

The club of crooked nations

Corruption is endemic to Africa — and the media are not exempt



BY PHINDILE NGUBANE & MARLAN PADAYACHEE



The 'brown envelope syndrome' is prevalent in many countries ... cases have come to light in Nigeria, Kenya and Tanzania ranging from politicians openly handing out money and gifts, to journalists being on their permanent payrolls.

THE GLOBAL DISEASE of corruption continues to plague Africa. The new South Africa, despite its chequered history of apartheid and the liberation struggle, has joined the club of crooked nations.

It was not surprising then that South Africa's culture of corruption came under the microscope at the all-Africa conference on corruption and the media.

The conference, attended by investigative and political journalists representing media unions from 17 African countries, was organised by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in Brussels, Belgium, recently.

South Africa, which in its transition from apartheid to democracy since 1994 has attracted a lot of flak, and rightly so, for the goings-on in the corridors of power and the numerous incidents of corruption, bribery and nepotism in high political places, was certainly not let off the hook.

Representatives of the World Bank, Transparency International and other African interest groups made interventions and shared their thoughts on this global disease that has

stigmatised most of decolonised Africa.

Participants at the conference agreed that under the apartheid regime, bribes and corruption were a way of life, but the state machinery was all powerful in defending its brand of corruption through various apartheid-linked slush funds running into hundreds of millions of rands. Such was the culture of apartheid administration that no one really questioned nefarious deals under the cloak of the world's most notorious political system since Nazism.

However, when the ANC turned the political tide of racism and discrimination into a new wave of democracy, it did not take South Africans long to rejoin the corruption line, and concern is growing that the country could soon be taking its place in the commonwealth of corrupt nations.

While it was admitted that South Africa was still far better off than most of the countries on the African continent, and that the country has put in place early mechanisms like the Public Protector to try to curb corruption, it still faces the danger of unsuccessfully fighting off this disease, as corrupters in most democracies tend to be found on the top of the social hierarchy

and have powers to manipulate the flow of information on the activities of their office.

Commented Transparency International's Dieter Frish: "Corruption, defined as 'the abuse of power for personal ends', has always existed. During recent decades, however, it has grown both in terms of geographic extents and intensity. Since the mid-1970s, corruption has infiltrated virtually every country in this world."

Frish, retired director-general for development at the European Commission, which funded this IFJ project, has devoted years fighting corruption at Transparency International, a world-wide NGO which lobbies strenuously against graft.

"It was hoped that the easing of political and economic restrictions that characterised the 1990s after the end of the Cold War would have gone some way in reducing this phenomenon.

"Through increased openness resulting from political pluralism and the freedom of the press, the process of democratisation should, under normal circumstances, mobilise efforts to overcome corruption."

However, emergent democracies are still fragile and appear to find the task of tackling established self-interest a formidable one.

The importance of providing training in investigative journalism was highlighted. Armed with this kind of training, journalists could be ready to tackle the dynamics that came with exposing corrupt activities, especially when dealing with government office-bearers and corporate officials.

It is equally crucial to realise that corruption not only exists within government and the private sector, but within the media as well. Various examples were given by journalists from southern, east and west Africa of instances where journalists were known to accept bribes from political parties or business people.

Shamlal Puri, managing editor of the London-based Newslink Africa, said there still remained rampant self-censorship in African newsrooms; while this might have been "understandable" during the era when countries had only state-owned media, the emergence of the independent press was expected to have seen an end to this.

Journalists exercise self-censorship in two ways: one out of fear of antagonising the government of the day; and the other to turn a blind eye to misdeeds of public functionaries in exchange for cash. Poor salaries and lack of good working conditions of most journalists in Africa have resulted in some journalists resorting to these means to maintain a decent standard of living.

"On some African newspapers, it is not uncommon for journalists to receive bribes from influential people either to publicise more positively or turn a blind eye to stories that could damage these influential people.

A journalist from Cameroon explained how the "brown envelope system" works: "Brown envelopes are regular in press circles in Cameroon where this kind of bribe received by a journalist is known as 'gombo', meaning that which makes a story palatable. We have received complaints concerning our members who approach personalities on whom they have what they consider an 'embarrassing story', who then ask for 'gombo' to kill the story."

There are other stories like the eight state radio and TV journalists who received 12 million francs in brown envelopes for various dubious assignments involving the Cameroon Football Federation.

"The 'brown envelope syndrome' is prevalent in many countries," Puri said, adding that cases have come to light in Nigeria, Kenya and Tanzania, ranging from politicians openly handing out money and gifts, to journalists being on their permanent payrolls.

"It is this corruption which destroys the image of our profession. These examples show how bad things are in Africa. And how important it is for us to clean our own house before we start fighting corruption in the mainstream community.

"As for the journalist who is corrupted by the corrupters with monetary handouts, ways have to be found for providing job satisfaction and just rewards and a sustainable salary," he said.

And then there is, of course, subtle but very effective censorship from the very same governments meant to be upholding the democratic order.

For example, in Kenya and Ghana where there is a vibrant, independent press, the government has used a mixture of overt repression, coercion and inducements to stamp out criticism.

In Ghana, there are currently more than 100 libel cases, either in court, or waiting to come to court.

"Some of these may be genuine but most are merely an exercise to use the law to silence newspapers."

While in South Africa media freedom is now respected by the new government, many countries on the continent do not enjoy that basic human right.

But the fact that the South African media enjoy this freedom does not mean that journalists should drop their watchdog status and relax. They must guard against a situation where sophisticated state machineries are used to silence the emerging and critical investigative journalism aimed at exposing the corrupters who continue wrongfully to steal from the country they have been given responsibility to serve.

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