Indonesia – Case Study 15

Background

Indonesia's Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) is an excellent example of an anticorruption initiative that has gained widespread public support. It was described by BBC News in 2009 as “one of the few institutions people in this country [Indonesia] actually have faith in.” Established by 2002 law, KPK began operations in 2003, following decades of attempts (with varying success) to fight a culture of corruption among government officials and citizens alike. It handles around 30 percent of Indonesia's corruption cases and has a 100 percent conviction rate against officials from all branches of Indonesia's government.

Indonesia has a long history of corruption. Suharto, the president of Indonesia from 1967 to 1998, presided over 31 years of power abuse by public servants of all levels. Perhaps most well-known of Suharto's corrupt practices was nepotism, giving top posts to his close relatives. Indeed, in 2004, Transparency International named Suharto the most corrupt leader of the 20th century, estimating his monetary gain over those 31 years at $15 billion to $35 billion. Corruption was such a fact of life in Indonesia that the citizens even had their own shorthand to describe it: the acronym KKN, which stands for the Indonesian words “korupsi, kollusi, nepotisme”—“corruption, collusion, nepotism.”

After Suharto’s resignation in 1998, Indonesia faced chaos; a 2003 World Bank report notes that, though corrupt, Suharto “succeed[ed] in delivering high levels of economic growth and substantial poverty reduction despite high levels of corruption” because his regime “was careful to ensure that the scale of corruption did not deter investment and economic activity.” Furthermore, the report noted, any such success “is overstated since it came at a high cost in terms of weak and corrupt institutions, severe public indebtedness through mismanagement of the financial sector, the rapid depletion of Indonesia's natural resources, and a culture of favors and corruption in the business elite.”

Amid the climate of chaos and potentially growing corruption that followed the Suharto regime, several anticorruption measures were tried and failed. KPK is the seventh in a line of commissions created to fight Indonesia's corruption problems.

Commissioners are selected by the parliament from a pool selected by the president. Corruption cases handled by KPK are tried by the Corruption Crimes Court. KPK is a very powerful institution, with wide-ranging authority—it can authorize wiretaps, order travel bans on individuals, request financial information about suspects, freeze suspects' financial accounts, request the assistance of other law enforcement agencies, and take over the indictment or prosecution of corruption cases being conducted by the police or the attorney general's office.

Amien Sunaryadi, one of the first KPK commissioners, believes that KPK's short life span since 2003 can be characterized as having two periods. During the first, from KPK's 2003 inception until mid-2009, he characterizes public support for the KPK as middling. Merly Khouw and Steve Burgess, who work in the East Asia and Pacific Anticorruption Focal Point at the World Bank, likewise say that this period was characterized by both cynicism and cautious optimism on the part of the Indonesian people. The Indonesian citizens, say Khouw and Burgess, applauded KPK's successes but also maintained an attitude of skepticism toward this success, regarding it as fragile. For example, when a new board of commissioners was chosen in 2008, many Indonesians feared that KPK's power would subsequently diminish.

But according to Sunaryadi, public attitudes toward KPK turned markedly more positive and public support for KPK skyrocketed when two KPK officials—Chandra Hamzah and Bibid Samad Riyanto—were accused of accepting bribes from a
corruption suspect attempting to flee the country. The case culminated in November, when 270 minutes of KPK wiretap tapes were played back in court, revealing “an intricate plot with fabricated testimony aimed at ousting Bibit and Chandra.”

Public outrage at the flagrant corruption took many forms, including Facebook protest groups and street protests. A Facebook group supporting Hamzah and Riyanto currently has more than 1.4 million members, and Facebook was also used in November 2009 to publicize a rally in support of KPK, with more than 5,000 people in attendance.

The outpouring of public support helped to inspire action against the officials responsible for framing Chandra and Bibit. Indonesian president Yudhoyono, who had been seen as too distant from the case, responded to the pressure by telling the police chief and attorney general to discharge those in the tape recordings from their duties.

More recently, KPK has been working to uncover how Bank Century, once Indonesia’s 13th largest bank, used the $716 million in bailout funds provided to it by the government in November 2008. The Jakarta Post reported in March 2010 that Indonesia’s Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Center “recently listed hundreds of suspicious transactions related to Bank Century, some of them linked to high-profile politicians.” The Indonesian Parliament requested that KPK investigate this case, and an investigation has been under way for several months. As Sunaryadi told CommGAP, although public perception is that the minister of finance is guilty, KPK has found no conclusive evidence of his guilt. This has caused some deterioration of public opinion of KPK’s effectiveness.

The Indonesian people have reacted not only to instances of corrupt practices but also to apparently entrenched corruption norms among the powerful. When Susno Duadji, former head of the Indonesia National Police, likened the effectiveness of anticorruption activists’ efforts to a gecko fighting a crocodile, Indonesians were outraged and latched onto the “gecko” label. Sunaryadi says that after this interview, “very quickly the term became very popular, with positive perception for KPK and negative perception for the police,” and the Indonesian people formed the “Saya Cicak” (“I am a gecko”) movement, which has been active in anticorruption protests.

Tools and Techniques Used

The formation and operations of KPK have proven as important to its success as its actions. Khouw has said that, while past government anticorruption initiatives were “toothless tigers,” KPK gained the trust of the Indonesian public in part because of its transparency from its very inception. Its first commissioners were selected transparently and included many respected and well-known Indonesians, such as prominent businessmen. This gave the commission instant credibility with many Indonesians.

Furthermore, the comprehensive powers that KPK has at its disposal are responsible for many of its anticorruption gains. KPK modeled itself on Hong Kong’s Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) but added prosecutorial powers to those of prevention and investigation.

ICAC itself has praised KPK’s results, explaining why this commission has succeeded when so many past initiatives in Indonesia had failed:

One of the main reasons why these previous efforts have not been successful is that they only focused on repressive actions: pre-investigating, investigating, and prosecuting corrupt acts. Although repressive operations are vital for the success of corruption eradication, these past efforts failed in the medium to long term due to the lack of significant preventive actions. The KPK is therefore a fresh start, a new way of looking at the corruption epidemic: the agency shall not monopolize the anti-corruption effort, but merely act as a trigger mechanism to empower authorized institutions to become more effective. Selected cases are handled by the KPK, in order to show the public that it is
Changing norms is key to fighting everyday corruption. 'One-Step-Up' Analysis of the Collated Case Studies from around the World

Serious; prevention activities such as socialization, education, research into the potentials for corruption of each government institution, and so on, provide the basis for a long-term anti-corruption strategy. Of course, prevention activities will likewise fail if the KPK is unable to show corruptors and the public that it means business by actively bringing down corruptors.8

Burgess expresses similar sentiments. Just as ICAC notes that KPK is a “trigger” mechanism, Burgess foresees a day when that trigger is no longer needed. He says that ideally, KPK need not exist forever; rather, it can use its powers to change both citizen and governmental norms, then wind down its power. Once the police and attorney general’s office are able to fight corruption on their own and gain the trust of the people in a less corruption-tolerant society, KPK and its broad powers will no longer be necessary.

Thus, many of KPK’s successes can be seen at the operational and organizational level. However, it has used some effective techniques as well. One of these is education. In December 2009, KPK partnered with the National Education Ministry to put on a seminar showing teachers how to include anticorruption education in their curriculums. A Jakarta Post story from December 2009 describes how KPK and Ministry of Education have “jointly published anticorruption modules that could be distributed to students. The modules are intended for kindergarten up to high school students and the subjects contain social, cultural and religious values, including teaching them not to take the belongings of others.”9

Success, of course, has been the most powerful technique. As noted above, the Indonesian people began to trust KPK when they saw it succeeding at combating corrupt practices. But this success also had to combine with visibility, both of the wrongdoings of corrupt officials and of KPK’s efforts. One aspect of visibility is maintaining constant activity. KPK works to maintain a low but steady flow of cases, done at regular intervals, to keep its activity constant and in the news. Likewise, KPK’s abilities to use strong measures such as travel bans and wiretapping have proven very effective in bringing down very high-ranking corrupt officials. However, such powers must be closely monitored, used wisely, and used only as long as they are necessary, to protect against abuses.

As stated above, social media sites like MySpace and Facebook have been among the most successful anticorruption tools in Indonesia, used to organize and publicize protests. But they are also simply a convenient way for people to make their voices heard, as Teten Masduki, the secretary general of Transparency International in Indonesia, told the Asia Times in November 2009. “Now we have a new model on how to control our government. … With new technology it’s easy to share our dissatisfaction with the president: just update your status.” Masduki also worked to release a mobile phone ringtone in support of KPK. The Asia Times reported that, in the first few hours after its release, the ringtone had been downloaded by more than 40,000 people.10

In some cases, KPK has not even been directly involved in the social media initiatives; concerned users start their own online movements and gain support via their social networks. One example is Usman Yasin, a lecturer at Muhammadiyah University in Jakarta, who started a KPK-supporting Facebook group to publicize protests and rallies.

Another technique for combating corruption in Indonesia has been the use of well-known or respected individuals in anticorruption initiatives. For example, several of KPK’s original commissioners were businessmen well known throughout Indonesia. KPK has also partnered with major religious organizations to make a joint statement against corruption—it is hoped that, when citizens see the leaders of their faith communities taking a stand against corruption, they will be more inclined to do so.

Celebrities are another group that can play a vital role in spurring people to fight corruption. One example of this is that of Slank, a popular
Indonesian rock group that has become synonymous with anticorruption efforts. Slank’s lyrics often speak out against corruption, and have infuriated parliamentarians, who threatened to sue Slank for defamation. A Slank spokesperson told CommGAP that Slank supporters came to their rescue in this situation, showing solidarity among anticorruption advocates: “When the lyrics and music of Slank’s song ‘Gosip Jalanan’ [Word on the Street] had parliamentarians in Jakarta threatening to sue them for besmirching the good name of the DPR [Indonesian parliamentarians], the masses strongly rallied behind Slank in the media, blogs etc. There was a plan by 100 lawyers volunteering to defend Slank should the case make it to court.”

Slank is also an example of informal alliances in the fight against corruption: The band performed in front of the KPK building in 2009 to protest the Chandra-Bibit arrests, and while there is no formal relationship between Slank and KPK, the two continue to support each other informally.

**Outcome/Impact of the Interventions**

KPK’s most notable success can be seen in its 100 percent conviction rate and the individual cases it has won, such as that of getting Chandra and Bibit released. Transparency International, an international nongovernmental organization that works to fight corruption, has noted these changes and clearly taken them into account in its Corruption Perception Index (CPI), which rates corruption levels in countries around the world. The higher the rating, the less corruption a particular country is experiencing. Indonesia has risen steadily in its CPI rating in recent years, from 2.3 (on a scale of 1 to 10) in 2007, to 2.6 in 2008, to 2.8 in 2009.11

Furthermore, as noted by Burgess and Khouw, the people of Indonesia appear less cynical and pessimistic about corruption than they formerly were. This is borne out in public opinion surveys of the Indonesian citizenry: A 2008 poll sponsored by the U.S. Agency for International Development showed that the Indonesian people care deeply about the eradication of corruption: 64.3 percent said they considered corruption an “important” problem facing the country, and 52.9 percent cited “the fact that s/he is against corruption” as a major factor in their voting decisions in the 2009 presidential election.12 This makes it the third-most cited criterion in voting decisions.

**Lessons Learned**

- **Some of the most powerful initiatives are not part of a formal, planned communication strategy.** For example, many social media initiatives, student protests, and Slank’s anticorruption lyrics and special concerts were not officially sanctioned by KPK. But KPK’s clear track record in fighting corruption no doubt gave citizens hope, inspiring them to encourage the fight against corruption.
- **Success breeds success.** The combination of public outrage at entrenched corruption and public support of KPK helped lead to concrete actions in the Bibit-Chandra framing case. Such success would not have been possible if the public did not perceive KPK as a successful organization.
- **Anticorruption strategies are not universally transferable.** As Burgess told the World Bank, KPK works uniquely well in Indonesia; it was created in the right place at the right time—when public tolerance of corruption had reached a low and people wanted a change. Culture and attitudes must be taken into account before institutions like KPK can be put in place and used to their full potential.
- **Corruption commissions need not be permanent.** Indeed, the broad powers of KPK might be detrimental if maintained for an extended period; such powerful institutions are better seen as a means to an end—government officials who do not abuse their power, and citizens who do not tolerate such abuses.

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Endnotes

3. Ibid.
7. Bolongaita 5.