional societies like ours than “corruption,” its semantic cousin. The term comes from horticulture. Here is how Dictionary.com defines it: “A bud, shoot, or scion of a plant inserted in a groove, slit, or the like in a stem or stock of another plant in which it continues to grow.” “Graft” is also used in surgery to refer to the transplantation of living tissue from one part of a body to another, or from one human being to another.

Note that the term, as used in science, is not burdened by moral overtones -- unlike “corruption.” The host system may either reject the graft, or it may incorporate it. If the grafted tissue becomes part of the host system, the resulting stock may be better, or, in medicine, there may be a dramatic relief from troublesome symptoms. Some problems are solved, but, then again, new problems may crop up.

There is a cognitive gain in separating objective analysis from moral judgment. This allows us to see how a system evolves and persists, and what problems it solves and creates. The beginnings of graft in the bureaucracy are sometimes benign, even well-intentioned. Some bright person in an office thinks of a creative way of raising “petty cash” from which unbudgeted expenditures may be funded. These expenses are often justifiable, but rather than go through the tedious process of filing a requisition form and waiting indefinitely for approval, the office finds it more convenient to dip into its “savings.” Before anyone realizes it, this slush fund – or in the euphemism of the Armed Forces, the “Provision for Command Directed Activities” or PCDA – becomes big. And because it is not subject to official audit, this all-purpose kitty, meant originally to give the office a little flexibility and discretion, begins to be abused.

The small graft that was supposed to solve a few problems arising from rigid budgetary rules becomes the dominant element in the functioning of the system. This can happen in any bureaucracy, especially in organizations with weak internal controls. Under such circumstances, the only check against graft is the personal honesty of the head of the office.

One can almost visualize how this happens in the military. One obvious source of the slush fund is the kickback from military suppliers. This is probably centralized; one doubts if only one person or a group in charge of procurement corners all the “gifts” from the suppliers.

In the case against former AFP Comptroller Carlos F. Garcia, the investigators from the Office of the Ombudsman took their cue from the affidavit filed by Mrs. Clarita D. Garcia before the US Customs. In that statement, the wife of Gen. Garcia tried to explain where the money that her sons were caught smuggling into the US came from. She pointed to military suppliers as sources of generous gifts. This clearly wasn't the whole story.

The Ombudsman investigators followed the money and property trail of the Garcias and came up with a catalogue of suspected ill-gotten assets. But, to be able to prove the crime of plunder, they had to identify the military suppliers and contactors who bribed Gen. Garcia. Unless they can show proof of how exactly these assets were illegally obtained, the State cannot convict Gen. Garcia for plunder. The government may seize Gen. Garcia's his assets if he cannot prove they are the fruit of honest labor. But that is all it can do.

Viewed from this perspective, one can understand the Ombudsman's sense of relief when Gen. Garcia offered to plead guilty to the lesser offense of direct bribery, and to surrender about P150 million in assets, in exchange for taking off the names of his wife and three sons from the charge sheet as principal co-conspirators. This plea bargain seems to have

enjoyed the tacit approval of the Sandiganbayan Court. It could have been sealed were it not for the public outcry that greeted Gen. Garcia's release on bail last December.

Now there is new information coming from the separate testimonies of retired AFP budget officer George Rabusa and former government auditor Heidi Mendoza at the ongoing legislative hearings. The information points not to kickbacks from suppliers and contractors but to UN funds meant as reimbursement for Filipino soldiers sent abroad as part of the UN peacekeeping forces. These funds are paid directly to the AFP, instead of remitted to the Treasury. US government reimbursements for expenses incurred in the Balikatan joint military exercises are apparently also remitted in the same way.

The availability of such huge unprogrammed funds in any agency is a great temptation for graft. Heidi Mendoza showed what happened to one UN check amounting to P200 million, payable to the AFP, as it morphed into smaller accounts in local banks. Part of the money disappeared into the account of an unnamed depositor. None of this is possible without the collusion of the banks. Someone from the participating banks would have to testify to supplement the documentary evidence against Gen. Garcia and the recipients of the military payola. One of these recipients, said Col. Rabusa, was former AFP chief of staff Angelo Reyes, who allegedly received P50 million from this slush fund as retirement gift.

These revelations show us a more complete picture of graft in the military, but they may not be sufficient to send anyone to jail. In the meantime, graft will continue until, like a deceased tissue, it is fatally rejected by a modern social system.

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