

Compromised win for hunger striker

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Now Anna Hazare has ended his 12-day fast after the Indian parliament agreed in principle to implement his demands in a Lokpal bill with almost unlimited powers, we should be delighted.

Anyone promoting anti-corruption measures in India is worthy of support and on such a high-moral-ground issue, it is difficult to be critical. However, watching the intense media coverage and hype around his fast and seeing team Hazare in action raises a number of questions.

In a vibrant democracy such as India, it is a dangerous precedent to have the parliamentary process railroaded by an independent campaign bypassing the consensus that should be achieved within the framework of the constitution.

If this does not happen, why have such a massive and expensive election every five years.

A campaign such as this provides a precedent for every major national and state political movement in India from the call for a separate Telengana state in the south to the Maoist movement.

In a healthy democracy, it makes sense for people to lobby democratically elected members of parliament to press their cases through the robust Indian parliamentary system.

Was Hazare's fight against high-level corruption only or was it also about corruption at the grass roots? There is a danger that a Lokpal at the national level and a Lokayukta at the state level would become one more bureaucratic system open to the same temptations as every other existing body.

It is good to see the government already acting strongly in two high-profile corruption cases -- the Commonwealth Games and 2G Spectrum case that has seen the jailing of a minister and a member of the upper house and another minister asked to resign. Strengthening anti-corruption measures at those levels of decision-making make sense, but extending them to every clerk accused of taking a 10-rupee bribe would make it impossible to enforce in the already overstretched Indian judicial system.

Many Indians are sceptical about what may be achieved through the Lokpal. They are keen for a number of practical measures to be taken by the government to minimise the factors that lead to corruption, such as the need for increasing the election allowance and spending limit (currently about \$90,000 for a federal and about \$35,000 for a state constituency) while the actual costs would be ten to 100 times more, as well as increasing salaries for senior public servants.

Team Hazare has run a well-structured and resourced campaign. The opposition Bharatiya Janata Party has benefited by backing him strongly, though it has been pointed out the party could have done much when it was in government.

Minimising corruption in a vibrant democracy like India is a good thing. However, it is something that must be approached with eyes wide open.

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