

**Ni Sisi!**

## **CORRUPTION: A THIEF IN BROAD DAYLIGHT**

*By John Githongo*

Your Excellency's, Esteemed Guests, All Protocols observed.

It is indeed for me a singular honour be asked to be here in Lagos, Nigeria today for a variety of reasons.

First, unforgivably, and as I was reminded by a Nigerian friend a few years ago, I have never been here before and yet I go around the world opining on corruption sometimes even being called an 'expert'. "Shame you!", he admonished me, "You go around preaching about corruption and you haven't visited Lagos!"

Second, for better or for worse Nigeria is Africa. The fate of our grandest aspirations and hopes as black people are inextricably intertwined with that of this largest of African nations with all its complexities; its tremendous wealth; it challenges – political, economic and social. When people think of Nigeria they think – oil. When I think of Nigeria I think people, Africa's most valuable resource of which Nigeria has produced more than any other country on this continent. Where Nigeria goes so does Africa follow.

Third I feel particularly honoured to be here just after you have concluded your elections successfully. Africa held her breath for Nigeria as you went through that process. Considering recent experiences with elections particularly in Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Cote d'Ivoire – Nigeria HAD to make it. It would appear to have been bumpy and even though cynics abound, Nigeria made it. When Nigeria makes it, Africa makes it too. We exhaled.

Fourth, I would like thank AELEX, for inviting me here to speak on corruption in particular. Allow me to also make it clear for the avoidance of doubt that the topic of my talk *Corruption: A Thief In Broad Daylight*, was chosen for me by Mr. Adedapo Tunde-Olowu and his team at AELEX. It is the most provocative title relating to corruption that I have ever been asked to speak on and for this I am both thankful and challenged. Because we live on a continent where for too long it is the chicken thief that faces the wrath of the law while those who steal from the people, especially those who steal really big ascend to high office often so they can steal some more.

The most though-provoking part of the title put to me was that I was being asked to speak about a thief whose modus operandi is totally out of kilter with that of other thieves. Thieves operate most effectively at night. Market women are most effective during the day one would think; lawyers, accountants, quantity surveyors and bankers too, though this may be challenged before this audience. A thief who operates not only during the day but in 'broad daylight' deserves special examination. This is a special category of thief because he does not run away once he has robbed you; he saunters off down the street or worse still sits there staring into your face waiting to do it to you again. I would conclude that in such circumstances a sort unspoken agreement is in place. A kind of Grand Compact between robber and the robbed. The thief and victim

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enjoy a symbiotic relationship. There is hidden agreement in play here that needs further interrogation. You will forgive me if I attempt to unpack this apparently cordial relationship that exists between thief and victim in countries like ours. Back home we appoint the biggest thieves to the cabinet where they can steal from an even greater number of people for an ever growing coterie of supporters lining up for patronage. But I digress in a direction to which I shall return because these Grand Compacts in many African nations define the nature of corruption, define what development means and most importantly development **for whom**, for which region, for which ethnic group...

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In 2009 life expectancy at birth for Nigerians was around 50 years despite a current GDP of over 200 billion dollars and a GDP per capita of over 2,000 dollars per head. The life expectancy figure surprised me because Nigeria doesn't have the kind HIV/AIDS problem in East and Southern Africa. Are people dying simply because of the struggle it takes to be Nigerian, I asked myself. The literacy rate is 65% for females between the ages of 15 and 24. In 2005 roughly 62% of Nigerians lived below the poverty line though other sources put the figure at over 70% in 2010. And yet today Nigeria produces roughly 1.2 billion barrels of oil per day since it started flowing in the 1950s. I should like to argue that if Nigeria were a patient standing in line with all other African countries as patients waiting to see a doctor its general condition would be found to be similar if not worse than that of others who have lived in harsher environmental conditions, endure a far poorer diet, far less vibrant cultural scene, have produced a tiny fraction of the doctors and professors Nigeria has and a much less diversified economy. There is contradiction here and I speak as Kenyan for whom similar contradictions attend. Nigeria is Africa's powerhouse with wealth of human capacity, land, oil and most importantly its people – too many of whom seem overeager to leave for other nations. I should like to argue, in the spirit of the thief who steals from you as you watch, that a good doctor would find the patient doesn't suffer from major physical ailments. Indeed, Africa as a patient is incredibly resilient when confronted with all manner of adversities both God-made and man-made. Closer examination would reveal our sickness is in the collective head.

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**CORRUPTION: AN OVERVIEW**

Allow me to start with an overview of the corruption debate in Africa over the last two decades. Over the years, almost half the countries in the bottom quarter of Transparency International's Corruption<sup>1</sup> Perceptions Index (CPI) have consistently been African. Yet since the late 1990s Africa has achieved a level of macroeconomic stability that had previously eluded it. This has been accompanied by a GDP growth trajectory that has been generally positive to date. As the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century begins it is clear that Africa is the final economic frontier as the world finds itself at the tail of three decades that have seen more people lifted out of poverty than at similar single bloc of

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<sup>1</sup> Defined as the abuse of vested authority for private gain.

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time in human history. The African Development Bank tells us one third of Africans are now 'middle class'. This period in Africa and some South Asian countries reveals that GDP growth as a measure of 'development' has become meaningless to the poor. Indeed, partly as a result of the explosion of extractive interest in African natural resources by countries such as China, growth in a number of countries has been as exponential. This has to be combined with a range of other contributing factors – declining infant mortality rates as health services have improved, rapid urbanisation, an increasingly informed and educated population, the growth in FM radio, mobile telephony and game changing advances in information technology that have allowed parts of Africa to leap from the so called Third World to the first.

Corruption and high levels of economic growth have always been able to coexist. Managing the resultant and inevitable inequalities requires robust democratic institutions or a coherent and effective authoritarian State. Some of the latter of these are imploding across North Africa and Middle East.

What corruption means and its effects changes in contexts where it is systemic; where governance institutions are weak or have suffered democratic setbacks in the memorable past; where populations are overwhelmingly youthful and have globalised aspirations and expectations that are blogged, twittered and face-booked outside State attempts at control; and, finally, where the elite exhibits conspicuous consumption with the rewards of graft. These states are vulnerable to conditions of perpetual volatility that can bubble over into political instability – such as Kenya. A range of other countries across the continent have similar conditions – Cameroon, Gabon, Nigeria, Uganda, Equatorial Guinea to name but a few. The list converges to considerable degree to both Transparency International's CPI and other instruments of measure such as the Failed States Index.

During the Cold War corruption was an instrument of political management by the superpowers across Africa and parts of Central and South America. This ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Transparency International was created after this – in 1993 and the World Bank under Jim Wolfenshon and Transparency International under Peter Eigen saw corruption catapulted to the top of the global development agenda. Across the African continent, this agenda and all the talk of good governance, anti-corruption and greater transparency converged with the sentiments of vast majority of citizens exhausted and simply broke after decades of incompetent authoritarian rule. Since the mid-1980s, enforced by the Bretton Woods institutions, dramatic economic liberalisation had been underway too, ostensibly because the market would be more efficient in the economic realm than the states that had so convincingly showed themselves not to be. Pre-industrialised societies were helplessly globalised leading, yes, to improved macro-economic management and better GDP statistics, but also to a consolidation of structural economic inequalities whose roots were deep and whose history went back to the colonial era. By the start of the new millennium the 'advocacy' phase of the fight against corruption had run its course. It ended finally in 2003 with ratification of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption. The world knew graft was a bad thing; the morality phase had ended in a sense and increasingly the fight against graft was bureaucratized.



**Ni Sisi!****INEQUALITY: NOW THE NEW FACE OF REAL POVERTY**

By the end of the 1950s, poverty, ignorance and disease were the primary evils that development sought to do away with. Tremendous advances have been achieved in all fronts. Some widespread diseases have been wiped off the face of the earth. Information technology, mobile telephony, radio and television have changed the meaning of 'ignorance'.

Pre-industrialised developing countries that liberalised their economies in the 1980s and '90s seem to have been unable to grab the kind of growth momentum seen in, say China, Korea or other parts of Asia. Indeed, despite spending on health and education, they export their best people to the West unable to employ them at home. The import of these economic policies, including those that saw debt driven growth in many developed countries, combined with the post-Cold War political realities meant the structure of States across much of Africa that embedded structural inequalities in the delivery of 'development'. We have finally reached the point where as a development priority; poverty has been eclipsed by inequality. India and China considered alone have lifted more of their citizens out of poverty than ever before. More people have been lifted out of grinding poverty in the last 30 years than in any other time in human history. Inequality is far easier to politicise, ethnicise and ultimately militarise along sub-nationalistic lines. It is a far more combustible condition than widespread poverty as we have witnessed in part - in the Middle East and North Africa recently. Advances in information technology grow and spread these narratives exponentially. This has implications for states unable to mitigate or suppress the discontent this causes among youthful populations with globalised aspirations and expectations in contexts where stark inequalities are accompanied by weak governance institutions, fragmented political elites and conspicuous consumption on the part of those who benefit from corruption carried out with impunity in the coming decades. Volatility will characterise prevailing conditions in many 'growing' developing countries where inequality, a youth bulge and corruption among a fragmented elite increasingly unable to count on financially stretched Western allies for robust support.

In Africa bureaucratization of the fight against corruption meant that on the one hand savvy corrupt regimes felt they had finally reached ahead of the activist curve that caused them so much discomfort especially from the international community's representatives, newly liberated media and foreign funded NGOs. Anti-corruption was 'programmatised', ironically, with the World Bank playing a leading role here once again. As often happens too, anti-corruption had itself become an industry often doing outstanding work in challenging contexts. But for a smart regime an industry is much preferred to a nebulous formation of journalists, NGOs and activists in general; they are easier to co-opt, dissemble, align with programmatically and use a language that can be adopted with some ease ensuring every head of state's speech has a sprinkling of the right words and promises with regard to graft.

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On the ground in many countries not much had really changed. Other related governance reforms improved growth rates but graft was devolved and decentralized piling on the pressure on the poor but, importantly, we have started to see African ownership of the corruption narrative. Indeed corruption is far worse today than it was in the 1990s. But it is more rigorously reported on by the media. It has also dawned on those in the trenches of anti-corruption that grand corruption – where huge sums are corruptly extracted from an economy by an elite, capturing domestic and international attention – has a life expectancy of roughly 25 years. Unlike human rights abuses whose scars people carry on their minds and bodies for generations cases of grand corruption lend themselves the failure of memories, destruction of documents, death of informed witnesses and general deterioration of evidence. The leader who made off with a billion dollars in 1990 is standing for public office today.

The most insidious effect of corruption in Africa is not the amounts of wealth misappropriated by crooked elites but its contribution to what should surpass the fight against poverty in the development discourse in the next two decades – the struggle to mitigate inequality around the world especially in rapidly growing nations. Corruption in a context of growth and deep inequalities has a particular effect. This is gross over-simplification but relevant nevertheless - *inequality* is more easily politicized than *poverty*. Once politicized it is then given a sectarian face – in African countries it is often politicised, regionalised and ethnicised. This harks back to the colonial era where elites mobilise politically along divisive lines. The final stage when governance institutions are wobbly – inequality is militarized and gangs of youthful militia become the enforcers for political actors in increasingly extra-judicial conditions. This brings me back to the Grand Compacts I spoke of earlier.

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**TIME TO EAT**

There are those who would argue that a functioning patrimonial state using a fair dose of authoritarianism can actually create a reasonably inclusive politics and thereby a modicum of stability. In this context the ruling elite while enriching themselves illegally and fantastically can corruptly dish enough resources to large enough constituencies – often along ethnic, religious, regional and other such lines – to guarantee this modicum of stability. Anecdotally, in such contexts one finds that foreign businessmen do not complain about ‘these corrupt Africans’ because the corruption is predictable, consistent and reliable. When predictability and consistency end for some reason; when the businessmen don’t know who to bribe and for how much, or actually pay the bribes but the promised advantage is not delivered – then the complaints about corrupt Africans become more voluble. In other words corruption has rules that are based on unwritten Compacts within ruling elites and their beneficiaries.

The Kenyan model has always been that those from the President’s tribe eat first and eat most. To keep the system from imploding politically, strong willed and loyal allies from other communities are given their chance to eat too. And while everyone eats the going is good. Politically though, especially when democratic elections are introduced, this system becomes far more difficult to sustain. We don’t say it too loudly and it isn’t



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written into any constitution but entire elections can be decided on the basis of whose turn people feel it is to eat or if a majority of the electorate and their leaders feel that one group has eaten too much for far too long – the Compact collapses.

Allow me to step out of line here and comment what I perceive to be the Nigerian model. I have read about the North-South divide and shall not attempt to delve into its history as I know only what I have read and been told. There would appear to be a Grand Compact at play in Nigeria as well. Simply put it seems to revolve around oil in Nigeria and around land and tax revenue in Kenya. It says most broadly that when someone from the North becomes President, he and his alliance of allied groups have their turn at the trough on the unwritten understanding that after two terms it will be the turn of the South 'to eat'. This introduces a kind of political stability in which many good things can be accomplished. This is despite the fact that this model is based on the uncodified understanding that the majority will not eat; it is not an inclusive model and exacerbates inequalities; it is based on manipulating the cleavages in a society not ameliorating them. It is this Grand Compact that allows a thief to look you in the eyes after he has robbed you; it is this Grand Compact that produces 'the thief in broad daylight'.

Grand Compacts gain compelling currency where leaders lack the will or imagination to codify them transparently into inclusive structures of governance where accountability for failure is a key component. It is clear liberal democracies will not emerge from Africa soon. They may not actually be culturally desirable or possible. History has shown that growth emerges from the unintended consequences of deliberate industrialisation, the application of knowledge and the creation of synergies. The surpluses of Asia are currently being used to finance consumption in the West. This fuels inequalities that are politically combustible and lend themselves to demagogues and populists. Surpluses must be used to invest in infrastructure and create social safety nets that mitigate the rougher edges of the market. Across Africa the family has been the primary social, political and economic safety net. Structural adjustment, rapid urbanisation and globalisation have forced this model into extreme distress.

All of you learned friends in this room pay school fees, medical bills, transport costs, burial costs, wedding cost etc – for large extended families. I should think at least 25% of the telephone calls you receive have to do with helping a relative out. You are the shadow welfare state of Africa. This status allows too many good people to rationalise away corruption. Instead we should ask, how do we make our cultural realities relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? How do we legitimise, dignify and turn into policy – this reality; how do we bring the shadow state out of the darkness into the mainstream of the way we Africans manage our affairs? As we look at the North-South revolving patronage model, it becomes clear that it will implode under the weight of the four 'D's': **democracy**, **demography** in the form of the youth bulge, the **digital** revolution in information technology and the reverberating revolution of **desire** – the aspirations and expectations of globalised populations, especially the youth. As a model it simply cannot deliver good governance. Good governance is supposed to be one of the primary deliverables of democracy. By good governance I mean essentially the rule of law and equal access to justice regardless of one's station in life; equal access to economic opportunity; the productive expenditure of the nation's resources providing access to



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health, education and clean water; and, most importantly freedom from fear; fear of being raped, robbed, killed.

How do we fashion a culturally sensitive model of governance that is inclusive, transparent and holds leaders to account? Thinking our way out of this paper bag will provide us many of the answers to the questions that haunt all of Africa. I bring them here to Nigeria in part because this is where most of Africa's the brain power hails from. The form of democracy that shall emerge from these answers will be one likely forged in blood and brought into being by visionary leadership.

**The story of Faust**

In Kenya we say, **Ni Sisi!** – it is us, we are the answer! For Africa to achieve its potential Nigeria **must** lead. I long for the day the best Nigerian brains are not just serving as professionals in the West but when Kenyans are travelling here for hip replacements; I long for the day when AELEX has offices in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi; I long for the day when Nigeria shall be a permanent member of the UN Security Council; I long for the day when that green passport does not cause immigration officials to give you a suspicious look. I am not a Nigerian but I have an investment in you, we, Africans have a massive investment in you – that's why in Kenya people celebrated when your President upbraided the Flying Eagles because of their performance at the World Cup. Because 'our' team had not reached where we expected it to. We look to you to succeed because Nigeria's success is Africa's success. God Bless Nigeria, God Bless Africa.

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