

Corruption and ideology

Because we're worth it

How and why lofty ideologies cohabit with rampant corruption

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CASUAL observers of Russian politics could be forgiven for feeling confused. On the one hand Vladimir Putin, the president, portrays himself as the helmsman of a hallowed civilisation and a moral bulwark against the metrosexual West; on the other, his cronies seem constantly to be pillaging the country. The news seems to divide between ideological (and military) grandstanding and allegations of graft.

Russia's government is not unique in combining lofty rhetoric with greasy palms. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's prime minister, wants to restore the country's lost Ottoman grandeur and burnish public morality. He has restricted the sale of alcohol and tried to ban adultery. Yet confronted with evidence of ministers on the take, he purged the police and prosecutors instead of the government: not an obviously moral response.

China's Communist bosses rely on Maoist notions of ethical leadership and, implicitly, on a Confucian mandate supposedly bestowed by heaven for their righteousness. They pose as guarantors of order and stability—while their families amass Croesan wealth. A recent anti-corruption drive is snaring some big names without seriously disrupting the cash-flow. As Minxin Pei of Claremont McKenna College in California puts it, Chinese leaders manage to “move effortlessly between universes of extreme moralism and extreme corruption”.

Every country has its charlatans and rogues, be they light-fingered British MPs or pork-happy American congressmen. Many, whether Latin American strongmen or African kleptocrats, claim to serve their people. Hardly any admit to thieving. But there is something especially grating about leaders who push moralistic causes, thus inviting judgment of their own behaviour, while overseeing scams. Casual observers may wonder why citizens put up with the hypocrisy—and how their rulers look at themselves in the mirror.

For all the difference between these regimes, there are some common answers. They cast light on the uses of ideology and the corrosive effects of power.

Fingers in the honey

Each of these governments tries to conceal its swindles. Tame media in Turkey portray corruption allegations as the work of coup-plotters and foreign saboteurs. (In fact Mr Erdogan's internal enemies are real—but so is the pilfering.) China punishes foreign newspapers for corruption scoops. Blowing the whistle on Russian officials can be dangerous, even fatal. In each of these countries, the citizens are mostly undeceived—and unsurprised. As in other put-upon nations, nest-feathering is widely regarded as inevitable, whatever the government's ideological

stripe. The real question is whether the corruptioneers improve their people's living standards, too—as, for all their faults, these all have.

Elif Shafak, an eminent Turkish novelist, says that Turks “are so used to seeing officials who are both corrupt and lazy that those who embezzle from public funds, or misuse their authority to further their interests, but at the same time keep working are seen as a better alternative.” She cites an apposite Turkish proverb: “He who holds the honey is bound to lick his fingers.” Many Chinese are willing to forgive bigwigs' sins in exchange for prosperity. After the chaos of the 1990s many Russians have, until recently, seen economic stability as reason enough to back Mr Putin.

In a way, Mr Putin's messianic Russian nationalism, Mr Erdogan's Islamism and Chinese leaders' exhortations of sacrifice take the edge off the sleaze. It is degrading to live in a venal polity, but the idea of a special national mission or destiny can be consoling. Lilia Shevtsova of the Carnegie Moscow Centre, a think-tank, says “Russians have been seduced to forget, temporarily, about Putin's corruption by the offer of compensation for their complexes and lost dreams”—in particular by the annexation of Crimea, a key part of Mr Putin's bid to restore Russian greatness.

Mr Erdogan's critics think his religious rhetoric serves a similar purpose. Analysts of Chinese politics note that its top brass sometimes undertake public shows of humility (visiting peasant hovels and so on) in deference to old notions of virtuous leadership. Thus, while they appear contradictory, moralising ideologies can provide useful cover for corruption.

There are overlaps, too, in the way officials rationalise their hypocrisy. The economies of China, Russia and Turkey have all, until recently, grown at an impressive lick; in each country, some see backhanders less as wrongdoing than as commissions merited for services to the nation. What looks like larceny is really a kind of justice. As Mr Pei, the China-watcher, notes, Chinese officials often work hard for low pay. Encountering the new rich, they think, “I'm smarter than you are, I work harder than you, and yet you're much wealthier than I am.” Recompense is duly extracted.

And, in all of these countries, bribery is too widespread to be regarded by its beneficiaries as seriously unethical. Mr Pei describes a “buffet” dynamic among bureaucrats, whereby “if you restrain yourself, you won't get anything to eat.” In such circumstances corruption can become a perverse obligation. Cheng Li of the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC, says that in China “if you don't take bribes, people will think you're crazy and you won't get promoted.” In both China and Russia, incorruptible officials seem untrustworthy to their flexible peers: traitors to the caste.

Abdullah Bozkurt of *Today's Zaman*, an English-language newspaper in Turkey, imputes a warped sense of duty to some crooked Islamist politicians, too. They consider themselves a boon to Muslims in Turkey and beyond, he explains. Purloining the funds to keep themselves afloat is therefore defensible.

A common attitude to the state underpins both the corruption and the propagation of ideology. As Ms Shafak summarises, “the state is privileged, all-powerful and yet paradoxically safeguarded as if it were a fragile entity in need of protection.” Between it and its citizens a gulf looms; conversely, officials elide its interests with their own. Elena Panfilova, of the Russian office of Transparency International, a corruption watchdog, explains that officials in Russia see themselves as servants of the state, rather than servants of the public. Since the state permits corruption, they do not regard it as an offence. And it is perfectly compatible with patriotism.

A bifocal view of their countries is also essential for the crooks. Russia is a light unto the nations; Turkey a jewel of Sunni Islam; China the world’s once and future supremo—but only in theory. The earthly manifestations of these ideals are, in their eyes, a mess, populated by folk at whom they privately sneer. The flip side of lofty ideology is contempt, as lucrative for the rulers as it is insulting to the ruled.