

### ***Curbing Corruption in Asian Countries: An Impossible Dream?***

By Jon S.T. Quah, (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2011),  
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This book written by a long-time observer and a highly respected academic is no doubt becoming a classic work on anti-corruption in Asian states. Delineating an analytical framework that studies the causes, consequences of control patterns of corruption in Asian countries, Jon Quah uses Chapter One of his book to skillfully trace how corruption turned from a research taboo in the World Bank to the agenda of its aid program in mid-1990s. The surge of the global interest in corruption also stemmed from the emergence of civil societies in many parts of the world and to the trend of democratization and marketization (p. 8). Quah adopts Arnold J. Heidenheimer's threefold classification of public-office-centered, market-centered, and public-interest-centered definitions of corruption, while focusing on the public office-oriented definition in his book. Quah comprehensively outlines several major causes of corruption, including the low salaries of civil servants, the existence of the opportunities of corruption and of red tape, the low risk of detection and punishment of corrupt offenders, the lack of political will on the part of political leaders, and such cultural factors as gift-taking and reciprocal favors. Rejecting the argument that corruption can be a "lubricant" stimulating economic growth in developing states, Quah argues that the consequences of corruption are fundamentally detrimental to their economy, governance and human costs. He then advances three patterns of corruption control in Asia: the first one relying on anticorruption laws without Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) to implement these laws, the second one embracing the combination of anticorruption laws and multiple ACAs, and the third one characterized by the impartial implementation of comprehensive anticorruption laws by a single ACA (p. 27). Japan belongs to pattern one, while pattern two includes India, the Philippines, Taiwan, China, Cambodia and Vietnam. Pattern three includes Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, South Korea, Indonesia and Mongolia. Quah finally emphasizes the importance of the policy contexts of the ten Asian countries he studies — Japan, India, the Philippines, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Thailand, South Korea, Indonesia and Mongolia. By policy contexts, he refers to the size of the country concerned, the GDP per capita, the nature and size of the population, and the nature of the political system. Each of the following chapters, ranging from chapter two to chapter eleven, examines in details the cases of Japan, India, the Philippines, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Thailand, South Korea, Indonesia, and Mongolia respectively. All the chapters are informative, rich in data, evaluative, and invaluable for all those who wish to have a deeper understanding of the anticorruption efforts of the ten Asian states.

Quah's insights on the dynamics of corruption in all the ten case studies are sharp and worthy of our attention. Despite the fact that Japan is characterized by a Western-

style democracy with the rotation of political party in power, its political system is vulnerable to corruption. The reasons are, according to Chapter Two, the cultural propensity of taking gifts, societal tradition of *amakudari* (reemployment of top bureaucrats in private and public corporations and their movement to political life after their retirement) and structural mix between money and politics. Quah concludes that Japan is unique as it combines a high level of grand corruption with a low level of petty corruption. Chapter Three focuses on India, where the dynamics of corruption are mainly the low salaries of civil servants, red tape, the low probability of detection and punishment, the societal tolerance of corruption, and the lack of political will. Quah concludes that India has not demonstrated strong political will in combating corruption. Chapter Four shows that the causes of corruption in the Philippines are similar to that in India. Quah stresses the importance of the political will of the leaders in the Philippines to tackle corruption. Chapter Five views corruption in Taiwan as being caused by the low salaries of civil servants, red tape, the low probability of detection and punishment for corrupt offenders, the Chinese traditions of gift-taking and *guanxi*, and the lack of political will on the part of the political leaders. Quah concludes that although the Taiwan President Ma Yingjeou is determined to combat corruption, the existence of multiple anti-corruption agencies without proper coordination is going to hamper the combat against graft. Chapter Six contends that Singapore's Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau is an effective case of anti-corruption as it has legal, political and public support, but the challenge for Singapore is to maintain the tradition of an honest and effective government. Chapter Seven examines the successful case of Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), which to Quah is also accompanied by public support and the strong political will of leaders to combat corruption. However, the challenge for Hong Kong is to maintain its institutional health and integrity. Chapter Eight focuses on Thailand, where the causes of corruption include low salaries of civil servants, red tape, the low risk of detection and punishment of corrupt offenders, the cultural practice of gift-giving and prevalence of patron-client networks, and the proliferation of money politics and vote-buying in elections. Chapter Nine argues that corruption in South Korea is caused by low salaries of civil servants, gift-giving tradition, red tape, and the low probability of punishment for corrupt officials. Although the South Korean government has taken anti-graft measures since the 1950s, including the introduction of the Korea Independent Commission against Corruption in 2002 and the formation of the Anti-Corruption Civil Rights Commission in 2008, Quah views the Korean example as having multiple agencies without the political will of leaders to combat corruption. Chapter Ten analyzes the case of Indonesia, which according to Quah has demonstrated the root problems of lacking a tradition of meritocracy, having low salaries of civil servants, showing red tape and inefficient administration, having weak disciplinary control and ineffective policing, and relying on incremental and institutional reforms. Chapter Eleven evaluates the case of Mongolia, which is also plagued by the low salaries of civil servants, red tape, the cultural propensity of using the back door, the low probability of punishment of corrupt offenders, and the lack of political will to fight against corruption.

Chapter 12 is the heart of the entire book as it sums up Quah's major findings and arguments. He gathers all the useful data on anti-corruption from a comparative perspective, including the data from the World Bank the statistics on public trust of politicians in the ten Asian states, and the Transparency International's data. Quah concludes that Singapore and Hong Kong adopt the third pattern of corruption control by relying on one single anti-corruption agency to enforce their comprehensive anti-graft laws. Although Thailand, South Korea, Indonesia and Mongolia have also adopted pattern three their anti-corruption efforts have been hindered by various problems, such as the limited powers of the anti-corruption agencies, the low salaries of civil servants, and the lack of political will. Pattern 2 is adopted by India, the Philippines and Taiwan as they rely on multiple anti-corruption agencies, which compete for scarce resources, lack coordination and enforce anti-graft law partially. Japan, to Quah, is an anomaly as there is a high level of grand corruption coexisting with a low level of petty corruption. He concludes that "curbing corruption in Japan remains an impossible dream until the 'rotten triangle' of politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen, which nurtures the existing system of structural corruption, is destroyed (p. 453)." Apart from the emphasis on the political will of leaders to combat corruption, Quah has stressed the importance of different policy contexts, including the level of economic development and the nature of the political systems. He argues that both Singapore and Hong Kong "have more favorable policy contexts than most of the other 19 Asian countries because both are politically stable city states with smaller territories to govern, with higher GDP per capita and relatively small populations (p. 458)." Quah finally concludes that, in addition to the critical factor of the political will of leaders to fight against corruption, the other four key ingredients for an effective anti-corruption strategy include (1) the incorruptible and independent nature of the anti-corruption agency, (2) the punishment of corrupt offenders, (3) the reduction in the opportunities for corruption in vulnerable government departments, and (4) the need to pay adequate salaries to both political leaders and civil servants so as to prevent them from being succumbing to the temptation of accepting bribes (p. 460). Quah stresses that the "successful experiences of Singapore and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in minimizing corruption demonstrate that curbing corruption in Asian countries is not an impossible dream if there is political will (pp. 466-467)." Moreover, "whether corruption remains a fact of life or a way of life in Asian countries depends mainly on whether their political leaders, civil servants and citizens are committed to minimizing it by addressing its causes through the implementation of a policy of zero-tolerance towards corruption.... Without such political will, curbing corruption in these Asian countries will remain an impossible dream (p. 469)."

Quah's book contributes immensely to our study of the dynamics of corruption in Asian states by focusing on the twin issues of institutional design in anti-corruption and the political will of leaders. His consideration of policy contexts also has wider implications for researchers, who may have to take into account other domestic factors shaping corruption control. These factors, as discussed by Quah, include the size of the

countries, the level of economic development and the nature of the political system. The successes of Singapore and Hong Kong can be arguably special due to their relatively small size. In large countries like China, for example, central-local relations remain a crucial factor shaping the variations in which different provinces and local governments combat corruption. While most provincial governments obey the directives of the central government to control corruption, the local governments under the provincial level may distort the central directives. Hence, a hypothesis that has not been considered by Quah is that in large countries, corruption control is influenced by the dynamics of central local relations. This central-local tug-of-war can perhaps be applied to other large countries studied by Quah, such as Indonesia and India. Furthermore, Quah has not probed whether the amnesty of corrupt offenders, like the case of Hong Kong under the British rule, may be a feasible strategy for large countries to curb corruption. Granting an amnesty to corrupt offenders before a particular year, and enforcing severe penalties on corrupt offenders thereafter, may constitute a turning point bringing about a clean break with the past. The case of Hong Kong where Governor Murray MacLehose granted an amnesty to corrupt offenders before 1 January 1977 demonstrated a clean break with the past. If large countries witness corruption as a fact of life, granting an amnesty may be a feasible solution for them to curb corruption effectively.

Despite the omission of both central-local relations in various countries, especially the large ones, and the use of amnesty of corrupt offenders to constitute a clean break from the past, Jon Quah's book is undoubtedly the most significant, comprehensive and insightful classic on corruption control in Asia. It will continue to be a must read in many years to come. Its emphases on a proper institutional design in the form of a single powerful anti-corruption agency, accompanied by the political will of leaders to fight against corruption, prevent a powerful thesis and recipe for any Asian state to control corruption. Scholars, practitioners, government officials and researchers from various disciplines will benefit tremendously from the insights and findings in this classic work on anti-corruption in Asia.

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