

Appearance Is All We Have

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A front-page article in Monday's New York *Times* quotes Prayuth Chan-ocha, the general who currently rules Thailand, and who declared a net worth of \$4 million (nearly half in cash) on an annual army salary of \$40,000, as saying in a televised speech, "Do not judge people based on your perceptions."

This seems laughable but, unfortunately, it is not. Every day in the United States hundreds, if not thousands, of local government officials say that some situation only presents the appearance of impropriety. *Only* the appearance, upon which the public is not supposed to base its perceptions.

But what else is there to base one's perceptions on? Is each of us supposed to investigate each matter on our own and come to a more responsible conclusion? And how can anyone investigate motives, know what any government official was really thinking? And does this even matter?

We can judge only based on our perceptions. When an official votes to give a contract to her brother, we may conclude that she was giving personal preference to her brother. When an official accepts a trip to a conference in Hawaii from someone seeking a contract or grant from the government, we may conclude that the official feels an obligation to give that individual or company something in return. When an official keeps a transaction secret, we may conclude that he is hiding something. As another Thai ruler is famous for saying, at least in a famous musical, *Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera*.

Appearance is not *only*; appearance is all the public has, especially when the public has no independent, well-funded, well-toothed government ethics program with a monopoly on interpreting and enforcing a comprehensive ethics code. Since very few of these programs exist at any level of government, government officials continue to have to insist that appearance doesn't matter, that the public must ignore the man behind the curtain, that is, the man who chose not to provide the public with an effective government ethics program.

The next time you hear a government official say there's *only* an appearance of impropriety, you should say that all you see is someone trying to convince people that appearance is not all the public has to go by, that is, someone trying to protect himself by misrepresenting reality to the public he is supposed to be representing. Ask the official why the government lacks a government ethics program that meets the best practices set forth in City Ethics' model code and other publications.

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