

By John O. Kollie*

Liberia, a tiny but naturally rich West African country, is one of Africa's oldest independent countries. Roughly the size of the US state of Tennessee, Liberia gained its independence on July 26, 1847 and has a population of 3.3 million. It has a literacy rate of approximately 58 percent.

Despite its longevity, Liberia is one of the world's least developed and most impoverished nations, even when compared to others on the continent. Eighty percent of Liberians live below the poverty line, and the unemployment rate is estimated at 85 percent.

Liberia's underdevelopment can be attributed to multiple factors, with corruption at the top of the list. Corruption in Liberia generally consists of bribery, extortion, nepotism and general dishonesty. Shady deals in Liberia are endemic or, in the words of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, "systemic." "Corruption in the country is a norm," Sirleaf said in a series of interviews with journalists in the Liberian capital of Monrovia. "It comes from tolerance and impunity in successive regimes that have allowed this thing to go the way it has."

The history of systemic corruption in Liberia dates back as far as the First Republic, the era of the elite Americo-Liberians. The First Republic was between Liberia's founding, in 1822, its declaration of independence in 1847 and the civil conflict in 1980, when a military coup led by a group of native soldiers ousted the Americo-Liberian regime. Americo-Liberians were freed slaves sent from the United States to the shores of Liberia under the American Colonization Society, who ruled the country for over a century and mistreated native Liberians.

News reports linking public officials and private citizens to embezzlement or bogus transactions are regularly published in the country. Information Minister Lawrence Bropleh says the Justice Ministry is currently probing more than 100 corruption-related cases. He adds that some of the alleged perpetrators reportedly "are officials of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's administration."

And the situation appears to be worsening despite the president's verbal commitment to curbing corruption.

Transparency International, a global civil society organization leading the fight against corruption, ranked Liberia 138th among 180 countries surveyed in its 2008

Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). Based on “the degree to which corruption is perceived to exist among public officials and politicians,” Liberia received a weighted average of 2.4 on the scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 10 (highly transparent).

In other words, according to the findings, Liberia is one of the world’s most corrupt countries.

The number of factors contributing to dishonesty in Liberia is vast, but some of the foremost causes are: a lack of accountability and transparency; a merit system that encourages nepotism and political patronage; and the low salaries paid to public servants, which are not proportionate to their qualifications and living expenses. Other key factors are a history of irregular payment to public servants, greed, and of cases not being investigated to the end. An overwhelmed and under-funded judicial system, coupled with the lack of “political will” on the part of national leaders, means most corruption cases in Liberia are never heard or adjudicated.

Every Liberian leader, including President Sirleaf, has been limited and affected by the general culture of impunity, in which alleged perpetrators are not prosecuted, that permeates the country. Take the Liberia Maritime Registry as a case in point:

The beginning of gross, open corruption

After World War II, Liberia’s ship-registering program was protected from mainstream corruption by being headquartered in New York City. The Liberian Ship Registry, conceived by the American government for Liberia, generates enough money — roughly \$24 million a year — to make it worthwhile to have ships register under the Liberian flag, even if an entity has no other economic activities in the country.

The Registry began in 1948 under President William V.S. Tubman, and then Secretary of State, Edward Stettinius, created the Registered Agent Office in New York City to register ships and corporations under the Liberian flag. With time, the easy registration system made Liberia the number-one ship registry in the world, and Liberia’s government was the earliest to contract out its administration of a ship registry to a private company.

During Liberia’s civil war, the country depended heavily on the maritime funds, which accounted for some 70 percent of government revenue. After taking over the government in 1997, President Charles Taylor signed a new contract

with Liberian International Ship & Corporate Registry (LISCR), and the program remained one of the few legal sources of income for the regime. But the secrecy with which the registry was run led to investigations that revealed massive corruption.

It was later proved that Benoni Urey, the Bureau of Maritime Affairs (BMA) chief and Taylor's business crony and family friend, had personally received about 20 percent of the Registry's annual income, according to United Nations reports on Liberia (1999-2003). Urey is today the most extravagant and flamboyant millionaire in Liberia, and he's dogged by a United Nations travel ban for alleged economic crimes.

In addition, Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation report, released in June 2009, names Urey as the leading economic criminal to be prosecuted.

Even though Urey is no longer at the BMA, operations are not transparent under President Sirleaf. Urey is believed to still wield influence with the BMA and, while President Sirleaf brags about fighting corruption in revenue collection, expenditures of this lucrative Registry remain questionable. In fact, in October 2009, President Sirleaf appointed Urey as mayor of the elite Americo-Liberian settlement of Careysburg, eight miles outside the capital, Monrovia.

"This confirms long-time suspicion that Benoni Urey is an integral part of the President's cronyism, in spite of his alleged criminal record under Charles Taylor, something she condemned during her struggle for political power," says Aloysius Toe, head of the Foundation for Human Rights and Dignity (FORHD).

Corruption is glaringly rife here. For example, maritime revenue is not reflected in Liberia's annual budget as it should be, and all transactions are secret. The BMA's new chief, Beyan Kesselly, after long ignoring public outcry for accountability and openness in reporting the Registry's revenue, told the media that releasing financial information was a security threat. Finance Minister Augustine Ngafuan concurred.

Ngafuan has warned national legislators against publicly disclosing the contents of the maritime bureau's contract and budget. He said in a legislative hearing on the draft budget for fiscal year 2009-10 that doing so would reveal Liberia's maritime secrets to competitors and hurt the country.

The minister's warnings came after successful requests to exclude maritime revenues from the fiscal budget. President Sirleaf had promised to instruct BMA officials to release the budget, but that has never happened.

"I want you, all members of the Ways and Means Committee, to get the information and to use it with the care it deserves. Otherwise, we shoot ourselves in the foot," Ngafuan told legislators.

He also specified that if legislators get the information, as required by law, they should keep it under lock and key so that the public, who they are paid to represent, is left in the dark. Don't let them see it – it is for your eyes only, his words clearly indicate.

Liberia has no specific freedom of information law that compels government officials to provide information upon request. But Article 15, Section C, of the Constitution clearly states: "In pursuance of this right (to inform or be informed), there shall be no limitation to the public right to be informed about the government and its functionaries."

So much for constitutionally-ensured basic freedoms...

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