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The healthy roots of corruption anger in Latin America

By Kevin Casas-Zamora and Miguel Carter / April 6, 2016

Corruption scandals have exploded across Latin America in recent years. From Brazil to Mexico, revelations of corruption have led to large demonstrations, prosecutions of government officials and business executives at the highest level, and acute political crises. Has corruption, or the perception of corruption, suddenly spiked?

The answer is no. The corruption victimization figures from regional surveys tell a complicated story. While the perception of graft and its direction over the past decade remain high, the trends are generally positive.

According to the annual *Latinobarometer* surveys, from 2011 to 2015 more than 27 percent of the Latin American population had direct knowledge of a corrupt act in the past year, down from nearly 38

percent from 2005 to 2007. Likewise, based on its biannual survey, Vanderbilt University's *AmericasBarometer* estimated that 19 percent of the Latin American population paid a bribe in 2015, a slight reduction from the 20 percent it found in 2006. There is also scant evidence of a widespread increase in the people's perceptions of the severity of corruption. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) shows an improvement in 13 out of 18 Latin American countries between 2005 and 2014. As a result, CPI's average score for the region, while still poor, is now better than ten years ago.

Given the spate of scandals and revelations this would all seem counter-logical. How could citizens in the midst of the recent scandals report that corruption and graft have actually gone down?

Rather than changes in actual or perceived corruption, the events of the past two years seem related to transformations in the social, political and economic context in which corruption takes place. First, there's the explosive growth of social media that allows for faster dissemination of information and lowers the costs for collective action. Second, there's been the rapid expansion of an increasingly politically active middle class. Third, there has been the growing and widespread perception that political and economic institutions in the region are rigged in favor of elites, a perception that recent revelations confirm and transform into combustible social reactions. Fourth, there's the region-wide economic downturn of the past three to four years that has stoked popular intolerance for graft and state inefficiency. And last, a massive normative transformation has swept through the region by strengthening safeguards against malfeasance.

The latter factor is arguably the most crucial of all. Indeed, these currents toward popular impatience and lack of tolerance for corruption have come at a good time for the region. The recent wave of scandals has been preceded by two decades of patient policy diffusion, institutional development and the strengthening of mechanisms for social accountability designed to unveil and prevent corruption. This process, often induced by external pressure, is beginning to bear fruit.

The number and breadth of these transparency- and accountability-enhancing measures that have been introduced is staggering. They include the near-universal ratification of international instruments such as the OAS Inter-American Convention Against Corruption, the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and the UN Convention Against Corruption, as well as the proactive regional participation in the Open Government Partnership (OPG).

These have also been accompanied by a variety of legal reforms and innovations in almost every country in the region designed to enhance transparency. Governments have passed a flurry of laws and regulations to upgrade the functions carried out by auditing agencies that have included: asset disclosure requirements for public officials; access to public information laws; the modernization of public procurement processes; the creation of plans, agencies and policies to institute e-government systems; anti-money laundering laws; and campaign finance regulations. Many countries have also enacted plea bargain laws, judicial reforms of different kinds, and wide-ranging amendments to civil service provisions.

True, there are questions about the effectiveness of the

implementation of these reforms. Yet, their passage has given new powers to citizens, journalists, prosecutors, and judges, and has forced public officials and business, at the very least, to pay lip service to higher standards of conduct.

In fact, the evidence suggests that, on average, public sectors in the region *have* become more transparent. Over the past decade, according to the World Economic Forum's figures, the ability of businesses to obtain information about changes in government policies and regulations affecting their activities went up in 12 out of 18 Latin American countries, as well as in the region as a whole. And according to the Open Budget Index, public access to information about the budget and the budget process improved in 11 out of 15 countries for which there is information in the decade from 2006 to 2015.

What this means is that, more than ever, the typical Latin American citizen is in a position to know much more about the inner workings of his or her institutions. And what the public now learns often makes for a less-than-pretty sight. A crucial implication follows—reforms that increase levels of transparency can have an ambiguous effect on the legitimacy of political systems. In the long run, increased transparency can deter malfeasance and have a salutary effect on public life. But in the short run, these reforms will likely yield a harvest of corruption scandals, often with devastating consequences for the legitimacy of institutions. These norms help reveal the infection of corruption, before the sunlight exerts its purifying and healing power.

The emergence of this new normative edifice in favor of transparency

and accountability is one of the most important, yet unsung, stories of the consolidation of democracy in Latin America. The recent events are surely a symptom of the serious political pathologies that continue to afflict the region. Yet, amid the doom and gloom we should acknowledge a large silver lining. The mere fact that we are talking about these scandals is because—at least in some important ways—democracy and the rule of law are finally taking root in the continent.

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