

By Hamadou Tidiane SY

There's a French saying that "a boom in the building sector generates a boom for every other business." Now that Senegal is seeing a real construction boom, one would expect everything to boom as well—including corruption.

Many Senegalese will tell you there's no better place to make money (I have a friend who always differentiates between making money and earning money) than the construction and public works sector.

In Dakar in 2006, one can see the evidence on every corner: New buildings rise, roads are built, and projects are launched almost every week. Yet, people are becoming too rich too quickly in this poor African country, especially considering the low official incomes of civil servants and government officials.

The dilemma for anyone fighting for political integrity, stronger ethics and increased transparency is knowing how to progress from changing simple perceptions and beliefs, to the much more delicate and challenging task of proving corruption and bad governance, whether they are a journalist, academic or a member of civil society.

The construction sector is a perfect example of these challenges. Between July 2005 and June 2006, this industry became the stage of many corruption scandals, including the biggest scandal in Senegal's history since its independence in 1960.

It began when President Abdoulaye Wade accused his former Prime Minister Idrissa Seck of corruption in July 2005. Seck was swiftly investigated and sent to prison for embezzling public funds designated for reconstructing his hometown of Thiès. He was eventually released under circumstances that remain as unclear as the destination of the millions he allegedly stole, prompting his defenders to say that his case was simply "politically motivated."

In June 2006, an unknown young man named Malick Ndiaye accused Abdoulaye Baldé, a top civil servant in the office of the president, of allegedly receiving large bribes from private building companies involved in a huge public works project for renovating Dakar. Ndiaye was eventually taken to prison for defamation, but no serious investigation of Balde was undertaken, despite heavy media attention. The two examples help illustrate the different treatment garnered by "politically motivated" cases such as that of the former prime minister and "media generated" cases like that of Baldé.

The major obstacles to fighting corruption fall into three realms: institutional, political and social, according to Jacques Habib Sy, head of the Dakar-based non-governmental organization, Aid Transparency. "At the government level, there's a culture of secrecy inherited from the colonial times... and with it a marked tendency to classify every administrative document as a 'state secret,'" Sy said. This tendency makes access to information so difficult—even illegal—that anyone trying to expose corruption cases with documented evidence is easily caught in their own trap.

Mouhamadou Mbodj, coordinator of the anti-corruption watchdog Forum Civil, put it this way: “When you expose a corruption case as a journalist, you are accused of defaming someone and asked to bring the evidence you have. When you exhibit your evidence, you are accused of receiving and exposing administrative documents, which is equally punished by the law.”

Three journalists working for the privately-owned newspapers L’Observateur and le Courrier du Jour experienced this harsh legal reality when they decided to run a story then widely circulating in private circles alleging that Karim Wade, the son of the Senegalese president and one of his top advisers and confidantes, was involved in an illegal transfer of funds out of the country. In its December 2005 verdict, the court imposed heavy fines on all three journalists. Several other journalists and at least one opposition leader faced similar charges in 2005 and 2006. Journalists and civil society groups are becoming more frustrated with the courts which, instead of asking alleged fraudsters to prove the origin of their wealth, are taking a tougher stance against whoever exposes misconduct. Whistle-blowers are encouraged in other countries and often afforded legal protection from the state.

Under these circumstances, one wonders how Senegal will achieve transparency and integrity in its public affairs. The government established the National Commission against Corruption and for Transparency in 2004, but its own members complain they do not have the legal or financial means to achieve substantial results. Furthermore, the Commission cannot take matters to court, and only reports to the Senegalese president once a year.

Beyond these institutional and political hurdles, one must also face the more entrenched social and political realities of the country, where petty bribery and minor corruption are subtly veiled behind traditional social practices. Corruption spreads further in Senegalese society every day because “at the cultural level, there’s a tacit acceptance of corrupt practices, which are perceived as a necessary step to accessing simple political, economic and social rights,” Sy explained. In a society where gifts are socially accepted, it is difficult to differentiate between a “genuine” gift and one given by a political leader or wealthy businessman to anyone who may expose him or witness his shady deeds.

Because of these social and cultural values, “tackling petty corruption may be difficult,” said Pape Samba Kane, a journalist who recently published a book revealing how business leaders and other people in power manipulate Senegal’s laws. However, he said, “it is no excuse. State corruption is vulnerable when people start combating it through scientifically proven methods.”