

By Sameh Fawzy

Corruption is rampant in the Arab Republic of Egypt, and bribery is the most prevalent symptom. In Egypt, bribery is entrenched in daily life. Egyptian residents must bribe public employees for legal permits and public goods. Even services, which citizens are lawfully entitled to, aren't accessible without greasing the government machine with money.

Public employees expect small cash "tips" from citizens to help offset their meager salaries. In 2008, following the unprecedented increase in food prices, President Hosni Mubarak ordered the government to increase civil servants' salaries by 30 percent. However, few Egyptian experts think this pay increase will eliminate bribery. It has not only become instilled in the country, it is a social practice.

Black market bread

Although the worldwide increase in food prices negatively impacted food production and distribution, it was corruption that exacerbated the problem — especially in poverty-stricken areas. Consider the 2008 bread crisis.

As lines of people grew at state-run bakeries that sold subsidized bread, riots broke out. Bread was still available at high prices in private bakeries and on the black market.

The Egyptian government provides a ration of wheat to state-run bakeries at the subsidized price of US\$3.00 per 110-pound sack. The wheat is supposed to be used to produce bread that sells for less than one cent per loaf. But many subsidized bakers were selling some of their wheat to private bakeries for up to US\$37 a sack.

The bread crisis began because state-run bakery owners were selling off a portion of their bakery's subsidized wheat to the black market, where they could command higher prices.

The profits from black-market deals go not only into the hands of bakery employees, but also to government officials — ranging from police and Egyptian Supply Ministry officials to city and local councils.

While a nationwide debate raged, the government tried to curb this bakery corruption by separating bread production from its distribution.

The new rules meant each subsidized bakery must produce a certain amount of bread per day. That bread is then sold through separate distribution points, rather than at the bakery itself. However, many are still skeptical of the government's ability to fight corruption in bread production and distribution.

Corruption at local levels

Corruption is particularly prevalent among municipal-level officials in Egypt. Zakareya Azmy, the president's chief of staff, describes it as "sinking up to its ears in corruption."

Local authorities enjoy enormous power over people's day-to-day lives. Like other countries, officials license shops and issue building and remodeling permits. But in Egypt, it is much more difficult to get a license without paying off the proper government employees, some of whom create power networks that distribute favors to others.

In 2008, Egypt held municipal elections, and new local councils were formed across the country. Many citizens have great expectations for these new local councils, and a number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are working on issues of governance, participation and democracy at local levels.

Businesspeople in political life

Another major sign of corruption is the increasing role of businesspeople in political life.

After becoming members of decision-making bodies, such as Parliament, many businesspeople form profit-sharing deals with top officials.

Three illustrative cases — those of Hany Srour, Mamdouh Ismail and Hasham Talaat — have led to public debate. All three men belong to the ruling National Democratic Party and are members of Parliament. Their cases have ignited a public debate about government corruption, its impact on people's lives and bringing the guilty to justice.

Take the case of Srour, the owner of a medical company that produces bags used to package donated blood. These bags were allegedly found to be unsanitary and infected with bacteria and fungi, which could harm patients being transfused with blood products.

In 2007, the general prosecutor questioned Srour after his parliamentary immunity was lifted. Srour was officially charged with profiteering, along with six other people from his private company and within the Ministry of Health. The trial began on June 12, 2007, and ended on April 15, 2008, with the acquittal of all defendants, including Srour.

Then there was the case of the deadly ferry sinking. The ferry, Al-Salam Boccaccio 98, owned by Mamdouh Ismail, sank in February 2006 shortly after leaving Saudi Arabia on its way to the Egyptian port of Safaga. Only 338 people out of the total 1,414 passengers survived.

Following the incident, Ismail fled the country and is believed to now live in the U.K.

A parliamentary committee that investigated the catastrophe found that the company had failed to meet a series of basic safety standards on the ferry. The committee condemned what it called “wicked collaboration” between Ismail’s shipping company and a few top government officials. The investigation also found that the circumstances of the accident “point to a hideous image of corruption in a service related to people’s lives.”

Yet on July 27, 2008, Ismail was acquitted in absentia after a two-year trial. There was public outcry, especially from the victims’ families. Hours later, the general prosecutor contested the verdict.

In another case Hasham Talaat, chairman of the one of the largest Arab property and real estate developers, was arrested for his alleged role in the brutal killing of Lebanese pop singer Suzanne Tamim. Tamim was killed in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, in August 2008.

Talaat, according to the statement issued by the general prosecutor on Sept. 2, 2008, is accused of giving a fired former police officer US\$2 million to kill the Lebanese singer.

From the covers of newspapers to public debates to movies, corruption in Egypt is on everyone’s mind.

Even a recent film underlined corruption and profit-sharing deals between Egyptian businesspeople and top government officials. The Yacoubian Building, a controversial movie released in mid-2006, portrayed a society in which corruption had become the way of life. Society sinking into poverty and social disintegration was the norm. In the movie, a character becomes a Member of

Parliament and sees the huge amount of corruption and bribery in modern-day Egyptian politics.

Government actions to fight corruption

Over the last few years, the Egyptian government has said fighting corruption is one of its top priorities. The Ministry of Administrative Reform has taken on the role of coordinating corruption-fighting efforts. According to its assessments, Egypt is rife with corruption, misuse of public authority, bribery, favoritism, embezzlement, and careless management of public utilities.

The government has made efforts to curb corruption at higher levels by enacting new laws that ease regulations and cut red tape. It was the slow and complicated government bureaucracy that makes corruption necessary, people said. With the new government changes, such areas as customs and tax laws are more transparent and limit opportunities for corruption.

In addition, the Minister of Administrative Reform established the Committee of Transparency and Integrity in 2007. Its role is to propose a national strategy and appropriate legal and administrative frameworks to combat corruption, document cases of corruption and help citizens have their complaints addressed.

According to an August 2008 report by the Committee of Transparency and Integrity, work is being done to build a network with government agencies and media outlets to fight corruption. The Ministry of Administrative Reform also says it's important to build ties with international organizations that fight corruption and promote transparency.

In April 2008, a World Bank group visited Egypt and offered to help the country get a grasp on corruption. The group offered to help develop tools to measure corruption that government organizations could use, and it offered to review Egypt's current legal and administrative frameworks set up to fight corruption.

While it seems as though the Egyptian government has declared war on corruption, ordinary citizens, who say they are still under the thumb of corrupt government employees, still wait for the day when anti-corruption policies are real, rather than rhetorical.