

By Sameh Fawzy Henien

On the Feb 3, 2006, Egyptians woke up to a great disaster: The Al-Salam Boccaccio 98 ferry sank shortly after leaving Saudi Arabia on its way to the Egyptian port of Safaga. Only 338 passengers survived out of 1,414 who were on board.

The parliamentary committee that investigated the catastrophe found that the ferry's owner had failed to meet a series of basic safety standards. The committee condemned "wicked collaboration" between the shipping company and some top government officials. The investigation indicated that the circumstances of the accident "point to a hideous image of corruption in a utility related to people's lives".

This is not an unusual incident in the Arab Republic of Egypt. Every day, Egyptian opposition and newspapers – both official and private – break stories about corrupt government officials. The high level of centralization, low pay structure, deeply rooted bureaucracy and the political influence on that bureaucracy all contribute to the problem. Over the last few years, high-profile corruption cases have resulted in lengthy trials, leading, in some incidents, to the conviction of several government officials. These have included a former minister of finance, a former head of the Customs Authority, a former governor of the Giza governorate, as well as some prominent bankers involved in corruption related to unpaid loans. Newspapers and laypeople also report cases for which no official action has been taken, so far.

In 2002 alone, as many as 48 high-ranking officials, including former cabinet ministers, provincial governors and members of parliament, were convicted of influence peddling, favoritism, profiteering and embezzlement. The current law regulating legal proceedings against cabinet ministers suspected of illegal activities dates back to the 1958-1961 Egyptian-Syrian union. The law, still in place in Egypt, has never been implemented.

The parliamentary elections in 2005 witnessed wide-scale cases of vote purchasing, as voters sold their votes in poor areas in return for 30 Egyptian pounds (US\$5) – the price of one kilo of beef. The purchase price for a vote soared to 1,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$175) in wealthy areas, especially in the Naser city constituency in Cairo.

In addition, Viagra pills, cigarettes stuffed with cannabis, mobile phones, clothes and food have been used to gain constituency in the elections.

In 2006, there was a campaign against former heads and chief editors of government newspapers and magazines. It has been proven that one of these editors, the head of Al-Ahram newspaper, has earned around 3 million Egyptian pounds (US\$525,854) per month; more than the combined monthly salaries of 1,500 journalists.

Unfortunately Egyptians are accustomed to these kinds of public crimes, which cost lives, kill hopes and perpetuate depression. Corruption is not only a crime,

but also a basic source of public despair. It makes people's lives miserable and their futures bleak.

In Egypt, corruption has been systematically embedded into daily life. People have to bribe public employees to get illegal permits and public goods. Even services to which people are lawfully entitled aren't accessible without "lubricating" the government's bureaucratic machine with money.

Public employees, in turn, are usually rent-seeking, looking for small cash tips from people to compensate the pitiful salaries they get. When my father passed away, I went to the special court where people obtain their "the inheritance declaration" after a relative dies. I was asked by the lawyer to give the court clerk five Egyptian pounds (US\$0.88) to receive my father's declaration without delay. I resisted at first, but conceded after I found everybody else bribing the secretary, who ends up collecting no less than 250 pounds (US\$44) a day – almost as much as his official monthly salary. While not a university graduate, the man's monthly income exceeds the salary of someone who holds a PhD and works in a government organization.

It is also common practice to pay civil clerks to move files ahead of other cases, speeding up the legal process.

There are four major governmental areas that are most associated with corruption: government purchases, customs and taxes, jobs recruitment and local administration.

Dr. Zakareya Azmy, the president's chief of staff and a prominent parliamentarian, describes local administration as "sinking up to its ears in corruption." The local authorities enjoy enormous power over people's day-to-day lives. They license shops, monitor markets and issue permits for erecting new buildings or repairing existing ones. Generally speaking, it is difficult to get the required license for any of these activities without paying the local employees, who sometimes constitute networks based on patronage distribution. If a contractor wishes to make a building that exceeds the legal height limits, he has to pay a bribe of around 100,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$17,528). The figure may decrease to half if he only wants to illegally install electricity or a clean water system in the building.

Local authorities benefit from the growth of the informal labor sector. In a country like Egypt, where around 5 million people work in this underground economy, the relationship between these workers and local authorities is crucial.

Consider this: Young street traders often sell their goods without authorization. They buy cheap Chinese imported commodities from wholesale merchants and sell them to the public in the crowded streets. Not only are these merchants tax evaders, to a certain extent they are cheaters, using every means to deceive low-class consumers who live in the suburbs of Cairo or visit the capital to buy cheap commodities. These sellers have to bribe the employees of the local authorities to let them illegally occupy the streets. However, due to the local authorities' rampant corruption, government inspectors sporadically roam streets to chase away illegal vendors.

In these situations, public employees sustain their interests and protect themselves, so the illegal vendors have to be vigilant and build their own safety network. They recruit young people scattered in the streets to quickly send warning in case of danger. During sudden official inspection campaigns, the vendors collect and pack their wares and hide, often in the small living rooms that belong to nearby buildings' guards, who charge a small amount of money in return.

The traffic is another example of daily corruption. If you want to avoid a harsh violation penalty, you can usually bribe the low-ranking street policemen 10 or 20 pounds (US\$1.75 or US\$3.50).

It is normal for small vans to break traffic laws in the streets of metropolitan Cairo. These vans are sometimes driven by underage, unlicensed drivers. Some analysts believe that these fleets of vans are covertly run by high-level bureaucratic officials in administrative and security positions who safeguard the vans' drivers and disregard all committed violations.

In Egypt, there are many watchdog organizations that cost a lot, but don't produce a clear outcome. Their jurisdictions overlap and their functions usually depend on the political will. Although the laws governing these monitoring organizations do not require secrecy, their periodic reports tend to be difficult to access. Politicians (including People's Assembly members), journalists, academics and laypeople find it difficult to obtain these reports for accurate information about the drain of public resources.

Corruption has become a myth in a society like Egypt: People talk a lot about it, while accurate information relating to the phenomenon is rare.