

When Youssef, a Moroccan national residing in France, returned home for the holidays in 2005, he reported the following: “I was confronted by the Moroccan traffic wardens on more occasions than in 10 years of driving in France.” In one instance, he was stopped by a traffic warden for not coming to a full stop and not yielding the right of way before entering an intersection. He explained that in France, full stops aren’t required when there are no cars coming from the right. The warden arrogantly replied that this is Morocco, not France. He then took Youssef’s driver’s license and car papers and walked away. Youssef followed the warden, requesting his papers back, but the warden suggested: “Either 200 dirhams (US\$23) for me or 400 dirhams (US\$46) for the government!”

Youssef refused and spent the rest of the day at the police station recovering his papers.

Institutionalized Sharing of Corruption’s Benefits

While this incident may seem unusual to a visitor, Moroccan nationals experience this sort of thing day in and day out. When people like taxi drivers make a living out of driving, spending long hours in police stations to sort out problems is not an effective use of time. Striking a deal with the traffic warden is considered the optimal choice. Reporting such incidents to the wardens’ superiors has never proven fruitful for the simple reason that wardens are not the only ones who benefit from those bribes. The haul of a day’s “work” is shared at pre-defined rates with the superiors who appoint the warden to “fruitful” intersections — crossroads where high rates of drivers will likely to fall into the trap.

An old schoolmate of mine who could not make it beyond high school “bought” a position as a traffic warden — he offered 20,000 dirhams (US\$2,320) and was admitted in the police corps notwithstanding his entrance exam scores. For him, this money was an investment in his future. Soon he was earning his salary, plus income from bribes. Years later I met him over a few drinks. He reported that he is in charge of assigning traffic wardens to different areas of the city. Every day at 6 a.m., he gives the wardens their assignments for the day.

“In the city, some intersections are more fruitful than others, and we request different amounts for different intersections,” he explained. “Each warden now knows how much they should bring in at the end of the day, depending on what location they were assigned. If they

make more than that, they are allowed to keep the extra. We really hate those wardens who give tickets and give the drivers the chance to pay later. We always encourage them to strike deals.”

Wardens who fail to meet their quotas are given undesirable assignments. “They are assigned to a remote area, guarding some official’s villa, and spending the whole day standing in the sun,” my friend said. “Of course, I do not keep all the money for me. I usually have my share and pass on the rest to my chief, who himself takes his share and passes on the rest upward. As to how ‘upward’ the money goes, that I have no idea.”

Given this striking testimony, one sees that corruption is not limited to the individual policeman trying to make ends meet by asking for *sadaqqa* (alms), as many Moroccans would believe. Rather, it appears to be a highly organized, meticulously institutionalized activity that involves a large number of positions of “responsibility,” no doubt including those who claim they are working to eradicate corruption in the country.

A few months ago, “the sniper of Targuist” exposed traffic corruption to the world when he posted the now-famous video on YouTube of wardens caught shaking down car after car for bribes. The wardens in question were arrested, but many believe that their arrests were punishment for not being careful enough, rather than for extortion itself. While those wardens are now sitting in jail, bribery continues on the roads, and Moroccan drivers are still paying this unconstitutional tax called *rechoua*.

Historic Legacy Difficult to Shake

What is known nowadays as corruption in the Kingdom of Morocco had never been perceived as such for hundreds of years prior to modern, post-independence Morocco. In fact, the Caïds, representatives of the sultans in various regions of the kingdom, regularly offered *hadaya* (gifts) to the king in exchange for more power and authority over the regions they represented and, therefore, more freedom to request gifts and “donations” from the citizens in exchange for regular administrative services, protection, and a blind eye to illegal practices. The phenomenon lingered on throughout the reign of the late King Hassan (1961-1999), when injustice, human rights abuse and corruption hit unprecedented highs.

After the death of King Hassan, his son, Mohamed VI, decided to take a completely different route. Although great progress has been achieved in terms of human

rights, including women's rights, freedom of expression and a number of related issues, corruption could not be eradicated overnight. People had come to believe that bribing for a service is the most natural thing to do. One of the famous Moroccan sayings stands witness for this culture of corruption: *ila ma 'andek leflous, klamek messous* (If you don't have money, your words are tasteless), meaning that one cannot get things done with words, but can with money. Another saying goes, *dhan essir yssir* (oil the squeaking wheel and it'll get going).

Until very recently, the word *rachoua* (bribe/corruption) remained so taboo that local NGOs such as Ribat El-Fath and Morocco 2020, when attempting to publicize the issue through colloquia and seminars a few years ago, were careful to avoid the word "corruption," instead using "ethics" or one of its derivatives.

Today, corrupt practices are pervasive in various vital social sectors, including, but not limited to, public institutions, the administration, the police, the customs and the justice system (Akesbi, 2006). Public hospitals and private clinics, embassies and even the educational sector are all hit by this plague. To eradicate the phenomenon, we need to target high-ranking actors and not civil servants at the bottom of the hierarchy. Real change always comes from the top down, not vice versa.

