

In June 2007, big news swept through Cameroon: The Yaoundé High Court sentenced Emmanuel Gérard Ondo Ndong, former general manager of the state company Special Council Support Fund for Local Authorities (FEICOM — Fonds Special d'Equipment et d'Intervention Intercommunal), to 50 years in prison and seized his assets. The event made headlines not only because of the length of his sentence but also because of the quantity of property he had gathered and money he had embezzled. His loot included mansions in Yaoundé, a fleet of cars and several bank accounts with billions of francs in Cameroon, France and The Bahamas. This verdict was the end of the first trial of the “sparrow hawk operation.”

The purpose of the operation, launched in February 2006, was to fight corruption and punish those guilty of embezzling public funds. Along with Ondo Ndong, this operation led to the arrests (often in front of video cameras) of two other general managers of state companies: Joseph Edou of the Land Credit of Cameroon (CFC — Crédit Foncier du Cameroun) and Gilles Roger Belinga of the Cameroon Housing Corporation (SIC — Société Immobilière du Cameroun), as well as the Minister of Water and Energy Alphonse Siyam Siewe. Siewe faced charges concerning his service as general manager of the Douala Autonomous Sea Port (PAD). In the SIC and PAD cases, two members of Parliament had their immunity lifted in order to appear in court: Edouard Etondé Ekotto, board chairman of PAD and government delegate to the Douala Urban Council, and André Boto'o à Ngon, a former minister and board chairman of CFC. In total about 100 people were jailed in Douala and Yaoundé while awaiting trial. This was a big change for Cameroon, where corruption has long been synonymous with impunity.

During the trials citizens saw first hand how public funds are managed. Ondo Ndong's lawyers argued their client was acting under instructions from “above,” i.e. the Civil Cabinet of the president or the prime minister. The other defendants gave similar defenses, despite the fact that they used the funds to buy houses, land or luxurious cars for themselves and/or other well-known personalities and members of government. For example, the Chantal Biya Foundation, run by the head of state's spouse, received 150 million francs (US\$336,000) and the Cameroon section of Transparency International, through its President Akere Muna, received 500,000 francs (US\$1,120) all from FEICOM. Regarding PAD, 5 million francs (US\$11,200) were used to pay for the visit of Michel Rocard, a former French minister and 3 million francs

(US\$6,720) for the funeral of the board chairman's father-in-law.

The press was not excluded. The court heard a list of national and international newspapers that allegedly received money to run advertising for the "promotion of the government's decentralization policy." Among the 21 press organizations named were the New York Times with 26 million francs (US\$58,200), Le Monde with 17 million francs (US\$38,100) and Group GIDEPPE/Jeune Afrique Economie with 87 million francs (US\$194,850). Sport teams, political leaders, members of government, religious groups and schools were also alleged to have benefited from the "generous gifts" of public fund embezzlers.

Diplomats and financial donors encouraged "the sparrow hawk operation," as corruption and embezzlement had become a serious cause for concern in Cameroon. H.E. Niels Marquardt, U.S. ambassador in Cameroon until June 2007, took the lead publicly denouncing corruption. "I have always thought that in Cameroon, corruption is the main hindrance that prevents this country from achieving its potential," he said.

Marquardt enthusiastically supported the operation, often visiting the head of state and speaking with the press. After one visit he said, "I congratulated the head of state for the courageous and concrete actions he has undertaken. I told him he could count on the moral and material support of the United States in this respect." This declaration was pivotal because at that time other potential targets were rumored to be preparing to use their wealth to overthrow the regime that seemed determined to track them down.

Many Cameroonian, however, have a skeptical attitude because for most corruption is the second "national sport" after soccer. Many people found it insufficient to arrest some people, who then have long and costly trials. They think it would be better to follow the example of some African countries, such as Mali, and recover the stolen money and use it for the common good.

But corruption seems to be an integral part of the public and private machinery in such a way that it seems impossible to eradicate. Even where the procedures are known and published, corruption is present in secret. Those who cannot tolerate it or consider it normal are powerless.

The most garish case is the production of identification documents (which has been suspended for some months

now) and passports. For several months in 2006 and early 2007, it was impossible to get a passport through the official procedures. Authorities explained they wanted to “secure and centralize the issue of Cameroonian passports in Yaoundé.” People had to pay huge sums of money to Immigration Department agents to obtain one under the table. Even today, it is impossible to guess exactly how much it costs to get a passport because of the many unforeseen fees. These fees are paid without receipts and go straight into the pockets of the police. At the Yaoundé Emi-Immigration police station, where all applications for passports are centralized, a policeman anonymously said they have taken from 150,000 to 300,000 francs (US\$335 to US\$670) to issue a passport that officially costs 55,000 francs (US\$123).

It is not surprising then that Cameroonians say that the four sectors that are the most affected by corruption are the police, (policemen are nicknamed mange-mille, meaning a bird that eats millet, but meaning literally eat-thousand), customs, taxation and the judiciary. In the private sector, corruption touches religious institutions, civil society groups and the media. Non-official payments have become systematic for some services: recovering an impounded car; clearing goods from customs; obtaining a driving license; enrolling in a high school or a university; and selling goods in a public place.

There are some rates that look like official fees: one should give 500 francs (US\$1) to the prison warden to visit a prisoner, 500 or 1,000 francs (US\$1 or US\$2) to a police officer at checkpoints, and 30,000 francs (US\$67) to the taxation agent for a good “calculation” of one’s taxes. Even in the case of para-state or private monopoly water, electricity or telephone companies, the applicant should pay non-official fees ranging from 50,000 to 200,000 francs (US\$111 to US\$448) to be connected to the respective networks.

Corruption also extends into the electoral arena. As this article was being written, parliamentary and council elections were being organized in Cameroon. It was an opportunity to assess the devastating effect of corruption in this area. For example, the funding of political parties in Cameroon is unfair. Before the elections, the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM), the former single and ruling party, sent out senior civil servants to campaign using state resources. The government does give some money to each political party for the campaign, yet CPDM has unfair advantages.

Oversight is also lacking. It is impossible to evaluate the amount parties expend. Some candidates have declared

spending huge amounts of money (there are no legal limits) on their campaigns without any possible way of verifying the amounts or their origin.

During the recent campaign, the outgoing president of the National Assembly, Cavayé Yegue Djibril, offered a sum of 100,000 francs (US\$224) to the chairman of each local polling commission if his party (CPDM) were to take 100 percent of the votes. All the other candidates and the bishops of Cameroon denounced his action but this did not result in any legal procedures. In the end, he was re-elected.

Campaigns, in general, are just made up of vague promises, attacks and denigration of the other candidates. Discussions on programs and national challenges are absent, but food and drinks are present. The distribution of money is the real draw to so-called political meetings. After giving a woolly speech, the candidate will take out a wad of new bills and distribute them to the voters present. Then comes the time for the sharing of food and beer. We call this “stomach political activism,” which appears to be promoted by all those who use money and politics to get to power.

For the journalists, the elections can be quite profitable. Interviews and biased reports on candidates are aired. Even some news reports are entirely devoted to the propaganda of a particular candidate or party, all for a specified amount of money. The law is mute on this kind of journalism. It is believed that if someone wants to be praised by the press, they should “take care” of journalists. Those who do not are just ignored or attacked by the press, which then focuses on all their weaknesses.

