

By Yulia Korf

We're driving through downtown Bishkek, the largest city in the Kyrgyz Republic. A friend of mine, Anatoly, is giving me a ride to work. I never drive in Bishkek myself. I have problems abiding by the unwritten rules dominating these streets.

Suddenly, a traffic policeman emerges from nowhere and stops the car. Anatoly hits the breaks. "Oh, yes — this is his favorite spot," he grins.

"Have we broken the speed limit?" I ask.

"No. But it doesn't matter. I'll fix it — don't worry."

Less than five minutes later, the deal is done. Anatoly is shaking hands with the policeman — and retrieving 50 soms (US\$1.33) from his pocket. We are quickly on our way again.

"What was that?" I ask.

"Nothing extraordinary. This is the second time I gave him money this week. He always does his ambushes around here."

"But we didn't break the rules!" I exclaim.

"If we did, I would have to pay three times more," Anatoly explains. "If you start arguing, they'll take your driver's license and to get it back, you'll need to bribe someone with a much larger sum."

Every day, Anatoly spends around 50 soms (US\$1.33) to stay "on good terms" with the road police in Bishkek. It's so commonplace here that it's taken for granted. The system seems indestructible — even after the new government of Kyrgyzstan "waged war" against corruption in 2005.

Two years later, the results of this "massive" fight against corruption are not impressive. A whole range of social services and institutions remain riddled with corruption. "Pay-as-you-live" practices continue to flourish, as if to mock official efforts to curb corruption. Sometimes, though, it's not just a matter of daily life. Sometimes it's a matter of life and death.

In theory, the Kyrgyz health care system is free, though private, paid-for health care is available as well. In reality,

though, money talks — even in the ostensibly free public health care system. Case in point: My colleague's wife urgently needed a caesarean section. But the attending surgeon refused to provide the care she needed before the family paid an unofficial "tariff" of US\$200. It took time to gather that much money and bring it to the hospital. Care was withheld, and the woman was forced to wait until the payment was handed to the surgeon. Finally, the operation began. It was too late, the child was stillborn.

Kyrgyzstan is a poor country. According to the World Health Organization, more than 64 percent of the population lived below a locally indexed poverty line in 1999. Would doctors and police stop taking bribes if they were offered decent salaries? No one knows for sure. It's a vicious circle: The state seems eager to prosecute corrupt officials yet it openly admits that bribes are often used to compensate for the low salaries of government employees.

Ironically, in 2007 the government in Kyrgyzstan praised anticorruption efforts, claiming that reduced corruption rates and the redistribution of confiscated bribe money contributed to the increase of social services employees' salaries by up to 50 percent. Apparently this was not enough: Graft remains an epidemic among workers in health care, education and law enforcement.

It's hard to know where to start. Many people here seem to regard public-sector employment as an enterprise in itself. Paying bribes to get hired as a police officer, civil servant or doctor is considered worthwhile. You can set up your own "small business," taking bribes within a larger institution. It doesn't matter whether this institution is a hospital, a local administration or the secretariat of an international organization.

What's more, the system rewards corruption from the earliest stages of a professional career: Because you have to pay bribes to get hired on in the first place, the system of corruption is self-reinforcing.

Twenty-eight-year-old Liya works in the local administration in the capital of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek. Her position is not a high-paid one, but she still calls it a lucrative job. "My salary here is US\$50," Liya says. "I paid US\$3000 to get this position. Yes, I bribed them! Because — guess what — it'll pay itself back. My salary here is laughable, but the dividends from the gifts for those little unofficial "favors" I do for our clients, are very good."

This comes as no surprise. Despite the clearly pronounced official policy of recruiting civil servants based solely on merit, there are loopholes. And these loopholes are eagerly exploited: “My boss suggested I apply for a position that has already been sold,” recalls Natalya, a 54-year-old employee at one of the government agencies. “It is to create the illusion of fair competition and to avoid rumors that someone was hired because they paid. They even promised me a minor increase in salary. I rejected the offer but they didn’t have problems finding someone else to help.”

On the second anniversary of the “Tulip Revolution,” which brought down the previous regime, President Kurmanbek Bakiev, in a televised address, announced: “From the first day in power, we’ve been systematically fighting corruption. For instance, this year the number of civil servants who declared their income has increased enormously. I can also assure you that none of the recent appointments of high-ranking state officials involved bribery.”

Bakiev’s optimism was not shared by independent journalists, who point out the fact that a number of the president’s close relatives have held lucrative state posts, including two ambassadorial positions in Germany and China occupied by Bakiev’s brothers. The mass media accused the Kyrgyz president of nepotism, suggesting that anticorruption slogans were merely an attempt to cover the president’s own misdeeds. A number of prominent politicians also have questioned the success of anticorruption measures this year.

A member of the Kyrgyz Parliament, Kubatbek Baybolov, has been an especially outspoken critic of the government. “Corrupt officials, including some high-ranking people, are often reported to be involved in financial misdeeds,” he said, addressing members of the International Business Council in Bishkek. “Almost none of them face legal charges, though. There were a couple of cases, but those sentenced were just scapegoats.”

For all the corruption, though, there are occasional success stories in anticorruption enforcement. One recent example: The principal of one of Bishkek’s elementary schools was arrested on June 29, 2007. She was charged with receiving a bribe of 600 soms (US\$15.93) for a school certificate that she sold to one of the students. Perhaps she didn’t pay a bribe to escape prosecution.

Justice is selective in Kyrgyzstan, and the wheels of enforcement grind slowly. No one, for instance, expects

quick action in the case of the ex-minister of emergencies, Janysh Rustembekov. Based on the results of the latest inspections, the Office of the General Prosecutor initiated nine legal corruption cases against key officials in the Ministry of Emergencies. According to investigators, the officials were responsible for massive fraud relating to expenditures for purchasing emergency equipment. In all, the investigation revealed that illegal tenders and double-entry accounting within the Ministry of Emergencies cost the government some 40 million soms (US\$1.06 million) in 2006-2007.

Kamchibek Tashiev, a member of the Committee on Natural Resources and Business Enterprises of the Kyrgyz Parliament, alleges that Rustembekov has been sheltered by his own brother, who works as an officer in one of the anticorruption committees. "Rustembekov would have already faced trial if he didn't have his own strong lobby," he charges. In March of 2007, Janysh Rustembekov resigned, along with four other ministers. But the official statement of the president read that it was mainly for "preserving stability in the country." There was no mention whatsoever of the possibility of corruption.

In March 2006, President Bakiev stated, "I utterly denounce all the rumors about the rise of corruption in recent months. All these speculations are generated by someone who wants to discredit our achievements." Bakiev then called on everyone to "consolidate efforts in the combat against corruption."

As it turns out, it is extremely difficult to "consolidate" in a losing battle. Despite official reports that about 297 legal actions have been brought against civil servants facing corruption charges, World Bank opinion surveys continue to corroborate the view that official corruption continues to run rampant in Kyrgyzstan.

It feels like yesterday we had it all: revolution, triumphant promises to tackle corruption and swearing by good governance. In 2007, though, nothing much seems to have changed. Bribes are even higher, probably due to inflation. Meanwhile, public optimism is almost non-existent. Yet fighting corruption is still a "top priority" for the government.

The road to the future is certainly paved with good intentions, if nothing else.