

Riding the yellow cab through al-Bataween, one of the most famous neighborhoods in downtown Baghdad, it felt like the car was going to break into pieces. The ride was a perfect example of how bad the streets are in the heart of Iraq's capital — and how bad the brand new car was.

The street was a plateau of holes. Some, filled with water, looked like small ponds. Inside the car, the passenger endured clanks and bangs akin to a busy factory.

Ahmed Shamghi bought this brand new Iranian-made Peugeot Par in mid-2008, but he is not happy with its performance. "It is a shame that the Iraqi government imports cars from Iran," he says. "The market is full of reputable international companies that can provide the best quality cars."

Last year Iraq's Minister of Trade signed a contract with Iran to import Peugeot Pars. Since then, thousands of the cars have poured into Baghdad streets. The Ministry sells the cars for \$7,000. To get one, Shamghi had to bribe a chain of employees and wait for weeks.

He decided to pay \$10,000 and get one through the black market. These cars also come from the Ministry, but via corrupt employees.

The new deal with the Iranian government is threatening the business of private dealers who import European cars. To drive a car that has been imported by a private dealer, the buyer must register the car by recycling an old car. The Iraqi government argues that this process will reduce traffic, removing from the streets inefficient cars that harm the environment.

But for dealers and buyers it is a different story. To get their hands on a new car, they must first purchase an old car to get a registration form for the new car. Then, they must destroy the old car. The process costs thousands of dollars as an army of corrupt employees must be greased to speed up the process.

Private dealers have been suspicious of the Ministry of Trade's deal. They wonder why the government imports "bad quality" cars from Iran when it can import good cars from other countries like Europe.

The Ministry of Trade has faced a wave of accusations by the people and parliament. In 2008, Parliament's Integrity

Committee called on Minister of Trade Abdula Falah al-Sudani to answer all those questions, but he has yet to do so.

al-Sudani belongs to the Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's Dawa Party, which has close relations with Iran. Some people believe that agreements like the Peugeot Par contract is payback for the years that Dawa party members spent in Iran while they were in exile.

Following its invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Iraq was destroyed from years of wars and U.N.-imposed sanctions. When Iraq was under the sanctions, government employees were receiving a monthly salary of about US\$2. It took no time for bribery to become a culture among most government employees.

After the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, corruption became even more widespread. al-Sudani is not the only Iraqi official who has been accused of mismanagement or corruption.

Until recently, security was the main topic of discussion among Iraqis who sit idly in teahouses, sipping tea and playing dominos or backgammon. Now that the security situation has significantly improved, corruption has become a popular topic.

People accuse officials of nepotism, resulting in projects that are never finished or poorly completed. Sub-contracting is widespread. Many projects are sub-contracted multiple times, diminishing the quality of the final product.

If the streets and services in the heart of Baghdad are poor, imagine the conditions in remote areas — in the countryside where the government might not even be present.

Most of the Iraqi cabinet officials who have administered Iraq since 2003 have been accused of corruption — both formally by official entities or informally among Iraqis chatting in teahouses.

The best example is the 2007 embezzlement conviction in absentia of the former Defense Minister Hazim al-Shaalan, who served in the interim government in 2004. al-Shaalan was convicted of embezzling US\$1 billion that had been allocated to buy weapons for the Iraqi army.

In late 2008 some political factions accused Prime Minister al-Maliki of using public money and media to promote his State of Law party during the provincial council elections.

It was not the first time that al-Maliki's government has been accused. In 2007 Judge Radhi al-Radhi, the former chairman of the Iraqi Commission on Public Integrity, accused the al-Maliki government of, "forbidding [the Commission] to take any action against the presidency, council of ministries, and former and current ministers."

Corruption is everywhere; you have to bribe to get a passport, to renew your driver's license, to register your car, and even to get a doctor's appointment.

But the small fish are not the big problem. It's the officials who channel money into their pockets, instead of funding projects. Many Iraqis complain about their monthly food rations. The contracts are granted by the Ministry of Trade.

Sabah al-Sa'di, chairman of parliament's Integrity Committee, said his calls to revoke al-Sudani's immunity have gone unanswered because many members of parliament enjoy support from parliament's major Shia Alliance faction.

"Bribing and stealing are very widespread at the Ministry of Trade," says a food-ration distribution agent. "It has never been this bad before."

Iraqi officials continually promise to combat corruption. They argue that things will get better, especially now that security has improved and the government can pay attention to the issues.

Rahim al-Ujaili, the current chairman of the Iraqi Commission on Public Integrity, argues that things have improved, "The average of financial and administrative corruption declined in 2008 compared to 2007 and 2006."

It is easy for government officials to promise to combat corruption, or to argue that things are better this year than the previous one, but they do so without solid proof or evidence. Meanwhile, people in the streets are hurting. Every year, billions of dollars are allocated to service projects and investments, but the lives of people have hardly improved.

The best indicator of the people's disappointment with officials can be seen in recent provincial elections. According to official figures, only 51 percent of the eligible

voters participated. Most of the former councils' members throughout Iraq lost their seats. People didn't trust them. Now that new officials are in power, people need deeds, not promises.

