

The psychology of corruption – defiance of logic or logic at work

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“... The world is a dangerous place to live not because of the people who are evil but because of the people who do not do anything about it.” – Albert Einstein

Corruption is just as compelling a topic as it is complex. In as much as corruption is generally accepted to be a social vice, underpinning what is corruption or what acts are corrupt is still extremely litigious in our society. Our human nature and the social framework in which we exist presents conflicting view-points that can and tend to build justifications both for and against corrupt acts depending on one's vantage point.; making acts of corruption just as logical as they are illogical.

At the heart of this complexity is the failure to arrive at an understanding, at least in principle, on what corruption really is. To a great extent, in Africa, corruption as a term has been linked to the corrupt deeds that have enjoyed extensive social pervasion and media airtime over time. For most, as a result, corruption is quickly associated with political corruption, which denotes the general dysfunction of a political system or institutions in which government officials, political officials or otherwise seek illegitimate personal gain through acts (or omissions) such as bribery, extortion, cronyism, nepotism, patronage, graft and embezzlement. Political corruption can also be understood to be a specific form of rent seeking where access to politics is restricted by limited transparency, limited competition and domination of narrow interest. In the same vein of thought you can have other forms of corruption like corporate corruption, which is the abuse of power by corporate managers against shareholders. In general, corruption can be argued to emanate from the battle of interests: between a greater interest (for example public interest) and specific interests

for example (personal interest) that result into abuse by either party on the same, and not the acts per se.

Yet corruption is not what it is as much as it is what it does to our human nature. Most of us, at best, are survivors and the strategies we employ often put self before others. This in general terms is acceptable. Corruption is the culmination of our human compromise against others interests, where the need for self before others is calibrated to the need for self even at the expense of others. We become motivated by the demise of others as a means of gaining our own success and fulfillment such that we even invest the demise of others as a means of staying successful. We end up existing solely for the purpose of preserving our own narrow interests even if it is to the detriment of a greater cause. Corruption is clearly not the sole catalyst for this transition. The relationship between our survival tactics and scarcity is also a pivotal vector for this ultimate in human compromises.

During the colonial era, Africa was often raided and taken over by a mere ship load of foreigners. How did they (the foreigners) manage to achieve such a feat? The inhabitants, with their stronger grasp of the local environment and larger numbers, were overwhelmed by a couple of hundred foreigners often just simply trying their luck. The colonial forces were very clear in what they wanted and were willing to do anything to get it. They engaged local hands, often people of influence like chiefs and 'lavished' them with trinkets (amongst other things) in exchange for access and protection in a land that wasn't theirs. Quickly, these chiefs and their point men, mystified by the elements of power, focused on re-enforcing these ties with the colonial powers as opposed to doing justice to their own functional purpose. They sold off their own people and gave away land to the detriment of many generations that followed. What they may have not known is that these elements corrupted them and as a result blindsided them from the plight of the multitudes. Colonial forces, in

many cases left behind endless social conflict and carnage as a result, while they quietly plundered wealth that was funneled to lands a far.

This is a potent demonstration of corruption at work, where access to lines of influence is restricted by limited transparency, limited competition and domination of narrow interests in the quest for wealth or otherwise. The proxy techniques of corrupting a few well placed individuals to achieve ulterior objectives that often, even those being used as agents, are really not aware of, is still very real. Half a century later, the players may have changed (which complicates the equation further) but the game remains more or less the same. No longer is the enemy evidenced by a color, creed or nationality, but more so by the underlying interests that underpin their ambitions. People get into positions of influence and as opposed to using those positions to support a greater cause; they use them to preserve their access to this limited line of power. The actions rendered give way to severing consequences for both the beneficiary and victim in the long term.

Tanzania, for one has seen an emergence of such a generation lost in our sense of collective purpose. Sons and daughters of this nation, well educated in many cases, having had the privilege of inheriting a nation ripe at independence quickly forgot the essence of the prompted the independence struggle. What happened? Was our objective to just simply kick out a foreign power or to rid our society of the corrupt elements that were propagated by these foreign forces that purposefully marginalized the interests of the multitudes in favor of those that benefited the few? Yet in the last half a century we have witnessed an alarming decline in anything that represents collective interest. Education, for one, which is at the heart of any society's sustainable development, is a classic example of the blindsiding effects of corruption. We have seen the same educated few (privileged by circumstance at a time when education was a rarity) endorse misguided policies; undermine the sheer fabric of the professions

that put them into power and our society in its totality in the process without a blink. Why is it now that corrupting the system is acceptable, whereas our ancestors gave their lives to fight against the same evil nothing more than 50 years ago? Is corruption more acceptable when you are a beneficiary and that much more deplorable when you are a victim? Martin Luther King is noted for having quipped that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

This is a potent example of the psychology of corruption at work, where we become insensitive to the influence that self has on others to the point of defying the logic that governs what we are meant to do and who we are. Due to our nature as humans, it is almost futile, if not naïve, to assume that we will proactively choose the interests of others before that of self unless we are compelled by circumstance to do so. The reality is that a few people abuse power because a lot of people let them. Since corruption, arguably, emanates from the battle of interests between a greater interest and specific interests, there is no standard for it and it heavily depends on whose interests are being affected and how. Then it is the responsibility of those representing specific interest to protect their interest just as much as it is that of those with greater interests to protect theirs.