

Book Reviews

Combatting corruption: Understanding anti-corruption initiatives in Malaysia. By Anis Yusal Yusoff, Sri Murniati, and Jenny Gryzelius. Kuala Lumpur: Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs, 2013, pp. 183, ISBN: 978-967-10094-7-5.

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Combatting Corruption: Understanding Anti-corruption Initiatives in Malaysia is a new addition to the available works on corruption in Malaysia. This work reinforces the belief that corruption is undeniably a complex problem that is very difficult to eradicate. Referring to many studies and discussions with governmental and non-governmental organisations and other relevant participants, the book examines the extent of the Malaysian government's success in implementing coherent strategies and initiatives to combat corruption. This sets out the purpose and direction of the book, which is to help key stakeholders evaluate previous initiatives and learn lessons while at the same time encourage critical discussion among those involved in promoting integrity and fighting corruption. The authors adopt the view that corruption requires coherent strategies for prevention and deterrence, as compared to existing efforts in Malaysia that focus on detection. In arguing this, the authors seem to support Kaufman's findings (2003), which claim that without targeted anti-corruption initiatives, the development of appropriate laws and agencies, and strengthening them, would have limited effect on combating corruption (Kaufman, D., *Governance crossroads*, in P. Cornelius, K. Schwab, & M. E. Porter (Eds.), *Global Competitiveness Report 2002-2003*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

As activists of one the most important non-governmental organisations in promoting good governance in Malaysia, the authors analyse the issue from the post-functionalist perspective. The book

argues for the need of targeted multi-dimensional strategies and initiatives to deal with this issue. In doing so, the authors claim that while Malaysia has many initiatives to combat corruption, these initiatives are sadly hampered by a lack of coordination and coherence between the agencies and groups that implement them. The book thus primarily recommends the establishment of an inter-agency working committee for coordinating strategies and initiatives. In addition to this, it also proposes that any future amendment to anti-corruption initiatives must take into consideration the historical development in the field as these initiatives often build upon each other (p. 20). In arguing so, however, the authors overlook the need to have a detailed discussion about the causes of corruption in the book. There is very limited discussion in the form of summaries from previous studies about particular reasons that lead to corruption in the Malaysian bureaucracy (p. 114) despite the authors giving a comprehensive historical account of effort to combat corruption since Malaysian independence. This has rendered their analysis of various initiatives to combat corruption truncated and inadequate because the most important step to eradicate or prevent something is to know what it is and how it happens. Identifying the root causes of corruption may help the government to deal with this difficult challenge and to design more effective strategies to combat corruption. This notable omission could be due to the difficult and often ambiguous nature of the causes that lead to corruption in Malaysia. The common assumption forwarded by the post-functionalist perspective is that corruption feeds on various causes and is self-perpetuating, as generally depicted in the discussion of this issue. Without discussing a specific cause, however, it would be tough to close the opportunities and strengthen the resistance to corruption.

The authors start their analysis with an historical overview of the efforts to combat corruption through legal and institutional mechanisms over the last decades. The authors stated that the initiatives to combat corruption began with the introduction of the corruption ordinance by the British government before independence. It was later followed by the relentless efforts of the Malaysian government under Tun Dr. Mahathir, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and the present Prime Minister, Dato' Sri Najib Tun Razak. Their initiatives, the authors believe, serve as strong evidence of the government's seriousness in curbing corruption. Some of these initiatives, however, are viewed with scepticism by citing Malaysia's

low CPI score, claiming that these initiatives tend to discriminate grand corruption. The authors contend that the government's inability to deal with grand corruption, seen to be widespread in the society, may be caused by the lack of political will among the ruling elites (p. 131), as argued repeatedly by S. K. Jomo and E. T. Gomez in their works on "political business" or "money politics" inside UMNO.

Further research is needed to refine the analysis and to expand this work. It would be good if the authors applied a specific framework to explain Malaysia's initiatives to eradicate corruption. Solely relying on the historical approach limits the analysis and renders it impressionistic. The adoption of a specific framework can help in the systematic analysis of initiatives to control corruption in Malaysia and can reveal interesting trends. For example, it could help suggest whether Malaysian leaders pursue initiatives to eradicate corruption shortly after they came to power, before or after election periods, or on the types of initiatives deployed. This could serve as a useful point of departure in order to delve deeper into initiatives to eradicate corruption by each Malaysian leader. In other countries, especially in the Middle East, most initiatives are done shortly after a new leader comes to power. Normally, the objective of taking this initiative is to gain public support and legitimacy for the new administration than eliminating corruption.

It is also necessary for the authors to expand their analysis to actors besides leaders and their initiatives. This is crucial in order to be able to explain social, interpersonal, and other pressures to commit corruption and its ability to be resisted. For instance, a good understanding of people's perception of power and the role of the government may shed light on the question of why many government initiatives to combat corruption have thus far been ineffective. Furthermore, additional work needs to be done to explain how various initiatives and enforcement interact. Enforcement is often regarded as a mechanism to deal with corruption once it is occurred. Yet, inadequate or lack of enforcement could act as a chance for committing corruption. A complete initiative to prevent corruption must therefore recognise enforcement as an important element. In addition, the authors could look at how each enforcement could deter corruption in a cost-effective manner.

The authors also discuss the implications of corruption in Malaysia from democratic, economic, and social perspectives. They assert that

corruption has damaging implications, citing many useful tables of statistics as an easy guide to better understand the issue. These figures and numbers are analysed, in which the authors evaluate the initiatives undertaken by the government and civil society in Malaysia. The authors further elaborate on these initiatives as a blend of hard and soft measures, emphasising that these measures are insufficient. Thus, the authors suggest the implementation of formal as well as informal methods to be more effective in combatting corruption. These include, among others, reducing redundancies and duplications, strengthening enforcement initiatives, and above all to have a working committee on corruption at various levels (pp. 136-137). This analysis, however, seems to disregard other factors that have adversely affected government initiatives to combat corruption, such as close relations between business and politics, and the fusion of politics, administration and others characteristic of Malaysian bureaucracy. Therefore, it might be a good idea for the authors to focus beyond institutional mechanisms and to urge the government to put into practice a good governance system that supports anti-corruption initiatives. This may include initiatives such as broadening public access to decision-making and to ensure their substantive participation in the political process.

The authors also documented a lengthy and comprehensive annotated bibliography of selected books and articles on anti-corruption strategies, particularly in Malaysia. In doing this, the authors informed readers how much has hitherto been achieved in this area. The overall impression left by this book is that it offers a powerful insight into various initiatives to eradicate corruption in Malaysia. It should be regarded as a valuable contribution to literature on corruption. This is because the existing literature on systematic studies on corruption in Malaysia is quite limited, discounting the works done by Y. M. Mansoor (Combating corruption: The Malaysian experience. *Asian Survey*, 19 (1979), 597-610) and N. A. Noore Alam Siddique (Combating corruption and managing integrity in Malaysia: A critical overview of recent strategies and initiatives. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 28 (2010), 107-130). This book is also significant in providing useful guidance for researchers and policymakers wanting to develop effective approaches and strategies to combat corruption.
