WORLD CORRUPTION

Corruption in government, business and everyday life exists to some degree in all parts of the world. Where corruption prevails—particularly if it is accepted behavior—its costs are enormous, not just in money, but in basic fairness and trust in government and business. Solutions often require international cooperation and openness.

In December 2003, U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft signed a “landmark U.N. anti-corruption treaty requiring politicians to disclose their campaign finances and countries to return tainted assets to the nation from which they were stolen” (AP, Jan. 23, 2004). The accused parties include government officials and bureaucrats, as well as corporations and businesses, often in cahoots with one another.

According to the World Bank, 7 percent of the annual world economy, or about $2.3 trillion, is lost to corruption annually. This rate is greater than the annual expansion of the world’s economy.

Transparency International, a not-for-profit organization, publishes the TI Corruption Perceptions Index annually. The 2003 index ranked 133 countries based on perceived corruption among public officials and politicians. This is a composite index drawn from polls and surveys across a wide range of residents and business and country analysts. The index defines corruption as the abuse of public office for private gain, including bribe taking by public officials in public procurement.

The index is not inclusive, however. Ninety-seven countries and territories failed to receive a minimum of survey and poll responses and were not listed at all in the TI Corruption Index. Most are not involved in very much international trade or tourism and many have had histories of dictatorships or non-democratic governments. Although Transparency International did not rank these countries, most likely would rank in the lowest half of the Index, were they included.

Mapping the countries in the lower half of the Index (those with the highest perceived corruption) provides an interesting geographic pattern of the world’s corrupt governments. The majority occurs in Central and South America, Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia. The pattern provides circumstantial evidence of a relationship between corruption, poverty, past colonialism and dictatorial regimes, many of which were or are supported by the United States.

When we add those countries not included in the Index, the pattern is even more striking. Most of these countries fit the same geographic pattern as those corrupt ones.

The implications of the pattern of government corruption are many. Both past and present politicians, such as Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Joseph-Desire Mobutu of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Idi Amin of Uganda, Francois “Poppa Doc” Duvalier of Haiti and Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania would be among the most corrupt. But there are thousands more corrupt individuals in government and business who hide their money in secret bank accounts in Switzerland, the Cayman Islands, Bahamas and other “off-shore banks. Much of this money is looted from governments through bribes, kickbacks, and the black market, often connected to illicit sales of oil, drugs and influence.

Least Americans believe corruption is purely a problem in developing countries, the United States ranked only as the 16th least corrupt in the index. Just recall current cases being adjudicated, involving some of our own major industries, Enron, Tyco International and World COM. Even Vice President Dick Cheney’s own previous employer, Halliburton Co., has admitted to overcharging the U.S. for services in the Iraqi conflict. Such revelations published in the news media suggest to foreign observers that Attorney General Ashcroft’s calls to eradicate corruption need to begin at home.

Free and open news media play vital roles in exposing graft and corruption, helping to keep the playing field level. When oversight of government and business by the media declines, corruption tends to increase.

And that is Geography in the News™, February 27, 2004. #717.

(The author is a Geography Professor at Appalachian State University, Boone, NC.)

Additional Sources: