

To foreigners, our government looks pretty good

By JACKIE BUENO SOUSA

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Depending on how you look at it, Endrit Shabani's visit to Miami couldn't have come at a better time -- or at a worse time.

Shabani, who works with Transparency International's chapter in Albania, was in Miami recently as part of an Albanian delegation studying how U.S. officials build trust in public institutions.

During their three-day tour of Miami, the group met with public leaders, visited community institutions such as homeless shelters and spoke with ethics and corruption watchdogs.

Their Miami stay, organized by the Miami Council for International Visitors, came as the city struggles with a less-than-transparent budget fiasco, a city commissioner fights theft charges, another commissioner was ousted for accepting a bribe in the form of a no-show job for his daughter, the county mayor's chief of staff is demoted for improper moonlighting and the region struggles with ethics challenges that are prompting a slew of new regulations.

ENCOURAGED

You'd think all that would be enough to cause anyone to lose faith in the prospect of taint-free public service.

Instead, only hours before he was return to Albania, Shabani was feeling encouraged.

``There's a big difference in how you see elected officials," he said, a tone of admiration sprinkling his words. ``We see them as gods. You see them as existing to serve you."

Added Artur Lazebeau, another member of the group and ombudsman of Albania's parliament: ``The main perception we get is that [public officials here] are humble."

No condescending finger-pointing; no disdainful shots about Miami being a banana republic; just a simple reminder that every time we catch officials abusing their power and hold them accountable we're upholding an ideal that is still very much alive, even in Miami.

Perhaps we challenge that ideal a little too often here, but there's value in noting that every ethics scandal is a victory of sorts, marking society's reaffirmation of what is and isn't

acceptable behavior. The notion is so fundamental that its merit is almost invisible to us.

The Miami-Dade County Commission may soon be debating new ethics rules, prompting many of us to feel shame that we need such ordinances in the first place. After all, if public officials didn't engage in wrongdoing, we wouldn't need such laws.

But to Shabani and Lazebeau, our rules and regulations are just one more sign of how well our system works when it comes to fighting corruption.

Even the ease with which we speak to public officials left Shabani in awe. Before coming to Miami, the group visited Pittsburgh, where they sat in on a City Council meeting.

Just as is often the case in Miami, only a handful of citizens bothered to attend the meeting. But Shabani couldn't stop thinking about an old man who rose before officials to complain.

‘VERY IMPRESSIVE’

“It was very impressive,” he says. “You just don't see that in our country; to see normal citizens speaking to officials. It just doesn't happen.”

He couldn't believe that so few residents show up for public meetings to air their grievances.

“If [such a public meeting] were to happen in my country,” he said, “there would be hundreds of people because they never have a chance to do that.”

One more reminder of how the imperfections of our system are sometimes a side effect of its successes.