

CRY THE BELOVED COUNTRY:

The Face of Corruption in South Africa.



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“Because the white man has power, we too want power... But when a black man gets power, when he gets money, he is a great man if he is not corrupted... He seeks power and money to put right what is wrong, and when he gets them... he enjoys the power and the money.” – an excerpt from the 1948 novel by Alan Paton: “Cry the Beloved Country”

The year is 1994, South Africa is finally set loose from the chains of Apartheid. The once weeping nation is rejoicing, light is emitting from our once dark futures. The nation has come alive. New opportunities are bursting at the seams. The country has birthed freedom.

“What I fear is that the liberators emerge as elitists who drive around in Mercedes Benz’s and use the resources of this country ... to live in palaces and gather riches.” – Chris Hani.

The year is 2022. The once promising South Africa has grown dark. The country has undergone changes. Yet it is still shrouded in poverty and inequalities which are worsened by corrupt practices.

Corruption can be likened to a cancer which has a ripple effect on the nation. It seeps into every department and causes widespread dysfunction. The communities who once held hope for their futures remain destitute and impoverished. The leaders who were once birthed from these same communities are the ones who now hold the keys to a better life. Instead, these keys are now used to open doors which only they can walk through. Today, the true fight isn’t against a racist and unjust system but rather in preserving human rights against greed and theft.

Corruption: “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain”

The reality is that South Africa’s inhabitants have no real ownership over the country. It is quite confounding considering South Africa has such rich reserves of natural resources and land. However due to the decades upon decades legacy of inequality and corruption, we maintain our current stance as a poor nation.

History suggests that corruption dates back to colonialism, which was marked by public officials spending public funds for personal interest. The year is 1652, the Dutch East India company established a trading post in Cape Town under the rule of Jan van Riebeeck.

Prior to landing on the African shores, Jan van Riebeeck was dismissed from the company in 1648, for using company resources to do his private business. He was given a second chance and continued with his spirit of corruption throughout his reign. His administration was marked by corruption, tax evasion and land appropriation

Following the Dutch, the British officially colonized South Africa in 1820. The British essentially wanted to control South Africa because it served as a trade route to India. The discovery of gold and diamonds, diversified with human greed was the perfect motivation for corrupt practices.

A prominent colonizer, Cecil John Rhodes, was forced to resign after engaging in nepotism by giving a friend a contract for the government run railways. There was also the infamous case of the smallpox coverup in 1883. Under his leadership, doctors in Kimberley were bribed, amidst the smallpox epidemic. This was done to mis lead the public and reject the reality that a true epidemic was taking place. This resulted in people not recognizing the true health threat and dying due to not taking proper health precautions. At the time, raising awareness of the smallpox epidemic would have derailed their financial gains from the lucrative mining industry.

There was also an association between British Colonial rule and their role in corrupting local Chiefs to push their agendas. Considering that black Africans had minimal rights below British rule just strengthened and spread the extent of their corrupt practices. Furthermore, corruption was rampant during the National Party's reign from 1948 to 1994. Afrikaner leaders implemented laws, policies and practices that only favoured Afrikaner interests and businesses.

The true victims were people of colour who were viewed as inferior and therefore not privy to any form of human rights. The issue of land appropriation is an issue on its own. Absolute secrecy was the common denominator in all government dealings and economic crimes were hidden due to non-transparency. To this day, many South Africans are still oblivious to the true face of the country's corrupt history. Thus, it proves true that corruption and state capture was a common occurrence during the Afrikaner and British state rule, and it remains a constant today.

Indeed, corruption is not a new concept in South Africa, it has formed a part of the DNA of the country. Corruption seeps into every crevice of national and provincial budgets and causes widespread dysfunction. It affects every fibre of government institutions and private enterprises. Corruption sows' seeds of mistrust and weakens governance capacity.

It is crucial that we not only speak of corruption as a phenomenon or concept, but that we also humanize it.

Imagine a busy Saturday night, a local restaurant is bustling with patrons. Suddenly – darkness! The local restaurant owner must halt service during its peak operating hours due to another wave of loadshedding. The number of turnover businesses lose because they cannot operate is disparaging and it has a negative impact on livelihoods. It has become a too common occurrence passing through busy intersections in darkness because the streetlights and robots don't work. It not a mere inconvenience but a safety hazard to road users. South Africa has failed to build new power stations in response to surges in population growth. Corruption within the procurement of coals used to fuel power stations have also been brought in question. Perhaps because the guilty parties can afford generators at their private residences, they do not empathize with the people who must settle for candlelight.

Although the basic right to sufficient, clean water is a part of the country's constitution, it is a right that evades many. Imagine a critical patient being denied surgery because the hospital has a water shortage. The country is plagued with loadshedding and water shortages. It would be unrealistic to think that corruption has not played a part in our taps running dry. Poorly maintained infrastructure and faulty water treatment plants are but the by-products of fraud and mismanagement of governance.

The issues of corruption and service delivery in South Africa are deeper than our infamous potholes. The mismanagement and embezzlement of government funds knows no end. Most state institutions such as schools and hospitals are functioning under capacity and many buildings are on the brink of collapse due to poorly maintained infrastructure.

Many South Africans remain homeless because funds meant for government housing has been misdirected. Government departments are understaffed because a potential salary is most likely being spent by an official holidaying in Dubai with stolen money.

Imagine a scholar or student excitedly finishing their studies, to only have their dreams dashed by a lack of employment prospects. In a more ethically governed nation, more funds would be available to fill posts and pay salaries, thereby curbing unemployment rates.

Increasing employment rates could potentially play a vital role in alleviating the many social ills that burden the country, such as crime, poverty, and looting.

Imagine your neighbourhood is riddled by drug trafficking and abuse, yet the known drug dealers remain unscathed because the local police officer has a price. Injustices include the abused individuals who never receive justice because their perpetrators have an ample sized bank account and willing recipients. It is common knowledge that bribery is a common form of corruption in local municipalities and in law enforcement. Corruption also erodes at the trust that communities have in government institutions. The enforcement of just laws and policies are also weakened impacting the judicial system.

Corruption impacts access to healthcare, quality, efficiency, and efficacy of healthcare services. It translates to the nurse contracting a case of COVID-19 during a pandemic because an official desired a Ferrari over procuring appropriate PPE. It means government departments failing to serve because nepotism and favouritism has led to unsuitable leaders filling posts. Perhaps the doctors' who used state funded medical equipment and medication to push their own agenda, whilst the community suffered. It is the grandmother who is unable to receive appropriate healthcare for her disabled grandson because a state official squandered the healthcare budget.

Yes indeed, the true victims of corruption are the poor because the rich will always have options. Corruption does not happen in isolation: someone, somewhere will always end up paying for the transgressions of another.

It rings true, past, and present, that power has the propensity to corrupt.

Power refers to the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events. The country is governed through power and equally crippled by corruption. Many are of the opinion that the people who have the power to change it, are the guilty parties, hence interventions have served ineffective.

“Power corrupts, and there is nothing more corrupting that power exercised in secret.” – Daniel Schorr.

South Africa has made attempts to combat corruption, yet it remains rampant throughout the country. An increased level of transparency is needed to restrain corrupt practices.

The purpose of the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA) serves to actively promote a society where South African citizens have access to information. This is for citizens to exercise and protect their human rights. There has been a call by the President to review the Protection of State Information Act which hinders the PAIA. This review should be treated with the upmost priority and be fast tracked. Other Anti-Corruption Laws and Policies should also be reviewed for efficacy and reformed accordingly.

The appointment of skilled Independent Auditors in every level of governance will ensure an increased incidence of detecting discrepancies and fraud on financial statements. The performance of audits on procurement processes, human resource operations and daily business dealings will ensure tighter control against corruption.

Chapter 9 Institutions are intended to guard democracy and refers to group of organizations established in terms of Chapter 9 of the South African Constitution. The establishment of the Chapter 9 Integrity Commission appears promising towards the fight of corruption. The hope is that the individuals and groups involved will vow to keep political agendas out of the way. Politics have been known to taint good intentions. The Integrity Commission has the potential to be a major driving force against the fight of corruption. On the condition that that government provides adequate funding and resources. This would assist the Commission in obtaining and maintaining institutional and operational independence from external influences.

Corruption will continue to be a challenge in South Africa if the guilty parties are not held accountable. As consistently as corruption occurs, the nation has yet to see individuals and groups being convicted at the same pace. Officials who are investigated for corruption and state capture often undergo long drawn-out court trials with no definite resolution. A Zero tolerance policy for corruption should be adopted at all levels of governance. A slap on the wrist is not the appropriate punishment for the devastation that corrupt practises sow.

Nepotism and favouritism could also be counteracted through the appointment of deserving employees who are professional and skilled. This would aid in promoting ethical and sensical dealings within government. Perhaps if funds meant for education are not embezzled or mismanaged, then sufficient funds would be available to produce more skilled and resourceful officials. When managed appropriately, education has the potential to create economic opportunities, thereby leading to economic growth and upscaling social structures.

It is imperative to foster a culture of whistleblowing provided that the government creates a conducive environment. Institutions also have a responsibility to support and protect whistleblowers from retaliation and abuse in the workplace.

Government structures could also foster and strengthen the establishment of secure corruption reporting platforms through social media platforms. Social media has become a vehicle for change and transformation. Therefore, individuals and groups at large can use this flagship to drive awareness through anti-corruption campaigns. More media outlets could also report on the true nature of corruption, without pushing personal and political agendas which dilutes the true message.

The strategic objectives of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy include Ethical leadership, Transparency, Accountability, Support of anti-corruption campaigns and whistle-blowers, and the fostering of strong anti-corruption agencies. However, the time has come for less speeches and talks of strategies, and more concerted efforts towards eradicating corruption.

Universities could ensure the implementation of anti-corruption initiatives in all their dealings as an institution. This includes eliminating nepotism, dishonest procurement of resources and ensuring research is conducted in an ethical manner by both students and staff. Education modules focused on anti-corruption and ethics could also serve useful in empowering students on anti-corruption practices and the implications of corruption. Producing highly skilled and competent graduates who are well versed on ethical conduct also plays a role in how individuals approach their respective careers.

It is quite ironic that most people hate corruption but will also bribe the traffic cop to avoid a traffic fine. Small fires have the potential to become wildfires. Communities also need to stay away from partaking in corrupt activities which further strip away at the integrity of the nation. Citizens should also embrace a culture of whistleblowing and exposing transgressions as they come to the light. Corruption has a domino effect on the nation, and no one remains unharmed. The eradication of corruption is the responsibility of every citizen, at all levels. From grass roots to the high rises – we all have a responsibility!