

MAKING AFRICA LESS CORRUPT



by Robert I. Rotberg

SUMMARY

Although Botswana ranked 31st of 174 countries on the latest version of Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), and Cape Verde (42th), Seychelles (43rd), Mauritius (47th), and Lesotho, Namibia, and Rwanda (all 55th) followed with comparatively high scores, 22 African countries are among the 50 lowest performing in the world on both the CPI and the comparable World Bank Control of Corruption (WBCC) indicator. Rwanda and Liberia (94th on the CPI) are among countries that have dramatically reduced corruption, and their examples demonstrate how committed leadership can reduce corrupt practices and enhance prosperity, economic growth, and positive priorities.

In many African countries, petty corruption provides daily payoffs to policemen, nurses, border guards, and bureaucrats. Then there is venal corruption: the big-ticket items. In South Africa, President Jacob Zuma and his cronies received cash for favoring the state purchase of frigates and fighter aircraft from France and Sweden. Nigeria is the home of almost too many sordid schemes; for example, although it is a major producer of petroleum, it imports refined oil products to enrich politically connected middlemen. The theft of equipment and rations by Nigerian army officers has crippled the battle against Boko Haram.

Fortunately, Africa also has countries where leadership action and strong institutions have



In 2013, Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer reported that only 13 percent of Rwandese polled had paid a bribe within the previous two years (compared to 57 percent in South Africa and 7 percent in the United States).¹ Crime rates fell and, following Singapore's lead again, the police even began nabbing citizens for littering. In 2008, the *Economist* called Rwanda "the cleanest country in Africa."²

The Case of Liberia

In 2003, Liberia ended a brutal 14-year civil war. Everybody who had a gun or some other way of extorting revenue was corrupt; mere survival was the goal of most citizens. Elites close to President Charles Taylor and his enforcers had grabbed what they could and shared only with Taylor and "the system."

In 2006, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, an American-educated former Liberian treasury and UN Development Program official, was elected president. Her inaugural address repudiated corruption. Among her first acts was the sacking of virtually all holdover civil servants in the finance ministry. She promised a thorough investigation of allegations of embezzlement and graft. Across the government, she dismissed 17,000 civil servants.



Johnson-Sirleaf declared her own assets, required new appointees and all cabinet ministers to publish their financial holdings in the local press, and issued a tough code of conduct for public servants. She strengthened key anticorruption institutions, reformed public finance, and created a transparent national budget and an open bidding process for public works. She adopted international standards for accountability in extracting natural resources and for stemming the illicit flow of diamonds. She also paid civil servants, which had not happened for months or years.

A special dual control system shared authority for financial management between local officials and foreign advisors. Both sets of officials within each ministry and state-owned enterprise had to sign expenditure permits and contract approvals. As Liberia slowly became less corrupt, outside investors, including China, began to extract Liberia's

1. Transparency International, *Global Corruption Barometer 2013*, <http://www.transparency.org/gcb2013>.

2. "A Pioneer with a Mountain to Climb," *Economist*, September 27, 2008.

mineral resources, export its timber, and revive its moribund economy. National revenues increased enormously from a very low base, and national debts were paid or reduced.

Liberia's problems have not been fully resolved. There are questions of possible nepotism involving Johnson-Sirleaf's sons, and the Ebola crisis slowed progress. Nonetheless, according to the CPI scores, Liberia is the "most improved" country in Africa.

Three lessons can be drawn from the Liberian and Rwandan experiences:

- Strong political leadership is essential to curbing corruption, and energetic action by rulers and ruling classes are crucial to making major improvements.
- Donor countries should bolster national political will and back leaders in their battles against corruption.
- Strengthened prosecution of multinational enterprises that bribe overseas officials for mining concessions and other privileges is essential in helping fragile countries like Liberia and Rwanda combat corruption.

Robert I. Rotberg

Robert I. Rotberg is the founding director of Harvard Kennedy School's Program on Intrastate Conflict and president emeritus of the World Peace Foundation. He was a fellow at the Wilson Center in 2014–15. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, where he leads a study on Africa.

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