

By Michée Boko

Chronicling the culture of corruption in Benin would have been an easy task under the government of former President Mathieu Kérékou. Numerous economic and financial scandals plagued Kérékou's more than three decades of rule, which came to an end in April 2006. However, since President Yayi Boni's landslide election, the new leader has made significant headway in reducing the impunity that marked his predecessor's administration.

The battle cry of Boni's campaign was, "*Ça peut changer! Ça doit changer! Ça va changer!*" meaning, "It can change! It must change! It will change!" Nearly 75 percent of the electorate agreed with the former development banker. Boni is now implementing major changes to the way public affairs are led – beginning by holding past officials accountable for their alleged crimes.

Under Kérékou's long-time rule (1972-1991 and 1996-2006), the people of Benin had become accustomed to public officials using their positions for private gain and facing little or no consequences. For example, with the approval of Kérékou's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rogatien Biaou, a piece of land belonging to the Benin Embassy in the United States was sold without the government's consent. Biaou was arrested for a brief period in early 2006, and then released. As a member of the government, Biaou could not be tried without parliamentary approval.

Now, however, the case is pending in front of the High Court of Justice, which is the only court with the authority to try members of the government. Biaou's accomplices are already in jail and the minister should be tried soon.

Biaou's case is hardly unique. In July 2006, the Parliament sent Alain Adihou, another minister in the Kérékou administration, in front of the High Court of Justice for misuse of public funds. Adihou's ministry had been allocated funds to create a *Liste Electorale Permanente Informatisée* (Computerized Permanent Electoral Roll). Adihou never completed the project and large sums of the money disappeared.

A third minister of the Kérékou government, Cosme Sèhlin, was also arrested in July 2006 after Boni's election. Police reported finding large sums of illegally obtained money—amounting to approximately 20.8 billion francs (US\$40 million)—and other undisclosed, illegally procured and prohibited products in his home.

The corruption characteristic of the Kérékou administration was not contained just to the public sector. In June 2006, Justice officials arrested Séfou Fagbohoun, a prominent businessman, who was said to be untouchable under Kérékou. Fagbohoun is accused of mismanaging the national gas company (SONACOP— *Société Nationale de Commercialisation des Produits Pétroliers*), which he purchased under questionable circumstances. He is also accused of tax evasion, tax fraud and other white-collar crimes. Several high-ranking police officers have also been incarcerated for embezzlement since Boni took office.

“During the time of Mathieu Kérékou, you could see spreading corruption. You could see its effects on the economy, on new investment initiatives, on the life of citizens, it was obvious,” said Pascal Todjinou, secretary general of the General Confederation of Benin Workers (CGTB— *Confédération Générale Des Travailleurs du Bénin*).

Since his inauguration on April 6, 2006, Boni has shown the Beninese people that he plans to follow through on his promises for widespread reform, not only holding past officials accountable, but also by stressing the importance of integrity within his own administration.

“The president clearly told his ministers—who repeated this to us—that if they ever got involved in any kind of corruption, they better resign before he gets to know what happened,” said Jean-Baptiste Elias, a prominent corruption fighter and president of the Observatory to Fight Corruption (*Observatoire de Lutte contre la Corruption*), a publicly-funded, government watchdog group.

In his electoral campaign program, Boni wrote: “Eradication of economical delinquency is a short-term objective. We will take immediate good governance measures in order to eradicate corruption in all sectors...What will also change is the method of governance. While focusing on values such as rigor, civism, discipline, respect to public goods, ethics, obligation to accountable to the nation and obligation to bear results, our method of work will leave no place to impunity.”

In April, shortly after taking office, Boni and the members of his administration publicly disclosed their personal assets. Although the disclosure of high-ranking government officials’ private interests is stipulated in the Constitution, this was the first time the information was made public by so many government officials. Observers saw the move by the president as an early sign of transparency. The Boni administration has also adopted a code of ethics, which bans the practice of corruption from the government.

In June, Boni reactivated the State Inspector General, which he charged with investigating corruption wherever it happens, and regardless of who is involved. The State Inspector General replaced the ineffective Public Life Moralisation Unit (*Cellule de Moralisation de la Vie Publique*) which worked, without results, for 10 years (1996-2006) under the Kérékou administration. During those 10 years, corruption simply grew and grew.

“It became a national sport,” said trade union activist Francis Hounsou.

Although Benin’s Council of Ministers has gone as far as to institute a national day against corruption to combat graft, corruption continues to be entrenched in many aspects of Beninese daily life.

“We noticed that the tax departments, the customs, the police, the gendarmes, and the harbour of Cotonou are the places where corruption is very high in Benin,” Elias said. “Public contracts, justice and recently, the new decentralized administrations, are also corruption poles.”

Police still demand money on the road from taxi drivers, even if they have the correct documents. Custom officers keep on taking bribes from clients, and politicians continue to buy positive stories from willing journalists.

“Some people are born and raised in corruption. They can’t pay their rent, pay their bills and run their car without corruption. So, don’t expect those people to immediately give up corruption,” Todjinou said.

Custom officers are known to be particularly corrupt and resistant.

“It does not matter how honest you are or how correct is your business. The custom officers will [force] you to [pay bribes to] them, or you will not get through the customs and have your goods out,” complained a businessman at an official meeting with the head of state at the Presidential Palace on July 29, 2006.

Secretary General of the Chamber of Trade and Industry Chakirou Tidjani explained that custom officers often take advantage of merchants' rush to get their often perishable products on the market by slowing the process and thereby forcing the businesses to pay bribes or risk losing profits.

Due to Boni's reforms, however, it is becoming increasingly difficult for custom officers to demand bribes, Elias said. He added, however, that the officers have found a new way to get the money: by overtaxing the goods in order to force the client to negotiate a fairer price. In the negotiation, the officers receive the money they are chasing.

"The men of the old system are still in place. Only members of government have changed," Elias said. "But we got a strong signal from the president that impunity will decrease. Those who used to think that they are untouchable will soon face justice. Corruption, bad governance and embezzlements will no longer remain unpunished like in the past."