

In April 2008, the head of the state railroad company Kazakhstan Temir Zholy (KTZ) was charged with accepting US\$100,000 in bribes from a company seeking work from the government. The accused, KTZ head Jaksybek Kulekeyev, is one of the highest ranking Kazakhstani officials ever prosecuted for accepting bribes. His supporters suggest that the previously well-regarded Kulekeyev was set up by higher ranking, more corrupt officials. The trial is ongoing. Either way, Kazakhstanis doubt that corruption in their country will end anytime soon.

Kazakhstanis say that while outwardly it may look like the government is fighting corruption, they are not surprised by the news of bribery involving top government officials. Even when a government official is caught red-handed and charged for a crime, it does not necessarily mean the government is combating corruption. It could also be that the accused has angered someone at a high level or supports the political opposition. The charges and trial are merely a cover to allow those in power to get rid of their opponents.

Corruption as a Way of Life

Corruption schemes are built into the country's psyche. People justify corruption as a way to build relationships or break through government-imposed barriers.

Need to avoid a line-up? Pay a bribe. Want your expected child to be delivered by a competent doctor in order to prevent childbirth complications? Pay a bribe. Have you been injured and want an experienced doctor? Pay a bribe. Otherwise, you may wind up being treated by a student who is still learning medicine.

Perhaps the saddest part of the corruption in Kazakhstan is the creation of simple, low-level work just to pass money illegally. For example, last year, every month in every Kazakhstan city, the road curbs were replaced. Residents were told this happened because the plants that make the curbs are affiliated with the cities' *akim*(mayor).

Bigger Gains Mean Bigger Corruption

Large-scale corruption, like importing or exporting goods, lobbying for changes in the laws, or wooing the court system, leads to bigger payouts. According to the Sange Research Center, which conducts opinion polls and

monitors corruption in Kazakhstan, corruption can be found among police traffic officers, customs officials, land registration officials, state university officials, and even in schools at kindergarten level. The center's research shows that 40 percent of people working in these areas regularly take part in corruption schemes.

The center also found that the largest volume of money passed involved customs officials: more than 17.4 billion tenge (US\$145 million) in bribes changed hands.

At universities, students can "purchase" grades, exams and diplomas. The Sange Research Center says that 5.7 billion tenge (US\$47.7 million) changes hands in the university bribery market.

Meanwhile, at the elementary level, parents "purchase" a place in kindergarten for their child, with a total of 3.5 billion tenge (US\$2.9 million) given to secure children spots in the public educational system.

But when it comes to sheer size, it is the Kazakhstan judicial system that sees the largest payoffs. The court system, for example, leads the country with an average bribe in the amount of 147,202 tenge (US\$1,227), says Janar Jandosova, head of the Sange Research Center.

The penitentiary system sees a bit less, with an average bribe of 136,007 tenge (US\$1,133) By comparison, bribes in the university system averages 26,537 tenge (US\$221).

To put all these bribe amounts into perspective, the average monthly salary in Kazakhstan as of April 2008 was 57,897 tenge (US\$492).

Considering Kazakhstan's population of 15.3 million people, the amount of money that changes hands through corruption is significant, says Jandosova, who points out that the volume of corruption at the lower levels of government — the administrative level — matches at least 7 percent of the country's budget. That number is likely higher as many of Kazakhstan's public services and state bodies were not accounted for in the research, she said.

Corruption in Education

Jandosova thinks lack of resources and government transparency play a big role in corruption.

Take the example of school admissions. Even though Kazakhstan's Ministry of Education and Science points to

153,000 available openings for pupils across the country, demand depends on geographic area. In Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city, there are 30,000 children who need to be placed in the city's 157 kindergarten schools in 2008. Another 10,000 children are on the waiting list. This is in comparison to the 1990s, when the city's population was a third of its current size and there were 346 kindergartens.

But once mass privatization began in the 1990s, more than half of the kindergartens were turned into shops and offices. This resulted in parents struggling to secure places for their children in a smaller pool of schools to choose from — by any means they could find.

Even after children gain entrance to the school system, bribery continues through payment for grades and certificates. Parents are expected to pay “semi-official” dues for school renovations, textbooks, stationary and even holidays. These monthly payments from parents are considered “voluntary donations” and are not taxed or officially tracked. Payments average about 11,991 tenge (US\$100) per student. Kindergarten classes also require similar “dues” for the supply of toys in the classroom and holidays.

But the largest amount of bribery in the educational system is found at the university level. For example, to enter universities, high school graduates must select their desired profession and university and then successfully pass the United National Test (UNT). While answers for the test are supposed to be kept strictly secret, they can be purchased for 59,955 tenge (US\$500) or more.

Students who score highest on the test receive scholarships to attend university. Those seeking a career in law, customs services, law enforcement, economics or international relations face the toughest competition for university admittance.

As expected, those students who graduate with a degree in economics or international relations tend to find jobs with a bank or oil company. They may also become diplomats. Salaries in these professions are high.

Strangely though, there is stiff competition for those interested in law careers in Kazakhstan. Graduates in this profession tend to start careers in state government where the salaries are almost three times lower than those in the financial sector. Nevertheless, young people keenly pursue jobs in municipalities (*akimats*), estate registration services, prosecutor's offices, or in the courts and police

departments — knowing they will receive generous bribes in their new careers, those familiar with the practice say.

The Sange Research Center's Jandosova says young people have been exposed to bribery since a young age. According to a student, who goes by Janar K*, Kazakhstan students go into law precisely for the bribes.

Furthermore, Janar says, lots of her friends who are studying to become lawyers do not attend the lectures at all. They either work or spend their time and parents' money in clubs and buy their grades later on.

The Cost of Education

According to students, the size of bribes they have to pay for grades varies depending on the region, the institute, area of study, the teachers and the final grade desired. On average, the highest mark for an exam costs 11,991 tenge (US\$100) or more.

One student who gives her name as Yulia says that bribes are seldom initiated by the students. As a rule, teachers imply that students have to pay them. She recalls one incident in which the teacher openly said to students, "You will not be able to pass the exam yourselves anyway." Janar, who prefers not to give a last name, says that another teacher said, "If you want to receive a scholarship, pay up."

According to Yulia, a student must work extremely hard to ensure that bribes are not needed. If a student misses a lecture, the only way to make up for it may be by bribing the teacher.

Often teachers use course leaders (student teaching assistants) who collect money and pass the grade books to the teacher. In return for this, a course leader may pay a lower amount for a grade or won't have to pay at all.

However, one student who goes by the name Aigerim says she works for an international organization and knows her rights and claims she has never given a bribe for any reason. When one teacher insinuated she should pay a bribe, Aigerim informed the school's rector, who fired the teacher.

The Future of Kazakhstan's Corruption

Jandosova believes it is possible to fight corruption in Kazakhstan. To do this, the country needs simple and

clear procedures, transparency, and sensible punishment for everyone involved in corruption — both citizens and government officials alike.

But what is more difficult to say is if the attitudes toward bribery in Kazakhstan will change. Current measures combating corruption are ineffective and are carried out merely for show.

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 103 criminal cases involving education workers have been brought forward since the beginning of 2008. Of these cases, 45 involve school principals.

Kazakhstan may have to look to its past for guidance. Kazakhstanis will need to only look at the 1995 mission statement that created the current education system. It says, “The main task of educating our youth is forming a legal education system that operates with a high conscience and in the tradition and respect of the laws.”

