

## False Consciousness as a Major Hindrance to Control of Corruption in Africa

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### Abstract

Corruption is rampant in Africa despite the effort to fight it. An effective fight against corruption requires a clear and firm understanding of the factors that cause and conduce it. Using Kenya as an example, I will examine some of the social, economic, political, and legal factors that have been given as causal explanations of corruption. By focusing primarily on political corruption, I will argue that false consciousness among the masses and leaders has to be overcome for the fight against corruption to be effective, and, by extension, for meaningful development to take place in Kenya and many other African countries.

According to the World Bank (2014), control of corruption is one of the core governance indicators. Without adequate and effective control of corruption, no meaningful development can take place. From 2010 through 2013, Transparency International Corruption Perception Index ranked African nations prominently as having the highest perceived levels of corruption, while the Index did not rank any African nations among the top twenty countries with the lowest perceived levels of corruption. Why is corruption so rampant in Africa? And why has the fight against corruption not been effective?

In this paper, I will examine some of the factors that have been given as causal explanations of corruption and argue that these factors are not the root cause of corruption. I will then explain the problem of false consciousness that is at the core of corruption. Finally, I will highlight a variety of methods that experts have suggested for African governments to battle corruption and argue that, beyond these methods, the problem of false consciousness must be addressed.

### Corruption and Its Causal Explanation

According to Mondo (2013), “corruption” is operationally defined as the misuse of entrusted power for private gain (p. 9). In this paper, I will primarily focus on political corruption, which is the misuse of power by government officials for illegitimate private gain. Political graft imposes the largest direct financial cost on a country. Reports indicate that accumulated illicit capital flight from Kenya, hidden in over 40 tax havens, amounted to a staggering Sh566 billion (U.S. \$6.369 billion) as of 2012. Ironically, this is almost the same amount required to clear Kenya’s total external debt stock, which, according to the World Bank, amounted to Sh662 billion (U.S. \$7.44 billion) in 2008 (*Daily Nation*, 2013). Most of this money has been looted from public coffers. Citizens who are already desperately poor are further burdened by public debts that could be offset by stolen cash stashed abroad. Moreover, most of the embezzled funds were borrowed, or begged, abroad in the name of the public. Corruption analysts estimate that at least U.S. \$10 billion, nearly half of Africa’s 2003 foreign aid receipts, depart Africa every year (Africa All Party Parliamentary Group, 2006, p. 14).

Let us take a look at some of the factors that have been given as causal explanation of corruption. First, poor economic conditions depress people's financial situations, which may then force people to look for supplementary income through corruption. This explanation of political corruption is inadequate. Those who engage in political corruption are usually people of means, including high-ranking government officials like cabinet ministers and heads of state. In Kenya for example, cabinet secretaries have been implicated in grand political corruption, including the Goldenberg and Anglo Leasing scandals, in which hundreds of millions of dollars were lost. These are people of means even by international standards. Their salaries are in excess of U.S. \$10,000 per month, excluding various allowances. Secondly, some argue that the legal and institutional systems are so inadequate that people engage in corruption with the belief that they can do so with impunity (Africa All Party Parliamentary Group, 2006). However, in order to strengthen the legal and institutional systems, there must be a political will to change. It is an open secret that lack of political will among leaders in Africa has prevented a strengthening of institutions to fight corruption. Thirdly, some argue that extended family systems engender corruption by exerting financial pressure to fulfill immediate and extended community and familial responsibilities (Wrong 2010). However, a closer look at cases of grand political corruption (in Kenya?) reveals that motives did not include fulfilling extended community and familial responsibilities. Public officials often stash embezzled money in foreign accounts or use it to build skyscrapers, purchase property worth millions of dollars locally and/or abroad, and live in extreme luxury. Therefore, one may safely conclude that political corruption is not primarily instigated by helping the extended family. This leads to the same questions. Why are people of means engaging in grand corruption? Why is there a lack of political will to fight corruption?

### **False Consciousness and Corruption**

False consciousness is a concept derived from Marxist theory of social class (Torrance, 1995). The concept refers to the systematic misrepresentation of dominant social relations in the consciousness of subordinate classes. While Marx did not use the phrase "false consciousness," he paid extensive attention to the related concepts of ideology and commodity fetishism. Members of a subordinate class, including workers, peasants, and serfs, suffer from false consciousness as their perceptions of the social relations around them systematically conceal or obscure the realities of subordination, exploitation, and domination. False consciousness entails the blindness of members of a subordinate class to their own interests. It is an instance of people being bound and blind to their own oppression. Meyerson (2010) discusses false consciousness among the dominating class, as members of the ruling class rationalize their actions through inaccurate perception of their own motives (p. 8). Among the ruling class, false consciousness entails the rationalization or mystification of their pursuit of economic interests. As Meyerson discusses, genuine consciousness depends on the proper assessment of one's position within the class system by members of the different classes (Meyerson, 2010, p. 80).

Let's turn now to false consciousness as a major hindrance to control of corruption in Africa. Michela Wrong (2010) accurately captures the mentality of most African political leaders

with regard to power. She describes most senior government officials' perception of the government as a cake that must be eaten. Government officials are seated at the table, sharing in the cake. In Kenya and many other African countries, politicians who are implicated in grand corruption justify their actions as "their turn to eat". What factors make embezzlement of public funds commonplace? Why is embezzlement normalized for those implicated? Why has there not been admission of guilt by leaders who have embezzled public funds? Let us examine more closely this "it's our turn to eat" mentality.

According to Ikuenobe (1998), corruption in African governance can be traced back to colonialism (p. 123). Colonialism created a legacy that Africans have perpetuated. For instance, the social ethos and norms that emerged from colonialism created an attitude of disdain and apathy. Because of this ethos, the public applauded leaders who embezzled public funds to enrich their communities and themselves. Africans understood that the primary aim of the colonial government was to exploit the African people. Whatever the African people could get from the colonial government was justified as a way of reclaiming from the colonizers what they had stolen from the colonized. Once viewed as a rebellion against colonialism, embezzlement has become a legacy in post-colonial Africa. The different human agents in this dynamic—in this case, the leaders who embezzle public resources or funds, the masses who justify the embezzlement, and the apathetic government employees—are ignorant of the motives that compel their thoughts and actions. This therefore constitutes a case of false consciousness.

Although colonialists appropriated resources from the countries that they colonized, this misappropriation does not constitute corruption in the strict sense of the term, because the colonial administration was established to benefit the colonialists. After independence, most of the African ruling elites retained the colonialist mentality. In other words, the African ruling elites saw their accrual of power as their "turn to eat", an instance of false consciousness among the ruling elite. In Kenya, most political parties fight for political power either because political leaders think it is their turn to eat if they haven't eaten already, or to continue eating if they are already eating, or to eat once again if they already ate at some point when they were previously in power. This "turn to eat" mentality greatly distorts leaders' conceptualization of political power and state resources. In grand political corruption cases like the Goldenberg and Anglo Leasing scandals, the "beneficiaries" were a few elites who, apparently, didn't feel that they had done anything wrong.

In Kenya, as in many African countries, it is not uncommon to hear leaders who embezzle public funds claim contrast government service to church service. The implication of such a statement is that the church has moral order, but the government does not have the same social and moral foundation that imposes responsibility on governing officials. This mentality constitutes a sense of false consciousness among the masses, as they justify or applaud leaders who embezzle public funds. The masses are deluded into thinking that one of their own has grabbed something that does not actually belong to anyone.

In some cases, corrupt government officials have been able to share some of the loot with members of their communities. As Ikuenobe (1998) has noted, "a person who is able to acquire money from the government in the civil public would not be a good person in his community if

he enriches only his private purse; he will be good only if he is able to help his community. So, there is a sense in which an official is indoctrinated to ‘see’ his duties in the civic public as a kind of ‘moral responsibility’ to benefit and sustain a primordial public—his community” (p. 123). In this sense, one can argue that in many African countries, Kenya included, one’s citizenship of the civic public or people’s perception of public service is tied to their own economic gain, for example, income, rather than tied to a sense of civic duty. In Kenya, for instance, absenteeism in the work place and poor job performance among civil servants and other government employees is indicative of their apathy toward public service.

Moreover, as Ekeh (1983) argues, those who have the opportunity to embezzle public funds but do not are shunned by their communities and viewed as “traitors” (p. 110). It is not surprising that, in Kenya, a leader who is accused of corruption appeals to his ethnic base for political and moral support with statements like “our community is being targeted”. The primordial public feels that whatever leaders have appropriated belongs to each leader’s particular community. Since Kenya attained independence, there has never been a time when the entire populace, irrespective of different ethnic groups, has united to fight against leaders’ embezzlement of public funds. Leaders do not embezzle public funds to benefit their communities, even if in some cases certain members of their communities receive handouts.

### **Suggested Methods of Fighting Corruption Are Inadequate**

Experts have suggested a variety of methods for African governments to battle corruption, with a special emphasis on transparency and accountability (Africa All Party Parliamentary Group, 2006; World Bank 2014) . One suggestion is to create anti-corruption agencies; however, given the barriers in Kenya and many other African countries, experts are dubious about the utility of such agencies. Another suggestion is to strengthen existing institutions, as institutional weakness—particularly the imbalance between a strong executive branch and weak legislative and judiciary branches—facilitates corruption. However, the same barrier of political apathy prevents the strengthening of existing institutions.

. A few economists, such as Dambisa Moyo (2010) have suggested that African governments can reduce corruption by reducing dependency on foreign aid. Further the author argues that African governments should cut off foreign aid completely. By encouraging accountability of donors instead of citizens, foreign aid encourages graft and breaks the fundamental relationship between a state and its people. However, it can also be argued that corruption continued unabated in African countries like Kenya and Zimbabwe when donors cut funding, so there is no guarantee that reducing dependency on foreign aid will reduce corruption.

### **Conclusion**

It is apparent that political corruption, which is of course antithetical to development, is rooted in false consciousness. In Marxist revolutionary theory, continuous development of the worker’s consciousness and capitalism’s crisis tendency precipitates revolution. But what should be done about the rampant political corruption in Africa?

I argue that those who engage in political corruption have distorted moral beliefs, which accounts for why leaders have seen nothing wrong with stealing millions of dollars from the public as their fellow citizens die from starvation and lack of basic health care. Although these leaders may have been exposed to others' moral judgments, they may not share those same beliefs. Another possibility is that they have been taught wrong or inadequate morality—morality that is non-objective. The fight against corruption therefore requires the re-evaluation of moral beliefs and practices, including the inculcation of civic responsibility in children as well as adults, so that we don't perpetuate leadership with distorted understanding of public funds. This re-evaluation should extend to all types and levels of educational, media, state, and municipal institutions and agencies.

Above all, the masses should be educated to understand that political corruption is as much a crime as the shady criminal who robs your local convenience store, who steals your goat or cow, or a burglar. The main difference is that political corruption undermines economic development, which perpetuates poverty. If the public understands this, then they are less likely to indulge leaders' embezzlement of public funds, and are thus enabled to unite in the fight against leaders' embezzlement, irrespective of ethnic group. Only when false consciousness is eliminated can ordinary citizens unite in the fight against corruption. This unity is indispensable for the fight against corruption to succeed.

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