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Resisting Corruption

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Resisting Corruption

Abstract

What can you do when corrupt operators come after you, trying to discredit, threaten or even assault you? Insights can be gained by looking at the usual tactics used by powerful perpetrators of unjust acts. They regularly try to reduce public outrage. Consider torture, something widely condemned throughout the world but still practised in many countries. Governments that instigate or sanction torture can use five types of methods to reduce outrage, as did the US government over the torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, exposed in 2004.

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1. Cover-up of the action. Torture is hidden from the public, typically by being done in secret locations. Sometimes there are elaborate procedures to disguise torture activities. There is never a public announcement.
2. Devaluation of the target. Victims of torture are commonly called terrorists, criminals or other derogatory terms. When the target is seen as lacking value, then what is done to them doesn't seem so bad.
3. Reinterpretation of the events. Perpetrators commonly lie, minimise the consequences, blame someone else or put a different spin on events. Governments that sanction torture typically lie about methods used, say that the effects on victims are not serious, blame rogue operators and say that methods do not really constitute torture.
4. Official channels. When torture is exposed, governments sometimes set up inquiries or launch legal actions against a few low-level personnel. This gives the appearance that justice is being done but usually without much substance.
5. Intimidation. Victims of torture are often too afraid to speak out. Investigators, whistleblowers and journalists may be threatened too.

The same five methods are found in all sorts of other areas, for example sexual harassment, censorship, police beatings, massacres of peace protesters, and genocide. So it is not surprising that corrupt operators use the same five methods.

In Wollongong, Australia, corruption in local government was exposed as a result of an investigation and public hearings by the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in 2008. Elected officials and employed staff were exposed as favouring applications from developers who provided gifts (bribes). The ICAC hearings and media coverage provided vivid evidence of all five of these methods. This was despite this corruption being not nearly so serious or pervasive as in many other countries.

1. Officials hid their activities, including by not recording meetings with developers, not recording gifts, using a colleague's computer, and preventing public consultation on development applications.
2. The manager of the local government body denigrated opponents of development.
3. Officials lied about their activities, blamed others and said their decisions to violate codes for developments were reasonable.
4. ICAC's inquiry was a significant exposure of corruption. However, ICAC pulled back whenever the trail led to figures in state government.
5. Many local government staff were afraid to resist the pro-development push because of the risk to their jobs.

In Wollongong, the ICAC inquiry sparked significant citizen action, with two groups taking steps to push for greater transparency and accountability: Wollongong Against Corruption (WAC) and Reclaim Our City (ROC). These groups organised conferences and protests, pushing for greater citizen participation in decisions about development in Wollongong and attention to other instances of corruption.

If corrupt operators predictably use the five methods of cover-up, devaluation, reinterpretation, official channels and intimidation — especially when corruption is deeply entrenched in institutions — then anti-corruption campaigners can seek to challenge each of these methods.

1. Expose corrupt activities by gathering credible information and getting it to receptive audiences.
2. Validate the targets of corruption by illustrating consequences for particular individuals and by showing the honour involved — honesty, concern for the public interest — in opposing corruption.
3. Interpret the corrupt activities as wrong and harmful; expose lies, show the real impact, point the finger at those responsible, and counter justifications.
4. Don't rely on official agencies to fix the problem. Instead, encourage citizens to become involved in campaigning and in behaving in honest ways.
5. Stand up to intimidation, and expose it. Not everyone can do this, but some need to.

The basic idea here is that public outrage over corruption is an incredibly powerful resource for an anti-corruption effort. Corrupt operators use methods to reduce outrage, so campaigners need to counter these methods, which means exposing and explaining what is happening to get members of the public involved.

So what should you do if corrupt figures come after you, threatening you and trying to discredit you? You need to make a strategic decision: not everyone can resist if the risks are too high. If you do decide to resist, then be prepared to collect evidence about the threats and attacks, and expose them to wide audiences. Don't rely on official bodies to protect you, but instead be part of a group that is willing to act. Behave honourably, and make sure that your behaviour is well documented. If you prepare well, then it is possible that attacks on you will backfire, creating greater support for you and your campaign goals.

The full article on the Wollongong corruption scandal is at:
<http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/12rsm.html>

For other articles on making injustice backfire, see:
<http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/backfire.html>

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