

On “Koun Bonega Crorepati” (“Who Will Be The Owner of Crore of Taka”), a popular game show on India’s Zee TV, participants answer general knowledge questions to win one crore taka [one crore is equal to 10 million taka (US\$145,571)].

But Bangladeshi politicians-regardless of name or seniority-do not need a TV game show to quickly earn several crores of taka. Thanks to a recent anti-corruption drive by the interim government that has revealed hundreds of cases of corruption, the Bangladeshi people now know that politicians and government officials have deceived them and earned crores of taka by abusing power.

Public opinion surveys from 2001 through 2006 show that people perceive Bangladesh as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, much to the denial of political leaders.

“Under the political governments of two ladies-Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia-corruption was made a way of life at all levels, particularly at the corridors of power,” says Golam Haider, a senior journalist at The New Nation newspaper . “It was openly patronized and practiced across the table.

Despite the interim government’s anti-corruption efforts, corruption still exists; now it’s happening under the table. The anti-corruption drive is not running on the right track. Corrupt people cannot fight corruption, Haider says.

Jasmin Rahman, a master’s student at a government university, says corruption begins at the school level. “A student who fails in school-level examinations still becomes eligible to sit for examinations under the education board, after she or he or their parents pay some bribe to the school authorities in the name of donation,” Rahman says. “What can you expect from a student but corruption in professional life, whose school life is full of corrupt practices?” Rahman says she had to pay a bribe to board officials to gain admission to college.

At the very least, the interim government’s anti-corruption drive has exposed several cases of government officials corruptly receiving money and property.

One example is the modern prince of Bangladesh, Tarique Rahman, and his younger brother, Arafat Rahman. The

brothers are the sons of former President Ziaur Rahman and former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, and they reportedly amassed vast resources worth many crores of taka at home and abroad, thanks to power politics and their nexus with corruption, as perceived by many Bangladeshis.

Tarique and Arafat have known corruption most of their lives. In 1977, Ziaur Rahman, a former chief of army staff, became president of Bangladesh by overthrowing Justice Abu Sadat Mohammad Sayem. But in the early hours of May 30, 1981, a group of army officers assassinated Zia, along with six bodyguards and two aides. During the assassination, family members struggled to survive. The then-government allotted a house in Dhaka, the capital, to Zia's wife, Begum Khaleda Zia, and their sons, Tarique and Arafat.

In 1991 and later in 2001, Begum Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) came into power, and her two sons reportedly began committing massive acts of corruption through misuse of their mother's office.

An investigation of Warid Telecom, a cell phone company that entered the Bangladesh market, revealed that Arafat Rahman purchased property in Dubai and put US\$2 million in two Hong Kong banks-his kickbacks for assisting Warid Telecom in obtaining a licence, newspaper reports say.

The two brothers also failed to legalize their undeclared and questionable 1.68 crore taka (US\$244,559) under an amnesty by paying 44 lakh taka (US\$0.64) as a fine. After the National Board of Revenue (NBR) rejected their plea, it began the process of filing a tax evasion case against the two brothers under the Tax Ordinance of 1984. Their mother, Khaleda Zia, and a former finance minister in her cabinet, M Saifur Rahman, also failed to what is popularly called "whiten their black (untaxed) money" of 1 crore taka (US\$145,571) and 1.30 crore taka (US\$189,242) respectively.

Tarique Rahman is now in prison on several charges, while Arafat Rahman is free after being interrogated by the army-led joint forces. In his wealth statement to the Anti-Corruption Commission, Tarique Rahman said he owns a house in the capital, 2.01 acres of land worth 345,000 taka (US\$5,022) in Bogra, savings certificates worth 20,000 taka (US\$291) and 134,000 taka (US\$1,951) in different banks, shares of different companies worth 7,170,000 taka (US\$104,374) and five tolas (US 58 grams) of gold. His wife and daughter own assets valued around 1.40 crore

taka (US\$203,799). The common people believe that is only a small portion of what they actually own.

On July 16, 2007, also under the pretext of the war against corruption, police arrested Sheikh Hasina Wazed, former prime minister and president of the Bangladesh Awami League. Hasina Wazed—one of the two key leaders of the two main political parties—faces extortion charges. She is accused of extorting about 3 crore taka (US\$436,713) from a businessman in return for allowing his company to set up a power plant during her tenure between 1996 and 2001. She is being held in a special jail as she awaits prosecution.

Several ministers of the Khaleda Zia cabinet have been sentenced to various prison terms in the last few weeks, while most of the senior ministers and politicians of the country are awaiting verdicts in corruption cases. The present interim government now detains hundreds of politicians, former ministers, government officials and businessmen on different corruption charges.

Amanullah Aman, a former state minister, was handed 10 years of rigorous imprisonment and three years of simple imprisonment and asked to pay a fine of 10 lakh taka (US\$0.15) in a corruption case for earning huge money through illegal means. His wife, Sabera Aman, also was sentenced to suffer three years in jail, as the court found her guilty of assisting her husband in unlawfully obtaining money.

Another official, Mir Mohammad Nasiruddin, the ex-junior minister for civil aviation and tourism, was sentenced to suffer 13 years in prison for committing rampant corruption. The minister was found guilty of amassing wealth through misuse of power and illegal means. In the same case, his son, barrister Mir Mohammad Helaluddin, was given three years of imprisonment.

In yet another judgement, the court sentenced former lawmaker Wadud Bhuiyan to 20 years in jail for acquiring land and property worth 6 crore taka (US\$873,426) through corruption and abuse of power. The court also ordered Bhuiyan to deposit his illegally obtained assets with the national exchequer.

Considering these examples, it's no wonder that Bangladeshi people widely believe that files in government offices never move from one table to another without fuel (a bribe or speed money). Through this means, scores of class-III and class-IV government employees "earn" crores of taka. For example, the anti-crime division found a Land

Ministry petty officer possessing three multi-story buildings in Dhaka and huge tracts of land throughout the country. He obtained this wealth by misusing power and maintaining close relationships with ministers and political bigwigs.

There are many examples in this impoverished country of government leaders living as tenants in the houses of their class-III or class-IV employee subordinates.

Police unearthed 1 crore taka (US\$145,571) in cash from the house of the chief forest officer, breaking all records of corruption. This government official earned a salary of only 20,000 taka (US\$291) a month. The joint forces later found more than 1,000 acres of government land occupied by him and his family members. His wife changed cars twice a year and possessed 400 bhoris (US 4,000 grams) of gold ornaments.

Recently, I have been following the story of a corrupt businessman who has a long history of evading taxes and power tariffs. Customs authorities suspended his license for paying a fine with a fake treasury note. Some of my journalist colleagues, who benefit from the unscrupulous businessman, are pressuring me to not publish reports against him.

Yes corruption still exists, but since the interim government has declared a crusade against it, the situation in Bangladesh is beginning to change. People are very hopeful that the country will be able to break free from corruption's grip.

