By Cheechiay Jablasone

On Sept. 27, 2006, a group of Liberian government officials led by Vice President Joseph Boakai lined the pier of Monrovia's harbor and received a delivery of 300,000 bags of rice, Liberia's staple. This was no government issue, but a venture by Sinkor Trading Company, owned by the Liberian businessman Eddie Brown.

Boakai and the huge government presence at the harbor could be interpreted as the beginning of "Liberianization," a program continued by successive Liberian regimes to involve nationals in business where their non-Liberian counterparts dominate. That interpretation, however, could be incorrect in a country where rice is not only a "cash cow" but also political currency. Rice importation is measured both by the political advantage it offers the ruling party and by the resources it places at the party's disposal for campaigning — pre-campaigning, in most instances.

In late 1997, after only a few months in power, then President Charles Taylor awarded Bridgeway Corporation, a Lebanese-owned import firm, a monopoly in the rice market. Taylor argued then that only Bridgeway could ensure uninterrupted supply of rice to the country.

Throughout his rule Taylor gave Bridgeway-imported rice as a gift to ordinary people and as provisions for soldiers and others he employed. Reports by the Liberian news media have also suggested that Bridgeway's owner, George Haddad, received tax breaks due to his alleged ties to the president. In August 2006, the government reported that Haddad, who owns a group of companies, had late or unpaid taxes amounting to more than US$3.6 million on rice alone as of September 2005. According to a government press conference on Aug. 22, 2006, Haddad and other importers jointly owed US$15 million in taxes on rice and petroleum. Haddad has denied he owes any unpaid taxes.

The dispute between the government and Haddad began after the government replaced Bridgeway with Sinkor Trading Company (STC) following Taylor's replacement by President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. The company is owned by the Browns, a family that owned a hotel chain in Monrovia and that was believed to have close ties with Johnson-Sirleaf.

While Johnson-Sirleaf told a public radio program that STC received the contract through a public tender, the minister of commerce said her ministry only solicited purchase

orders from key importers and selected STC because it offered the lowest price for a 50-kilogram bag of rice. STC was selected to bring in rice as the sole importer for six months, and then the market could be opened. The market has slightly changed since, with only one other importer involved in the importation of the commodity.

Though STC offered a low cost, it actually imported a lower quality of rice. Pressured by public outcry, STC switched to importing Chinese white rice (round grain), the type previously imported by Bridgeway. However, STC is importing 45.5-kilogram bags of rice, a reduced quantity, instead of 50-kilogram bags.

By that deduction, STC gains additional 100,000 bags of 45.5-kilogram bags of rice for every 1,000,000 50-kilogram bags of rice it should have imported. The opposition Liberty Party called that “robbing” of the impoverished people.

At the price of US$21.00 per bag, this translates to milking about US$2.1 million for every 1 million bags of rice sold to a population of nearly 3 million. Here everyone needs to eat rice to survive, thus making the business of rice importation one of “cool cash,” according to a senior government official.

An officer at a local anticorruption group, the Center for Transparency and Accountability in Liberia (CENTAL), insisted that the lack of integrity in Liberia’s public offices cannot be settled without laws restricting the discretionary powers that public officials sometimes enjoy.

For instance, there has been much public discontent over the increase in the allowances of members of the national legislature; meanwhile a local hospital in Foya District in the densely populated northern Lofa County had to close down because it lacked funds.

Sentiments against lawmakers began to swell after administrators at the church-owned, government-subsidized hospital, Phebe, a major referral center for much of central Liberia, objected to a 50 percent slash in its US$600,000 allocation. While the legislators cut US$300,000 from the hospital’s allotment, they raised their already high monthly income by US$500 each. They have thus budgeted more than US$500,000 for the annual income of all 94 members of parliament beginning July 1,2007. Lawmakers will now earn at least US$48,000 annually, compared to US$18,000 earned by senior government ministers and US$660 by civil servants, who number 35,000.

Another huge source of revenue in the country is Liberia Petroleum Refinery Company (LPRC). Harry Greaves, a longtime confidant of the president, was appointed a member of the board of directors of the company, but ended up as its managing director. Not only has Greaves changed the organizational structure of the LPRC, eliminating all deputy posts, but he has allotted himself a US$60,000 annual salary, equivalent only to the annual salary of the president of the country.

Greaves also receives an annual US$10,000 bonus and a monthly allotment of gasoline amounting to 2,770 gallons, compared to the 250 and 350 gallons allocated for the members and chair of the board, respectively.

LPRC management is also facing public outcry over a contract it has with a refinery firm, ADDAX, in Nigeria. Not only was the contract seemingly reached in total violation of the Public Procurement and Contract Law, two human rights groups, the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (JPC) and the Foundation for Human Rights and Democracy (FOHRD), have questioned its benefits to the country.

While the Public Procurement and Contract Law requires there be international bidding when contracts for services exceed US$50,000, the refinery deal of thousands of barrels of crude oil was awarded without bidding. The LPRC management single handedly selected ADDAX. It has also since refused to publish the contract, citing confidentiality for its Nigerian partners.

Cheating is rife in Liberia, affecting all strata of society. People see it everyday. Lorpu Flomo, 32, sells assorted goods at the main Monrovia Market in the business district of Waterside on Water Street. Each week she pays L$15 (US$0.25), which equals a fifth of her weekly savings to Liberia Marketing Association (LMA), a body that oversees 12,000 hawkers and petty traders around Monrovia. Though she has a small business, she pays the same amount as those with huge stalls. Annually, LMA receives about L$8,640,000 (US$140,488) from its members' weekly dues alone, yet no one knows where the money goes. The markets are filthy, and Lorpu said they expect the officials, who hardly seem to care, to remove the dirt.

A particularly sad example of how Liberian society is wired for cheating or the induction of cheating is the culture of the "flexibility fee." High school seniors, mainly in Monrovia, are required to contribute money to bribe examiners at their senior high school certificate exams administered by the West African Examination Council

(WAEC). In May 2007, cheating was so widespread that it became widely reported in the media. The exams of more than 17,000 12th graders were cancelled. Each student reportedly paid fees ranging from L$600 (US$10) to L$1000 (US$16), determined by their respective school's administration, to bribe examiners to be lenient.

It is not only at schools that one pays these bribes; payment is rampant at hospitals too. At the main government-run John F. Kennedy Medical Center in Monrovia, health workers make demands to patients for nearly every service rendered.

Annie Williams, 26, took her husband suffering from a stroke to the JFK Medical Center, and said she had to pay L$100.00 (US$1.63) to obtain a wheelchair to roll her paralyzed husband from the car. Different services cost varying amounts. Seeing the doctor who attends to hypertension and cardio-related ailments would cost an additional US$20.00 compared to the L$250.00 (US$4.06) administrative charge to see any doctor. Because of the rush, this doctor sees 20 patients daily.

Additionally, cab and commuter-bus drivers usually increase transport fares for distances around Monrovia. Just dare to ask them about the fare increases; they would normally retort that you have only seen their petty corruption and not the high-level corruption, which is responsible for the suffering of the people.