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IN Person

The private sector reaches out to the community to help reduce corruption, writes Kamolwat Praprutitum

There are no grey areas when it comes to fighting corruption, says Kobkarn Wattanavrangkul, who calls it "the tiger hounding the rabbit".

The chairwoman of Toshiba Thailand is the visible and vocal force behind the private-sector anti-corruption campaign. Wiping out graft is everyone's business, she says.

"Corruption in this country has gone beyond the level that we can accept," Ms Kobkarn says.

Yet the subject is rarely spoken about publicly by any large private company. Many people also appear to tolerate the "opaqueness" that has held the country back, according to opinion surveys.

Ms Kobkarn, 53, says she draws her anti-graft campaign inspiration from Dusit Nontanasorn, the late former chairman of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, and Chanchai Charuvastir, the late former president and chief executive of the Thai Institute of Directors (Thai IOD).

The men were pioneers in private sector graft busting. Dusit and Chanchai initiated Thailand's Private Sector Collective Action Coalition Against Corruption (CAC) in 2010.

There has been considerable discussion about "tea money" accounting for 30% of the value of some state projects contracted to various companies. Ms Kobkarn reckons the figure could be even higher.

"We can't sit back and be the silent majority who look the other way," she says.

In the broad picture, if procurement projects involving private firms are one of the hands that feed graft, they must be tamed, the award-winning businesswoman insists.

The private sector must rise to the occasion.

"I remember Khun Dusit asking me, 'Are you up for it?'" Ms Kobkarn said. The TCC chair was wondering if she might be having second thoughts about joining the anti-graft initiative.

But not everyone in the business community has been as forthcoming. She recalls a TCC meeting many years ago in which provincial chambers of commerce were seeking a consensus to be built around a private-sector graft combating initiative.

A book was spread out for members to sign in support of the cause. However, no one stepped forward, initially.

"It was an awkward moment," she said. No one wanted to be put on the spot.

But then the chairman of a northeastern chamber of commerce rose from his seat, walked up and signed his name. After him, many more followed suit.

"I suppose we were waiting for the brave one," she said. After that, the TCC adopted a resolution not to condone or engage in corruption.

Through the years, Ms Kobkarn, also president of the Thai Japanese Association, has held a number of corruption-fighting positions. She is president of the TCC's Ethics Club and vice chair of the chamber's Anti-Corruption Working Group.

Ms Kobkarn also sits on the committee of the Foundation for a Clean and Transparent Thailand (FACT).

Before the private-sector anti-graft movement gathered momentum, a tour of Hong Kong broadened the members' horizons.

A group of Thai business people looking for a watchdog model visited Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC). An ICAC official told the group it must passionately believe they have the ability to beat malpractice in any shape or form, according to Ms Kobkarn.

The ICAC, which was formed in 1974 while Hong Kong was under British rule, impressed the visitors.



Some of the 'do good' books recording a person's good deeds produced by Toshiba and the anti-corruption alliance, IOSCI, NAKACHOL.



Kobkarn Wattanavrangkul, chairwoman of Toshiba Thailand. She is a vocal private-sector anti-corruption campaigner. TAWATCHAI KEMGUNNERO

Fighting the good fight



Ms Kobkarn speaks to her staff at the Toshiba head office in Bangkok. TAWATCHAI KEMGUNNERO

on the state of desperation the territory had lived through.

According to the ICAC, it was so bad that some people who had fallen sick were denied an ambulance service unless they paid the paramedic staff a bribe.

The ICAC's graft prevention campaign capitalised on the art of communication and real cases to get its message across to various audiences.

The ICAC made a "Rabbit vs Tiger" cartoon to educate children about corruption.

In an audience survey, the rabbit represents goodness and the tiger evil.

"As far as perception goes, there is a clear line dividing the tiger and the rabbit," Ms Kobkarn said.

For the teenage audience, the ICAC produced a television advertisement featuring a girl who bought a shirt she later wore to a party. She returned the merchandise to the store the next day and was refunded in full. She only needed the shirt to go to the party without the intention of paying for it.

"She broke no law but it was wrong," Ms Kobkarn said.

But her moral ethics took a beating. Corruption thrives on a deadened moral conscience.

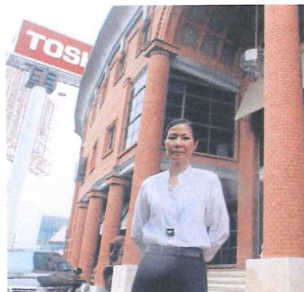
"When we talk about corruption, we point to the government. But actually it is rooted in the people," she said.

And such roots often lead to a blurry line. Purchasing staff are treated to dinner or a trip overseas by suppliers of another firm vying for sales contracts.

A similarly dubious relationship may also spill over to state procurement projects where officials are given gifts by firms eyeing concessions.

Ms Kobkarn said the private sector anti-whistle-blower, keeping track of large state projects.

Earlier, the Anti-Corruption Organisation of Thailand (ACT), a private sector initiative, urged the government to disclose



Ms Kobkarn stands outside her office. TAWATCHAI KEMGUNNERO

information on rice sales, particularly during government-to-government deals under the rice-pledging scheme.

ACT claims it has hundreds of Thai companies as members.

Ms Kobkarn said the anti-corruption alliance supplies information it obtains about suspicious deals connected to the state to independent agencies such as the National Anti-Corruption Commission or the Ombudsman.

It also holds round-table forums and shares the information on major state projects prone to irregularities with the media.

She says Transport Minister Chadchit Sitpritump has asked the alliance to be the watchdog of the controversial 2-trillion-baht transport infrastructure overhaul plan.

However, she said the alliance must play its watchdog role constructively. It acknowledged the country's need for improved infrastructure but the vast sums that will go into the projects must be scrutinised.

A watchdog role is not about objecting blindly to everything, she says. The alliance also has extensive links with small and large non-government organisations working to raise anti-corruption awareness.

The alliance also provides partial sponsorship to the reality show, *D Ambassador* (the *Virtuous Ambassador*), which depicts the lives of youths who regularly do good deeds, including volunteer work and charity.

There are also the *D Passports* issued by the Ongkorn See Khao (a coalition of white organisations). Students of participating universities are encouraged to write down good deeds they have done in the passports, while private firms are urged to give consideration to job applicants who possess and make use of the book.

Ms Kobkarn says ridding Thailand of corruption has to be done from the bottom up, by educating people to denounce malpractice — and the younger, the better. At Toshiba, "budget books" are distributed to employees to record their daily expenses, how many trees they have planted and what merit they have made over a day, week or month.

Ms Kobkarn says the company will not enter into state procurement projects it has doubts about.

"I told our staff that this is the [graft-free] direction the company is taking," she added, echoing the sentiment of her late mother, Thanphuying Niramorn Suriyasat, who founded Toshiba Thailand.

She says Thanphuying Niramorn's best-remembered legacy was her off-spoken principle that people in Thailand can do business honestly and still prosper.

Toshiba earlier discontinued its sponsorship of a television talk programme after its well-known host was embroiled in alleged embezzlement over revenue-sharing funds from the state-owned Moot Plc.

However, Ms Kobkarn insists it is not her job to pass judgement.

The mother of two daughters notes some parent companies are not in favour of their affiliated firms in Thailand engaging in anti-graft activities, fearing a possible political backlash.

"I know there's a risk involved. That's why some people are reluctant to get into the [anti-corruption] act," she says, adding her critics have charged she is only interested in dressing up her image.

She likens corruption to a cancerous condition which recurs whenever a person's "immunity" or moral conscience is down.

The US director of architecture says that staying neutral and keeping quiet can sometimes mean being indifferent to corruption.

"If we let that happen and our country sinks to its demise, we only have ourselves to blame," Ms Kobkarn says.