Transforming Corrupt Systems: What Have We Learned?

Scott A. Fritzen and J. Patrick Dobel
Forthcoming in Public Integrity

Abstract:
The past two decades have witnessed a growing consensus among policy analysts, political elites and advocates: that corruption is a moral evil with significant deleterious consequences for national economies, social development and human rights; that leaders across all sectors have a responsibility to fight it; and that a set of anti-corruption reforms exists that, if implemented with sufficient ‘political will’, stand a fighting chance of transforming corrupt systems. We discuss this consensus and two areas in which analytical progress across the field has been piecemeal and unsatisfying to date. The first is the relationship between governance context and the design and sequencing of anti-corruption measures. The second concerns the nature of ‘political will’ and the dynamics of change and reform sustainability. To address the ‘causal complexity’ inherent in transforming corrupt systems, we call for more rigorous comparative research into how interventions function differently across diverse governance environments.

Keywords: corruption, anti-corruption, governance, context, policy reform, political will

1. INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have seen an explosion of theorizing and commentary about corrupt systems and potential drivers of their transformation. Journal articles indexed in the Web of Science with the key word “corrupt” or “corruption” in their title have been rapidly increasing: from 64 articles published in the year 1990 to 245 articles in 2010; in 2017, the number reached an all-time high of 555 articles. Corruption is also an active area of policy analysis and journalistic treatment across the world, and together with crime tops the list of “very big problems” according to public opinion in 34 developing countries (Pew Research Center, 2014).

National governments are both the sites of corruption and the critical key actors in combatting corruption. The question of how to develop a coherent and effective policy
approach to combatting corruption at the country level has loomed large in much of the grey
literature made available online by think tanks and donors (Pope, 2000) and a number of
published works (Bhargava & Bolongaita, 2004; Zhang & Lavina, 2015).

This review article summarizes the state of play in intertwined debates among
practitioners, academics and policymakers on the question of how to transform corrupt
systems. We base our analysis on a review of the broad-ranging academic and gray literature
concerning corruption, informal discussions with leading academics active in this field, and
on our experience writing and consulting with governments and international organizations.

Our analysis proceeds in five sections. Section two examines the unfolding of the anti-
corruption discourse over the past thirty years, with a focus on key drivers of an emerging
normative consensus regarding corruption. Sections three and four describe the contours of
the practice-oriented consensus about transforming corrupt systems, inspired by key
purported examples of success and by analytical approaches drawn largely from the fields of
criminology, economics, politics and sociology. Section five concludes by exploring areas in
which the consensus is less robust and empirically and theoretically grounded, and where
therefore further research will be particularly fruitful in the coming years.

2. ANTI-CORRUPTION COMES OF AGE: INTERLOCKING LEGAL AND MORAL
REVOLUTIONS

While the idiom of corruption has played a role in theorizing about societal and political
decline for thousands of years (Dobel, 1978; Uslaner, 2008), the conceptual landscape has
changed significantly since 1990. During this time, international community and elites have
converged on a strong consensus about the moral, political and economic challenge of
corruption. Corruption generally defined as abuse of entrusted power and position for
personal or group gain, it is argued, produces deep moral, cultural, economic and political

The story of the modern consensus surrounding corruption has several roots. The first is
the third wave of democratization, which involved citizens who claimed the issue and gave
voice to outrage over corruption and the abuse of power (Diamond, 1994; Rothstein, 2011).
Another is the small number of international non-governmental organizations – foremost among them Transparency International (TI)—that have effectively promoted awareness of corruption and a belief that something should be done (McCoy, 2001). A third driver was the explosion of research on governance generally, driven by the ‘discovery’ of the importance of institutional quality to economic development (World Bank, 2017). Finally, a security focused, post-9/11 world conceptualized corruption as posing security and environmental risks for countries through illegal arms, natural resource depletion, and people smuggling (Shelley, 2014).

All of these factors have contributed to an emerging analytical, normative and political consensus that systematic corruption decreases growth rates (Mauro, 1995) and involves immense rent seeking and siphons off money from economic development (Rose-Ackerman & Treux, 2013). Corruption in office involves a decline in the quality of public service, huge costs to the daily lives of citizens and an increase in social vulnerabilities (Rothstein & Varraich, 2017). Widespread corruption normalizes deviance at all levels and creates a society where it is an irrational and dangerous choice to act with integrity in possession of office (Graycar & Prenzler, 2013). Corruption grows into a collective action trap when it generates public resignation and powerlessness across the society and undermines civic and economic initiative (Persson, Rothstein & Teorell, 2013).

This interest has not just remained a matter of theory. Nearly twenty years ago, Wang and Rosenau (2001, p. 40) noted “the emergence of corruption as an issue of global governance in the last several years, as indicated by the rising sensitivity and emerging norms with respect to corruption on a global scale”. Since then, all but a few fragile or failed states have adopted national anti-corruption strategies or legislation and have signed the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (Rotberg, 2017, p. 110). Over 55 countries adopted Freedom of Information laws between 1995 and 2008 alone (Berliner, 2014, p. 481). Numerous international professional and corporate groups have developed codes of behavior and best professional standard (OECD, 2009; TI, 2011).

The consensus is also reflected in a number of initiatives to garner better data to identify major corrupt state and corporate actors. The Corruption Perceptions Index has been joined by the World Bank’s Control of Corruption indicator, the Index of Public Integrity, the Bribe Payers Index among several others (Rotberg, 2017, chapter 2). Networks have also
worked to develop transparency data, such as in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (Haufler, 2010). Systematic evidence of the effect of measuring and publicizing corruption indicators is lacking (though see Macaulay & Macaulay, 2017 for case study evidence). That has not stopped some from claiming that in the fight against corruption “salient victories have been achieved…in large part because numerical methods of expressing the impress of corrupt practices are easily available” (Rotberg, 2017:77).

We have described an emerging consensus that is primarily normative and legal. It is also rhetorical, as seen in the ubiquity with which corruption is now used as a framing device by political leaders attempting to claim the mantel of legitimacy and reform, by donors and analysts seeking to proffer advice on good governance, and by citizens and activists working to challenge elites and institutions (Windsor & Getz, 2000).

Of course, there are also critical and dissenting voices. Critics of the consensus rarely challenge the normative underpinnings of the consensus. Rather, they focus either on the hypocrisy of reform advocates (such as the international donor community in less developed countries or the anti-corruption ‘industry’ itself; see Bukovansky, 2006; Sampson, 2010) or take issue with the substance or sequencing of proposed strategies (as when Mustaq Khan [2006, p. vii] argues that anti-corruption reforms are “neither necessary nor sufficient for accelerating and sustaining development”).

The next two sections shift the focus onto the empirical record regarding whether reductions in systemic corruption are possible in practice (section 3) and the strategic toolkit that could explain or induce success (section 4).

3. PROOF OF CONCEPT: A MIXED RECORD

Corruption may occur in even robust administrative and political systems (Graycar & Prenzler, 2013). Such ‘episodic’ corruption would be a function of the variation in human value systems and behavior, clusters of corrupt institutions or failed leadership. Direct controls on corruption – such as heightened monitoring – can only be unevenly applied across different settings and sectors. Additionally, such measures have costs and may generate side-effects such as reduction in efficiency or discretion needed to be responsive to
local conditions. These tradeoffs warrant an intelligent balance being struck (Anechiarico & Jacobs, 1996).

The challenge of transforming corrupt systems is far more formidable. Corruption becomes “systemic” when corrupt behaviors happen with considerable frequency and are underpinned by interlocking value and incentive structures that normalize such behaviors (Klitgaard, 2000). This moves beyond any one organization or sector and involves deep collective action challenges. Systemic corruption depends on the participation of elites and leaders for its continuation, but such elites cannot in general be expected to ‘fix’ the system they run, and may plausibly only use anti-corruption programs to protect their legitimacy or attack rivals (Rothstein, 2011). This combination makes a corrupt system a powerful and stable equilibrium that requires tremendous effort to disrupt, let alone transform (Caulkins et al., 2013).

Notwithstanding the challenge, no small number of ‘successful reforms’ are documented in the literature, and help to offset the pervasive pessimism about long term progress. Such narratives fall into two broad categories.

*Sector and local government examples*

The first category includes organizations, major programs, sectors, or local governments that are presented, typically in the case study literature, as cases of successful reform in conditions of systemically corrupt initial conditions. For example:

- The city of La Paz, Bolivia, under young, reformist mayor Ronald MacLean-Abaroa from 1985 to 1991, is said to have experienced significant declines in corruption across a broad range of public services and regulatory areas (Galtung, 1998; Rotberg, 2017).

- Four countries in post-conflict settings assisted in a World Bank project were found to have made substantial progress across a broad range of public expenditure management functions, including accountability and oversight (Fritz, Fialho Lopez, Hedger, Tavakoli & Krause, 2012).

- An in-depth analysis of the connection between corruption and public services across India’s states found successful and sustained implementation of reforms to reduce corruption risks in several local governments, including in the relatively poor state of Chhattisgarh (Bussell, 2012).
- Indonesia’s Corruption Eradication Commission (known as the KPK) has over the last fifteen years become a well-documented example of an aggressive and effective anti-corruption agency that successfully prosecuted hundreds of senior officials (Kuris, 2012; Rotberg, 2017).

Such cases raise as many questions as they answer. In most such cases, “evidence of the impact of specific anti-corruption reforms on actual levels of corruption is scarce” (Chêne, 2015, p. 2; emphasis added). That is notwithstanding the fact that it should be easier as a general matter to demonstrate progress in more geographically constrained areas (a particular city as opposed to the whole country) or in specific areas of reform application. In addition, cases in this first category raise the question of how parts of a corrupt system relate to the whole. In each case, there is no doubt that the sector, organization or local government in question remains itself embedded in a broader corrupt system. How can reforms at the sub-system level influence, and be sustained within, the broader inter-organizational or national environment? Such questions foreshadow our treatment in section five of reform sustainability as a problematic area.

Country examples

The second type of anti-corruption ‘success story’ puts forward countries in which substantial change in the degree of systemic corruption has purportedly been achieved. Putative exemplars of national transformation are found in three groupings.

i) Long-term historical winners. Several mature Western democracies are discussed as exemplars of anti-corruption strategies—the state of ‘best practice’ in institutional design and the social maturation of anti-corruption values. Much of the literature on corruption is fairly ahistorical, but a few excellent studies have traced the development of institutions and societal forces that resulted in high levels of social trust and public integrity. Demark, and the Nordic countries more generally, have come to occupy a special position in this category (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015; Rothstein, 2011).

The challenge for researchers working in this vein is to chart the development of effective institutions over centuries of development and contestation. The ironic effect of these narratives can be a sense in which short-term transformational change appears all but
impossible. If the development of effective anti-corruption institutions is a function of “deep democratization” such as the emergence of an active civil society and respect for the rule of law over centuries (Johnston, 2014), then what hope for progress exists in poorly institutionalized, fragile and decidedly undemocratic states? This is the key point made by critics of the emerging consensus, such as Mushtaq Khan (2006), who argues that only sustained economic growth can create the long-term conditions for the governance qualities exhibited by our ‘long-term historical winners.’

**ii) Policy and ‘political will’-driven transformations in East Asia.** A second category of successful transformers focuses on East Asia. Singapore and Hong Kong are the countries/territories that have gained the most attention as examples in which transformational changes in the functioning of public administration – including reductions in systemic corruption – were achieved over a period of one or two decades rather than centuries (Quah, 2010). The two cities two similarities in their approach.

The first is the creation of unusually strong enforcement agencies dedicated to fighting corruption. Singapore led the way with the adoption in 1960 of the Prevention of Corruption Act, which dramatically strengthened the powers of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB). Based in part on careful study of the Singapore experience, Hong Kong launched its Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in 1974. Both agencies were separated from the police force so as to act as a check on the potential for police corruption (Lethbridge, 1985), and both gave their officers powers to arrest suspects and to deploy extensive investigative methods (wiretapping, bank transactions). Notwithstanding some differences in approach (the ICAC invested much more heavily in a public information and outreach campaigns, for instance), the two agencies became renowned for the effectiveness of their sustained enforcement actions, including against senior officials in government (Rotberg, 2017).

The second element in the Singapore and Hong Kong strategies was an early focus on reducing opportunities and incentives underlying corrupt practices, and on fostering overall effectiveness in public administration (Johnston, 1999; Manion, 2004). Both cities focused on the selection and training of public officials, and on civil service reforms to improve pay and performance measurement. They have come to be seen as pockets of developmental effectiveness (Lee & Haque, 2006).
The speed and transformative nature of change experienced in Singapore and Hong Kong featured prominently in the anti-corruption literature beginning from the 1990s. The fact that these changes occurred outside of a privileged western orbit blunted apologies for corruption based upon cultural relativism and cultural resignation.

iii) Sustained progress through policy and political will. This final category is comprised of countries increasingly cited in the past ten years as exemplars of sustained progress, though not necessarily transformation. Rotberg (2017) identifies five countries – Georgia, Rwanda, Liberia, Macedonia and Montenegro – that achieved substantial progress on two key indicators – the Corruption Perceptions Index and the World Bank’s Control of Corruption indicator – between 2004 and 2014. Mungiu-Pippidi and Johnston’s volume on Transitions to good governance (2017) adds Estonia, Botswana, Costa Rica and Qatar, among a few others, to this list. What such narratives have in common is the connection of policy reform and political will to improved outcomes, even if fragile. They imply that effective action can be taken to place entire countries onto “virtuous circles of anticorruption” (Mungiu-Pippidi & Johnston, 2017).

4. EXPLANATIONS AND TOOLKITS

These sector, organizational and country examples highlight the question of what might drive such successful reforms and outcomes? This is where the literature attempts its move from description to explanation. Space constraints do not allow a comprehensive listing of what the literature suggests are effective anti-corruption strategies (see Rose-Ackerman & Palifika, 2016; Rothstein, 2011; TI, 2000; and Rotberg, 2017 for more sustained descriptions), but we point in this section towards some key categories of approaches. We first explore some analytical underpinnings of the anti-corruption toolkit, then categorize specific prescriptions into ‘direct,’ ‘indirect,’ and ‘political’ approaches, noting the considerable overlap and potential synergies among them.
Principal-agent analytics

The design of anti-corruption reforms has often been informed by institutional economics and principal-agent analytics (Lambsdorff, 2007). These frameworks focus attention on information asymmetries, the effects of monopoly power and discretion, and the need to change risk-reward calculus for potentially corrupt actors (Klitgaard, 1988). The approach reveals slippage points where “agents” pursue their own interests despite being authorized and supervised by “principals” of the state (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016).

These theories drove the development of risk assessment technologies critical to modern efforts to anticipate and get ahead of institutional corruption. Modern risk assessment methods anticipate dangers from information asymmetry and accountability loss (OECD, 2009; Huberts, 2014). They inform more politically sophisticated audit methods and give greater depth to vulnerability and ethics audits (Lewis, 2005; Lang, 2008). These tools have also been applied to the assessment of “national integrity systems”, a family of methods for governance assessment in which institutions, norms and practices underpinning accountability in public life are probed for weaknesses and opportunities for reform (Pope, 2000; Brown, Head & Conors, 2016).

We now turn to direct, indirect and political approaches to combatting corruption, approaches that have drawn on the diverse multidisciplinary work described above to inform specific policy prescriptions.

Direct approaches: Enforcement

Direct approaches draw inspiration both from criminology and the institutional economics and principal-agent literature. They focus on the modeling of ‘rational’ actor incentives to commit corrupt acts (Burke, Tomlinson & Cooper, 2011). They seek a clearer legal demarcation and criminalization of corrupt practices, and attempt to increase the probability of detection as well as the severity and predictability of the consequences arising from corrupt acts (Klitgaard, 1988).

Direct approaches have seen very active deployment over the past 20 years. The United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) has been signed by all but a few countries. It commits countries to specific standards in some areas (asset recovery, law enforcement) as well as to preventive activities and technical assistance (OECD, 2009;
UNODC, 2013). The United States Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) has in turn become a powerful tool to target international actors who use banking systems and deploy bribes (Spahn, 2013). In the final year of the Obama administration (2016), FCPA enforcement actions reached record levels, with total criminal and civil fines, average corporate penalties, and the number of individuals charged, all trending upward and often multiple times higher than average levels 10 years earlier (Shearman & Sterling LLP, 2017).

The direct approach has also manifested in the development of specialized anti-corruption agencies (ACA) as an attempt to improve the likelihood of rigorous enforcement. A large literature has attempted to isolate the conditions in which ACAs might make a difference, modelled in no small measure on the experience in Singapore and Hong Kong (Quah, 2010). They include: the existence of comprehensive, supporting legislation; strong investigative powers; independent leadership that is respected and defended within the overall political environment; and adequate human resources and budgeting (Meagher, 2005). A review of ACAs (de Sousa, 2010) found that few meet these requirements, and that many become as internally corrupt as the environment they seek to police. Still, the aforementioned case of Indonesia’s KPK inspires hope among many that even systemically corrupt environments with highly contentious politics can make progress using this approach (Kuris, 2012).

**Indirect approaches: Structural reforms and transparency**

Indirect approaches are marked by structural reforms that reduce the opportunity for corruption, and by other good governance reforms aiming to improve the general performance of public administration systems.

While the standards promoted under indirect approaches can vary to account for different cultural or political values (Guerber, Rajagoplan & Anand, 2011), the major international focus has been on the integrity and autonomy of professional expertise, efficient and fair public service to all citizens and the accountable use of public funds. This has lead in the public realm to a range of principles that concentrate upon competence, accountability, fairness and self-reporting. What Transparency International (Pope, 2000) called the “ethics regime” requires that ethical standards be clear, public and aligned with the legal framework; that strong codes of conduct for public officials be backed by legal
prohibitions against conflicts of interest; that ethical guidance and support be available for public servants; that confidential reporting mechanisms protect whistle blowers; and that concerned civil society organizations be equipped with new technologies and opportunities to monitor public authorities (Lewis & Gilman, 2005).

Indirect approaches also focus prominently on economic policy and regulatory reform (for a detailed review, see Rose-Ackerman & Palifika, 2016, chapters 2-5). A wide literature recommends streamlining regulations, revenue sources and dense thickets of laws that invite corruption and get in the way of economic efficiency (Lee & Haque, 2006). This means cutting into the bureaucracy to increase efficiency and decrease opportunities for rent seeking. These changes can be immensely important, but very difficult to adopt and implement since they often expose protected sectors of the economy to new competition and undermine existing corrupt revenue sources for large numbers of officials (World Bank, 2017).

Durable outcomes of the indirect approaches rely heavily upon transparency and freedom of information tools (Florini, 2007; Fritzen & Basu, 2011). Strategic use can be made of technology to minimize face-to-face discretion and create transparency of data, proposals and decisions in the areas of procurement and financing (Bussell, 2012). Discretion in many routine decision and licensing areas can be replaced by web algorithms. And transparency in public expenditures and finances can be used to increase the efficiency of revenue collection and expenditure accountability. Though transparency as a stand-alone strategy has its critics (Lindstedt & Naurin, 2010), such approaches hold the potential to rebuild trust relations with citizens, particularly where the use of indicators and benchmarks for government performance in basic services is promoted (Rothstein 2011b; Johnston 2014).

Political approaches: social mobilization

Political approaches refer to attempts to empower a broad range of stakeholders to join in the effort to oppose corrupt practices, including citizen groups, professional associations and private firms (Diamond, 1994). Political approaches can lead directly to broadly constituted anti-corruption movements, as in India, Indonesia and Romania in recent years (Johnston, 2014). More commonly, the work involves slowly cultivating changes in social norms, together with the enlisting of allies in the fight against corruption (Mungiu-Pippidi &
5. CONCLUSION AND THE TERRAIN AHEAD

As explored above, the past three decades have witnessed the emergence of a strong consensus on the costs and moral wrongness of corruption. This consensus creates a profound political problem: in a corrupt system, it stands to reason that one cannot trust the people running the system to fix the system. This places politicians of all stripes in a hot-seat, with both strong incentives to publicly demonstrate their commitment to fighting corruption and strong reasons to moderate changes on the ground.

Over this period, the policies, reforms and approaches that have been advocated and in many cases adopted have fallen into recognizable categories. Enforcement-oriented approaches rooted in an understanding of principal-agent dynamics have attempted to shift perceptions of the risk-reward calculus among potentially corrupt actors. Efforts to prevent corruption through administrative and regulatory reforms, and through the creative application of information technology, have continued to garner attention and experimentation. Drawing on the recognition that addressing corruption is as much a collective action as a principal-agent problem, advocates now focus on rebuilding relations of trust between citizens and institutions. They support empowering communities and civil society actors to monitor or engage with government to change corrupt practices.

Yet the optimistic tone underlying the emerging consensus on the normative and strategic fronts coexists with considerable frustration over the wide array of failures and erratic outcomes in practice. The most outstanding fact about the numerous corruption indicators noted in the previous section is that country rankings across indicators are both closely correlated and remarkably stable (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). The literature documenting failed anti-corruption initiatives or reforms is also prodigious (Batory, 2012; Fritzen, 2005). And inferences regarding progress in fighting corruption are difficult to glean from indices or individual cases of reform.

From a broader perspective, what has most frustrated the efforts of both theoreticians and policy designers is the inherent causal and dynamic complexity involved in transforming corrupt systems. ‘Causal complexity’ exists when “the effect of one variable or
characteristic can depend on which others are present” (Jervis, 1997, p. 35) and in which an outcome can result “from several different combinations of conditions” (Ragin, 1987, p. 20). Corrupt systems almost certainly meet such criteria, once the national and sector dynamics are laid out. To the extent that they do, such complexity poses three implications that help explain both current difficulties and future opportunities in the literature.

The first implication is that in the face of systemic corruption, it is highly unlikely that any one intervention, or even any one set of interventions, will in isolation be successful. The problem comes down to the issue of multiple, binding constraints: in any complex system, release any one or small number of the constraints, and an ‘overdetermined outcome’ – the systemic stability of corrupt practices – will nevertheless ensue. To wit: there are no silver bullets in the fight against systemic corruption. One suspects that theorists and practitioners would readily agree to this as stated abstractly; yet because it is quite simply easier – conceptually and practically - to focus on particular reforms and mechanisms for change, one still sees numerous examples of linear, mono-causal thinking and strategies that elevate a particular principle or type of reform to the exclusion of others. For example, calls for the establishment of a strong and independent anti-corruption commission became the almost exclusive focus of the ‘India Against Corruption’ movement, with the result that this movement largely dissipated once political barriers to its adoption were encountered (Singh & Sohoni, 2016). The problem with such reform proposals is not necessarily that they are wrong-headed, but that corrupt systems can adapt to them and generate intense opposition with no cascade of support to other areas.

A second implication arising out of the causal complexity of corrupt systems is the need to delineate the relationship between reforms and their broader governance context. Consider that if no one reform is likely to work on its own, the easiest answer theoretically would be to call for a “big bang” approach, where a decisive, multifaceted attack on corruption is applied in an integrated manner to break the stasis of corrupt systems (Rothstein, 2011). Indeed, the concluding chapter of Rotberg’s The Corruption Cure (2017) lays out 14 laws, policies and political actions, from asset declaration to the establishment of complaint hotlines and adherence to international conventions, that are to trigger a ‘big-bang’ transformation of corrupt systems. Yet these reforms are presented in a context-free manner. The omission implies that these are the reforms that would work anywhere and everywhere,
provided political will on the part of the leadership. Yet many of the reforms require institutions (say: an independent judiciary) that are clearly not even remotely in the cards for a broad range of countries, including some cited positively for their reforms elsewhere in the book (including Xi Jin Ping’s China; see Manion, 2016). Though they might be inspired to adapt parts of the reform program that seem appealing and feasible, the idea of rolling out a set of reforms predicated on comprehensive institutional transformation would be a nonstarter in most contexts.

What is needed is a type of contingency-based modelling of reform, showing what combination of reforms may work to contribute to systemic transformations given specific governance parameters. Daunting though this sounds, some small steps in this direction are evident. One framework (Bhargava & Bolongaita, 2004, p. 34) lists a “global menu of anticorruption instruments”, assessing the goodness of fit for each of them in different governance environments. The authors conclude, for instance, that anticorruption commissions were unlikely to be helpful in settings with poor state capacity, since they would then be themselves easily corrupted. Michael Johnston, in Corruption, Contention and Reform (2014), develops such contingency-based thinking further, by emphasizing different priorities and actions for countries suffering from different “syndromes” of corruption. In grossly undemocratic or fragile countries, for instance, Johnston recommends the promotion of greater pluralism and safe spaces over reform activism, noting that “[t]oo much emphasis on confronting such regimes directly could well result in repression – or could induce insecurity among elites and thus encourage rapacious hand-over-fist corruption in the here and now” (2014, p. 49).

A final area reflective of great causal complexity is the nature of political will and the dynamics of change. One way to summarize the emerging consensus on transforming corrupt systems is that while it is possible to get transformative changes off the ground, most anticorruption reforms fail. Even promising reforms fall prey to ‘recorruption,’ a term capturing the resilience of the forces that generate corruption (Dininio, 2005). What then makes the difference between ineffective and sustainable reforms?

In much of the literature, the answer centers on the presence or absence of political will. This enigmatic phrase covers an array of approaches. On the more slipshod side, reform success might be viewed axiomatically as an expression of political will, while reform
failure denotes its absence. Such argumentation would clearly be simplistic, circular and unconvincing.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, political will to fight corruption has been described as a whole series of institutional conditions that may or may not be present. Brinkerhoff (2000, p. 248) proposes a number of dimensions, such as “degree of analytical rigor in anti-corruption solutions” and “continuity of effort.” The perspective becomes so comprehensive that it loses parsimony. It requires “big bangs” and revolutions to put in place such “will.” We question the utility of using the term in a way that essentially requires and describes de facto power to remake the state.

A number of concepts and frameworks can help to round out an understanding of reform sustainability. In-depth accounts of particular political and social dynamics of reform can be studied in specific places. They identify how leaders and advocates send credible signals and build coalitions. Mungiu-Pippidi & Johnston (2017) develop a framework for “creating virtuous circles of anti-corruption” that places reform momentum at its analytical center. Work on ‘tipping points’ (Caulkins et al., 2013) and the alternative trajectories of corruption reforms constitutes a promising direction in the literature. While these are promising directions, no overarching, unifying framework exists in the literature for talking about the dynamics of the policy reform process as it affects anti-corruption programs.

In short, we need better ways of understanding the design and sequencing of what might be called ‘minimum packages’ of anti-corruption reforms, in conditions that are often less than hospitable for comprehensive change. We also need greater sensitivity to multiple potential types of anti-corruption reform sequences given different governance parameters. Finally, both the literature and practitioners will benefit from greater attention to the challenge of sustaining reforms over time. Confronting corrupt systems is truly a challenge that encompasses both policy- and sector-level diagnosis as well as a complex array of skills and tools needed by agents of change working from multiple vantage points.
REFERENCES


