

Corruption is a vice that has affected the proper functioning of institutions and structures the world over. From governments, states, civil society and the private sector, many institutions have been crippled by corruption. The media has not been spared from this practice, and in Southern Africa the cases of Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo best illustrate this.

The Vice defined

Corruption, as defined by many schools of thought, is the misuse or abuse of public or private office for personal gain, which involves fraud, embezzlement, nepotism, bribery, extortion and influence-peddling. According to the USAID school of thought, there are three types of corruption:

- *Systemic versus Sporadic*: Systemic corruption applies to situations where corrupt practices are the rule of life, and sporadic refers to situations where corrupt practices are the exception to the established rule.
- *Organised versus Disorganised*: Organised corruption involves a number of officials and systems within an organisation or across organisations taking part and sharing the gains from routine corruption practices; disorganised corruption takes place opportunistically on a case by case basis.
- *Grand versus petty*: Grand corruption is referred to a large-scale abuse and misuse of power, while petty corruption is characterised by small-scale abuse and misuse of power.

Dr Justino Pinto de Andrade, the Dean of the Faculty of Economy at the Catholic University in Luanda, Angola, described corruption as “the cancer of democracy, the enemy of citizens’ rights and a friend of dictatorship.”

It is becoming more evident today that corruption is not simply an economic or developmental concern, but also a threat to people’s being and existence. It has political and social costs that vulnerable citizens have to pay for.

One of the factors that make corruption such an invisible virus is its subtle connection to organised crime, blackmail, bribes and intellectual siege. Corruption is frequently associated with the use of violence and intimidation, anonymous messages, abductions, threats, murder, among others.

The Vice in the media

Wherever and whenever corruption exists, media becomes crippled and underdeveloped and an enemy of the government. The development of a strong and efficient media is intrinsically connected to the existence of the rule of law,

The Impact of Corruption on the Media

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By Elias Isaac

open political processes, good governance and institutions that promote, protect and defend democratic values such as freedom of expression and opinion, freedom of information and the rights of citizens to be informed. Corrupt regimes do not favour or support strong and efficient media. They fear to be exposed and challenged and events in Indonesia and Philippines, Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa have given us clear evidence what a strong and efficient media can bring about.

Corruption has a negative impact on the establishment of strong and efficient media that provides citizens with accurate, factual and credible information. It creates limitations and barriers in securing a truly pluralistic and participatory society in which citizens are free to consume the information they choose and to make informed decisions.

In many cases and situations, like in most countries in Africa, corrupt officials try to buy off the media or infiltrate it with agents. If the media tries to keep its impartiality, then these corrupt officials set up defamation campaigns against individual journalists or media outlets with the objective of creating fear and silencing them. Corruption creates attitudes and vices that promote intolerance and violence which most of the time are expressed in repressive actions.

It is notable that most of the violence linked to corruption is exercised on independent media in particular. It is very obvious that in such situations the state media becomes an instrument at the mercy of corrupt individuals and institutions discouraging any form of real and factual reporting or information dissemination on corrupt prac-

tices. This violence creates fear and mistrust and silences holders of compromising information.

The Case of Angola and the DRC

In Angola and in the whole Southern Africa region, there has been a notable drive by independent media to become the champions of democracy and good governance, through exposing corrupt practices. They have turned the tables upside down and taken over from the conventional opposition political parties, who have become ineffective and part of the corrupt system; preferring to keep the status quo.

For many years now in Africa, democracy and a pluralistic society have been confused by the mere cause of having a multi-party legislature, a government of national unity or more than 200 political parties registered in the Supreme Court, like the case in Angola; or DRC which has 200 newspapers, 170 radio stations and 50 TV channels showing a chaotic and corrupt state system. Democracy and good governance are far more than that. It is a process that allows every citizen the right to information and not intoxication with propaganda.

What makes the establishment of an open and democratic society is the functioning of a strong and efficient media; it is the right of the citizens to be unconditionally informed in order to enable them to freely and consciously participate in the social, political and economic affairs of their country. Strong and efficient media makes democracy a functioning and participatory process.

In Africa, and in many parts of the world, political parties divide the citizens and intoxicate them with long expired ideologies, dogmas and political utopias, ethnic, racial and religious loyalties and limited mind-set. But efficient and strong media plays a critical role in informing and educating the people with diversified information uniting them around common concerns, interests and needs.

There are rare cases in the world where political, social and economic development took place without the presence of strong and efficient media. This means that all efforts for sustainable development, transparency and accountability have to take into serious consideration the crucial role that media plays in building a responsible citizenry.

The existence of a strong and efficient media is vital in the process of making and consolidating any democratic state where good governance and rule of law are respected and protected. The multi-purpose nature of media in informing the citizens on factual issues happening in their communities has the objective and responsibility of educating the public on the evils of corruption, and becoming the guardians and defenders of freedom of thinking, expression and information.

Corruption does not only impact on economics and social development but the whole social fabric, including the media to the extent that citizens' rights to freedom of information are curtailed, manipulated and even denied. It impedes and persecutes sources of factual information and is an undeclared coup to all democratic norms including freedom of expression and information and the rights of citizens to be informed accurately and responsibly.

Throughout the history of Angola, especially after independence, media has always been manipulated and controlled by the government and two political powers that have used the media and journalists as instruments for political party propaganda against each other. The media served the objective of the powers and not the rights of citizens.

In order for media entities to really serve the public good and interest, they need to move away from partisan and political interests ensuring that appointments of directors, editors and other senior positions are based on professional skills and merit and not on political affiliation and loyalties.

Conclusion

The media has the duty and the responsibility of playing a positive role in promoting open and democratic societies, but it can also play a negative role and become the biggest stumbling block when ill-managed. The experience of the media in the DRC is one of those negative and sad experiences in which quantity does not mean quality and credibility. The great numbers of media outlets in the DRC have contributed to political instability, hatred, violence and assassinations of opposing party members. This is so because the great majority of media outlets in the DRC have no independent editorial lines or sustenance. They are dependant on (and have been created by) political interests that manipulate and control them.

On the other hand the experience in Angola is that the government has put a tight control over the media and since independence in 1975, the country only has completely non-governmental media in terms of radio, and four commercial radios in four provinces with the ruling party being the major shareholder in all of them. In the case of Angola, the issue is not only the limited quantity of media outlets, but also the lack of quality of information produced and disseminated.

Most unpopular and undemocratic regimes use and control media outlets, and corrupt the media actors because they know that information is power in the hands of the people to make informed decisions and to challenge those in power. But when the media is corrupt, then citizens will be kept in the dark and oppressed. ■

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