

By Sam N. Dnyegya

For many years, ordinary Ugandans have believed, based on the opposition party's verbal rhetoric, that opposition politicians have the ability to tackle the rampant corruption in the country, especially in government and public offices, if they happen to attain power. These politicians have always criticized the ruling establishment over the rampant corruption in government institutions and the abuse of public office by some of the supporters of the ruling National Resistance Movement Organization (NRM) party.

This attitude on the part of the opposition has not, however, been consistent. Consider this: in May 2007 three former health ministers, Maj. Gen. Jim Muhwezi and his junior ministers, Capt. Mike Mukula and Dr. Alex Kamugisha, together with state house employee, Alice Kaboyo, were arrested for stealing money meant for immunizations. But some opposition politicians were not amused. When the four were sent to jail, opposition politicians were the very first people to condemn the arrest saying that the culprits were being persecuted, and that the arrests were biased.

They claimed that the government was unfair in its approach on the issue, as it targeted less influential people and left out others deemed powerful.

To cap it all, the four were released on bail, several opposition politicians scampered to take group photographs with them as if to congratulate their heroes upon victory.

As a result of such acts from the opposition members, people started wondering why President Yoweri Museveni was accused of harboring corrupt officials in his government. Why, when the government finally took action, did the opposition cry foul?

During his State of the Nation Address, President Museveni reiterated the government's commitment to "zero tolerance to corruption." He said that if the evil is to be eliminated, every leader, at all levels in society, should ask what contribution they have made toward the fight against corruption.

In the past, it was unthinkable for people close to the presidency to be held accountable for corruption, which is why the arrest of the four officials for stealing funds belonging to the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) is a milestone in the history of

Uganda and a great boost in the fight against corruption. This followed an investigation by the Inspector General of the Government (IGG) that discovered millions of shillings had been stolen and unaccounted for, putting at risk millions of children for whom the money was meant to buy vaccines. In Uganda many children still die of preventable diseases such as measles, diphtheria and whooping cough. The GAVI money was meant to prevent this.

Conversely, the IGG has long been accused of not being able to take tough action against corrupt officials, especially those close to the corridors of power. However, this seems to be changing. In addition to the arrest of the top politicians in the ruling party, the IGG also investigated the solicitor general, Lucien Tibaruha, over his wealth and alleged abuse of office.

This was followed by a presidential interdiction of the solicitor general and his deputy, which formally allowed the IGG to investigate them, especially their handling of court cases involving the government, which has led to the government losing billions of shillings. It is alleged that the two conspired with plaintiffs and got kickbacks after the judgments and payments had been made.

Unfortunately, the war against corruption was further set back when the coordinator of the Anti-Corruption Coalition in Uganda (ACCU), Geoffrey Rwakabale, was dismissed in May 2007 for corrupt tendencies in regards to finances. Rwakabale's actions would have threatened to derail and discredit anti-corruption efforts in Uganda if the board of directors of ACCU had not acted swiftly and removed him.

Henry Muguzi, acting coordinator of the ACCU, says what happened was a sign of development — for a seed to germinate and grow, it must first rot.

“Anti-corruption efforts in Uganda have to face challenges such as these, before they can bear real fruits,” he affirms. Muguzi adds that he is disappointed by cabinet ministers who stand for those who have been accused of corruption in the courts of law, as it sends wrong signals and contradicts the government's claim to pursue the “zero tolerance to corruption” policy.

Muguzi says that the strong stand adopted by the government against corrupt politicians and senior public officials, plus the zeal and courage exhibited by the IGG Justice Faith Mwodha is very encouraging.

Issa Kirarira, the vice chairman of interfaith-based Action for Ethics and Integrity (INFOC-Uganda), says that fighting

corruption in Uganda is a process that requires moral authority to sustain a result based on the fight to stop the disease from spreading. He says it's the poor who suffer from the blunt force of corruption, as indifferent government institutions ignore their plight. One example he gives is the Mulago national referral hospital, where the poor receive cheap treatment, while drugs are stolen every day, leading to many deaths.

Another telling example is the actions of the Kampala City Council. During his election campaign, the current mayor of Kampala City, Ntege Sebaggala, promised to uplift the welfare of the poor and defend their rights to do business in the city, especially in the numerous markets. Yet his council has awarded the major market tenders in the city to one tycoon, Hassan Bassajabalaba. The mayor has strongly defended this, contradicting his campaign rhetoric. He says that the hundreds of thousands operating in these markets are too poor to develop them.

The vendors claim that the mayor changed his pro-poor position after Bassajabalaba gave him a 10 percent stake for the next 49 years in Nakasero Market. The mayor says that before assuming office he saw things differently, but now he is like a person traveling in a helicopter — he sees things that people on the ground can't see.

Despite the president's direction to cancel the Nakasero Market tender to Bassajabalaba, the mayor still insists that the tender be given to the tycoon because the 25,000 vendors working in it can't develop it. The chairman of Nakasero Market Vendors Association, Ali Kayanja, says that the level of corruption within the Kampala City Council is simply disgusting, frustrating and very unfortunate.

As the government tries to fight the evils of corruption, rampant tax evasion is still going on, as a result of the collusion between the Uganda Revenue Authority staff, the police and businessmen. Many more businessmen are importing fake goods into the country with the collusion of the police and staff of Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS). Fake cement (which has led to many buildings collapsing and killing people) fake toothpaste, leather products, medicines, powdered milk, lotions and computer software are everywhere on the Ugandan market, with bodies such as the UNBS turning a blind eye.

Among fraudulent practices in Uganda, land grabbing involving cabinet ministers, businessmen and politicians is now the order of the day. Without even being aware of it, poor people and schools have lost their lands to unscrupulous officials who have sold these properties to

the rich. The name of the minister of the local government, Kahinda Otafiire, has surfaced in almost every land scandal in Kampala city.

Shimon Demonstration School and Shimon Teachers College, a pioneer education institution in Uganda built in 1952 with a student population of 3,000, was given to an Arab investor to construct a hotel on its 14-acre land. Since December 2006, no construction has taken place. It is alleged that money changed hands between some government officials.

Karim Kaliisa, the executive administrator of the Union of Muslim Councils for East, Central and Southern Africa, believes that corruption is ingrained in the blood of Ugandans. He argues that it's usually the people at the grassroots who initiate corruption when they want the services of those in public office. He adds that the corrupt are praised by people at the grassroots level as being easy and approachable, while those who want things to be done according to the law are cursed. "People here take corruption as a way of life and a road to development, and it is a social evil that has eaten the nation left, right and center," Kaliisa concludes.

Some say that the government is taking a tough stand on corruption, because it will be hosting the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in November 2007.

Uganda still has a long way to go to eradicate corruption, says Barbara Nambi, the administrator of Transparency International-Uganda Chapter. "Uganda scored 2.8 on the Corruption Perceptions Index this year and was ranked 111th in world, which is still very bad," Nambi said.

With all that, the million-dollar question is who will end corruption in Uganda? Is it the government, the opposition or civil society?

