

Hugh Glenister, a Johannesburg businessperson and self-proclaimed rebel, once sat on the Mozambican side of the border of South Africa for three days because he refused to pay a bribe to a law enforcement officer. In the end, his patience and moral protest paid off: The officer gave up, allowing Glenister to cross the border into his homeland without having to pay anything.

The South African government was probably unaware of just how tenacious Glenister would turn out to be when he took them on in court over **the dissolution of the country's vaunted investigative unit, the Scorpions**.

And although Glenister eventually lost his case, he did something quite rare in the context of the contemporary South African psyche — he successfully fought off the apathy his fellow citizens are prone to whenever they confront matters of state.

“Corruption is a problem when society gives up on it,” said Glenister two months after his court challenge ended. “There is only one way one of dealing with the problem, and that’s by standing up to fight.”

The Slow Slide from Accountability

Glenister’s act of rebellion started when the ruling African National Congress (ANC), at its elective conference in Polokwane, passed a resolution to disband the country’s Directorate of Special Operations, the pugnacious crime and corruption prosecuting unit that is known to South Africans as the Scorpions.

Ironically, this is the same ANC that brought democracy and the end of apartheid to South Africa in 1994, along with constitutional reform based on the tenets of transparency, fairness and equality.

The Scorpions began their crusade against corruption in 1999, but the group was only given official status two years later. In a relatively short lifespan of nine years, they evolved into South Africa’s answer to the incipient system of patronage and corruption, which the country’s leaders have increasingly sought to employ and nourish.

In their campaign to disband the anti-corruption group, the ANC argued that the Scorpions had become a law unto itself, while the party’s critics retorted that corrupt ANC

officials had merely grown weary of falling under the microscope of the Scorpions.

For Glenister, the impending demise of the unit spelled doom and removed the final bulwark against the pernicious spread of corruption. Spoiling for a fight, like any rebel worth his salt, he gathered a team of lawyers — using 2.5 million rand (US\$250,000) of his company's funds, much to the initial unease of his shareholders — and announced his intent to fight the ANC's decision in the courts.

His aim was to arrest what he described as “the slow slide away from accountability” while, at the same time, refuting that typically South African condition — apathy.

Glenister set out to prove, on technically legal grounds, that disbanding the Scorpions was unconstitutional. After a series of court appeals and an appearance before Parliament where he further argued his case — and tried to appeal to the common sense of MPs — Glenister's battle came to an end, with the courts finally dismissing his case.

Down came the curtain on the one-man show. The Scorpions are currently in the final throes of being dismantled and its detectives will soon be absorbed into the ranks of the South African Police Service.

A South African Paradox

That, in itself, is highly ironic, given the fact that the police service's reputation has been sullied by corruption charges brought against its commissioner, Jackie Selebi, earlier this year for his allegedly profitable fraternization with local underworld boss Glen Agliotti.

In fact, South African decision makers appear to have made a habit of wrapping their abiding votes in sheets of irony. For instance, many of the MPs who voted to terminate the Scorpions were the very same people who were implicated in a Parliamentary travel voucher fraud that became known to the public as “Travelgate.”

Glenister finds no comfort in this paradox, but says he has no regrets, choosing to believe he has “lit a fire” that promises to burn for a long time. “We only start winning when we tell a corrupt person we have had enough,” he reckons.

And that, it would seem, is something the South African media have been doing on an increasing basis. Reports and broadcasts focusing on corruption have steadily dominated mainstream media and research shows that this has generally coincided with the legal vicissitudes of ANC leader — and likely President of the Republic — Jacob Zuma, who has been in and out of court since 2005.

Zuma remains entangled in a protracted legal fight over corruption claims in connection with the government's multi-billion rand arms deal, another persistent public service scandal that first surfaced in 1999.

Increased Media Coverage

According to Media Tenor, an organization that monitors media coverage in South Africa, reports on corruption are at a higher level today than their previous peak in 2005, when Zuma was sacked as the country's deputy president, a move precipitated then by his alleged ties to convicted fraudster, arms deal beneficiary and Durban businessman Schabir Shaik.

One question that the research was unable to answer was whether the media had merely become more sensitive to the issue of corruption, or if the problem had actually grown significantly.

What is clear is that media coverage of corruption has definitely increased since Zuma was first implicated. However, most of these reports have focused on political corruption while ignoring to a large extent corporate malfeasance.

Media Tenor found corruption in the private sector was six times less likely to be covered in the media than political corruption, based on more than 7,000 news stories that appeared between January 2004 and September 2008.

The same research found corruption to be high on the media's agenda. Across the country's main news channels, the subject dominated news bulletins and broadcasts between January 2007 and October 2008.

This news saturation has fed a general pessimism on the part of the public over the government's ability — or desire — to reduce political graft.

Even the authority of regulatory bodies, such as the public protector, auditor-general and public service commission, has been neutralized by a growing indifference that has

been exhibited toward these institutions by Parliament. Not even the judiciary has been spared the wrath of ANC politicians who have taken public exception to rulings against party officials, particularly in the matter of Zuma and his alleged links to a 66-billion rand (US\$ 6.6 million) arms deal.

Trending Up?

These attacks on the independence of anti-crime organizations worry Hennie van Vuuren, program head of corruption and governance at the Cape Town-based Institute of Security Studies.

Speaking at an anti-corruption summit in August 2008, Van Vuuren offered a sobering assessment of corruption in South Africa in a paper entitled “Power, Profit and Political Corruption in South Africa.”

He agreed that the effects of corruption — a phenomenon he said was confined mostly to a small number of powerful politicians — had instilled a pessimistic outlook in people.

Citing Transparency International’s 2007 Global Corruption Barometer, Van Vuuren revealed that 67 percent of South Africans who were polled believe that corruption will increase in the next three years, while 54 percent believe the government’s efforts to fight corruption are ineffective.

He also decried the moves to dissolve the Scorpions because “the real beneficiaries of this decision will be corrupt individuals within business and government who wish their activities to go unchecked.”

Transparency International (TI), commenting on South Africa’s poor ranking in TI’s global corruption scale, said the country was seeing a “fatal link between poverty, failed institutions and graft.” Van Vuuren reaches the same conclusion: “This manifestation of corruption poses the greatest threat to human development and democracy in South Africa.”

