



Act Now, PM

Act against arbitrary policies, clean up political funding and speed up prosecution

It is wholly welcome that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has announced official intention to tighten laws against corruption. This is necessary, but not sufficient by a long stretch. Action must begin on three fronts. One, scope for arbitrariness in government policy and action should be eliminated. Particularly in the allocation of natural resources. Policy must change to bring in transparent norms and processes for allocation of natural resources and other permits and clearances. Two, the judicial process must be streamlined to ensure that cases are disposed of beyond final appeal within, say, 18 months of commencement of prosecution. Even if the law is tightened, if it takes more than a lifetime to complete prosecution, the toughest law would fail to deter the corrupt. This task will call for enormous expansion of the judicial infrastructure, appointment of tens of thousands of judges at different levels and deployment of technology in the court system to facilitate speedy processing of cases. All this is eminently doable. If state governments lack funds to appoint judges and build court rooms, the Centre can chip in with a scheme.

But the biggest piece of reform required is to clean up political funding. Opaque funding out of the proceeds of corruption distorts our democracy and destroys accountability in the administrative machinery. Loot of the exchequer, sale of patronage and plain extortion — these are the ways in which politics is funded today. These, apart from raising resources for genuine political activity, lead to amassing of personal fortunes by individual politicians and civil servants who collude with them and turn unaccountable. The solution is to mandate disclosure of expenditure by every political party at every level, make that claim contestable by other parties and watchdogs, get a body like the Election Commission to moderate the contest and finalise the expenditure, for which the party has to show source of income. Such institution of transparency will change corruption in India from being systemic to what it is in most other countries, opportunistic and incidental. This is the toughest challenge. Best of luck, Dr Singh.