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The Korea Herald > Opinion > Viewpoints > Columnists



[Kim Ji-hyun] Corruption, is it all in the culture?

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Who would have imagined the name "Kim Young-ran" would cause so many ripples.

Named after the lawmaker who proposed it, the so-called Kim Young-ran law is said to be one of the toughest pieces of corruption-fighting legislation in the country's history.

Its primary purpose is to weed out corruption among government officials, the corporate sector and the media. Despite the barrage of criticism it has faced, particularly from the media for including it in its scope, I see no real problem with the Kim Young-ran law. In fact, if I had been so dependent on bribes or perks that I would be destitute without them, that's where the real problem would lie.



KIM JI-HYUN

The effectiveness of the law also is not so much an issue in my view, because I wonder if legislation and strong government action -- as was in the case of Singapore -- can bring a real end to corruption. A strict law can discourage people from corruption. However, cliché as it may sound, it may not be enough to weed out the deep-rooted culture of corruption.

I can't believe Koreans are particularly more corrupt than other nationalities, or that Korea has no hope. In fact, figures show that South Korea isn't doing too badly in terms of maintaining transparency, particularly in the public sector.

In the 2015 Corruptions Perceptions Index compiled by Transparency International, the country ranked 37th out of 168 countries for public sector transparency. In Asia, it was behind only countries such as Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.

It's a little more complex to gauge corporate integrity, but a steady stream of high-profile scandals involving many of the most respected companies in Korea suggest the level may be lower than expected. And corporate sector corruption seems to have stronger cultural roots.

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Ever since corporate Korea got a jumpstart after the Korean War, corruption has run in its veins. Companies played a vital role in the country's reconstruction, but they also molded a culture that accepts corruption as a natural part of doing business. Authorities had turned a blind eye to cronyism, all in the name of economic growth.

The media played its part, for corporations and the government depended on it to tout its propaganda. All this has now come back to bite us in the rear end, it seems. And unless the culture itself is somehow eradicated, it will be difficult for the current mood of transparency to continue.

An experiment mentioned in the book, "Economic Gangsters: Corruption, Violence, and the Poverty of Nations" suggest corruption may have strong cultural factors.

Economists Raymond Fisman and Edward Miguel write that an experiment they conducted showed that corrupt behavior may be governed more by cultural background than by the relative severity or permissiveness of the law.

After examining five years of unpaid parking tickets in New York City for cars driven by foreign diplomats who worked at the United Nations, they found that diplomats from countries where corruption tends to be high according to the World Bank corruption index were more likely to have unpaid parking tickets.

Those from countries with low levels of corruption tended to have a smaller number of tickets, and if they did have tickets, paid them. So cultural overtones seem to play a bigger role than we thought in promoting or demoting transparency.

The Kim Young-ran law does hold more significance compared to other laws due to its wide scope and fierce penalties. And we are seeing positive changes following its enactment. The biggest seems to be that, in general, people have become simply more wary of anything that may make them the first batch of culprits.

However, as time passes, more people will discover the legal loopholes and get around even the most stringent of laws. So unless the fundamental problems are solved, and the culture itself is altered somehow, it may be difficult to see irreversible change.

One thing that the new law does gives us, though, is hope. Hope in that there are plenty Koreans who are more than willing to fight corruption and raise the level of transparency. There could emerge the next Kim Young-ran and Kim Young-ran law that would bring even more changes.

If that is the message that the Kim Young-ran law can give us, I am more than happy to embrace it.

By Kim Ji-hyun (jemmie@heraldcorp.com)

Korea Herald Tokyo correspondent

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