

If you thought your old school desk was uncomfortable, consider the classroom in Malawi just outside the commercial capital of Blantyre. The “schoolhouse” is simply a tree. Beneath its sheltering branches, children have arranged a circle of rocks. Some stones are barely bigger than a fist.

Imagine teetering on one of those through an arithmetic lesson.

Here, in one of the poorest countries in the world, children often learn in crumbling mud-and-grass structures, or as in this case, no structure at all. Yet just behind the scattering of “chair” stones, there stands a new school building built of tidy red bricks. Inside, rows of sanded wooden desks and chairs face an empty blackboard. A heavy padlock on the door keeps the children and their teachers locked out.

The reason for this strange scenario is what’s known in Malawi as the “187 million kwacha scandal.” Over US\$2 million earmarked for new schools in 2000 wound up in government pockets instead, with allegations of corruption leading all the way up to the nation’s then-president, Bakili Muluzi. Dozens of schools were never built, or contractors weren’t compensated for the few that were. That’s why the contractor who built this school keeps the padlock on the door. Seven years later, he’s still waiting for his check.

Since the schools scandal broke, a new president has risen to power on an anti-corruption platform. But the country still struggles to bring the original key government officials to justice. The locked and half-built schools stand as a visible symbol of Malawi’s situation today. Although many say the country is starting to make progress against corruption, the past continues to hold Malawi back. In fact, key figures in the battle over corruption from that past now find themselves locked in combat in a major, ongoing political crisis.

The “187 million kwacha” scandal is just one of many that occurred under Muluzi. He stepped down in 2004 and hand-picked his successor, Malawi’s current president, Bingu Wa Mutharika, but the two fell out. Mutharika says it was over his desire to clean up the rampant fraud and embezzling that had been the norm in Malawi. Mutharika defected from Muluzi’s party after winning the election, a move many analysts saw as his chance for a clean break from a history of corruption. While he is no longer beholden to the party machine that got him elected, that

break sparked the fight that is holding the country back today.

Politicians from Malawi's former ruling party and the new administration battle daily. This year Mutharika's opponents won a court ruling that deemed the political defection of the president and his followers as unconstitutional. This politicking has resulted in high job turnover, as officials switch back and forth between political parties. This constant game of musical chairs has undermined efforts to take control of the government and to clean up ministries.

Vacancies remain in key offices, such as the country's Anti-Corruption Bureau. Last year, the bureau's chief had former President Muluzi arrested and charged with 42 counts of corruption, fraud and abuse of office. But the chief was removed, and without him to lead the prosecution, Muluzi walked free. Political observers say the former president is using his freedom to fuel the battle between his political party and Mutharika. Muluzi's political party is now attempting to impeach Mutharika.

In the midst of this political chaos, corruption continues to flourish in Malawi, though many officials and observers say it occurs on a smaller scale than in the past. Politicians award lucrative government contracts to businesses that support their political party; local leaders reportedly sell subsidized agricultural goods meant for the poor; and this year medical suppliers, angry at the first major attempt to create a transparent and fair bidding process, threatened public officials and contributed to a massive medicine shortage throughout the nation. Progress in Malawi is a tough slog forward.

Nearly 90 percent of citizens believe that corruption is a severe problem in Malawi, according to the government's own survey. That perception may have increased, ironically because more cases are now being prosecuted. In a landmark case last year, former Education Minister Yusuf Mwawa was convicted on fraud and corruption charges for writing a check from the Education Ministry. He used it to pay for his elaborate wedding at an upscale hotel in Blantyre. In the past, such transgressions may never have been prosecuted.

Thanks to a systemic clean-up underway, crimes such as Mwawa's are no longer so easily committed. Until recently, ministers could open any number of bank accounts then simply write themselves a check from government coffers. Under a comprehensive new accounting reorganization, that's no longer the case. A senior official from the office of

the national Accountant General says the government closed a stunning 1,500 individual accounts that had proliferated in a handful of ministries.

“If you can deter people with no opportunities (for corruption), that’s a big part of the problem,” says David Gilmour, the outgoing U.S. deputy chief of mission to Malawi.

The U.S. and other donors are trying to help Malawi fight corruption at the infrastructural level. During a signing ceremony for the U.S.-proposed Millennium Challenge Corporation Threshold Country Plan in Malawi, an official announced that the program, “attacks corruption on a systemic level, from passing needed laws, providing training and equipment to a broad range of government agencies, to strengthening the oversight role of the national assembly, the media and civil society.” It’s a comprehensive plan, but as U.S. officials noted two years ago, nobody expects to see much in the way of results in these early years.

In fact, donors say that most money in Malawi fails to reach its citizens simply because the government can’t spend it. Proposed projects often wind up not being implemented because skilled technicians and managers necessary for the work often leave Malawi for higher paying jobs in Europe and America or, in a nation with an HIV infection rate of roughly 14 percent, they have died from AIDS-related illnesses. Without skilled staff and often without computers and other equipment, even the grandest plans stall.

When it comes to corruption, foreign donors are increasingly a part of the problem. Many donors show “results” by how much they have managed to spend in a country, not necessarily by how many people have benefited from the help. Inadvertently, this spending sets up an environment for corruption by providing incentives for simply using up money without showing any positive outcomes. Money either doesn’t get spent or winds up being used to pay for expensive hotels and redundant workshops in a rush to use up funds by the end of the fiscal year.

Approximately three quarters of the government’s income comes from foreign aid. The senior Malawian official in the Accountant General’s office says that unlike government money, which is now centrally tracked, money donated to various public officials is not monitored. Nobody tracks which donor has paid whom, and for what.

Asked whether Malawi's problem is due more to corruption than to dysfunction, Gilmour laughs and says, "No, unfortunately there's plenty of both."

And while the Malawian government today is trying to starve its corrupt members, a Malawian official says, "Now they're just eating from donors."

