

By Walid Al-Saqaf

If you have ever visited the Republic of Yemen before, you may well have heard about “hag-al-gat.” This term literally means “money to buy qat.” This phrase is a well-established protocol for demanding a bribe.

Qat is a narcotic plant. Its leaves are chewed by the majority of Yemeni adults near the end of every day across Yemen, where 40 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.

If a traffic policeman stops you near a traffic light and asks for hag-al-gat, he is politely asking you for a bribe. In exchange, he will not issue you a ticket. Don't try to argue, just give him 500 rial (US\$3) and avoid a long and painful argument with one or, perhaps eventually, several traffic policemen.

Unlike other countries around the world, there are no standards that could be used to define how much a hag-al-gat would be for a specific duty. It largely depends on the amount of work the person requesting the bribe is willing to do, along with his mood and possibly your tribal or political affiliation. It may cost 100 rial (US\$0.50) to get a document notarized in a small police station and rise to millions of rial handed in sacks to a judge in order to reverse a verdict that is about to be issued in his court.

Of course, to secure the verdict even further, perhaps a few bundles of fresh and expensive Hamdani qat may help as well. Qat constitutes the second largest household expense for an average Yemeni family, often taking up a third of the family's budget. The Yemeni economy posts a 250 billion rial (US\$1.2 billion) annual loss due to the consumption of this narcotic. To counteract this, the government has initiated a five-year plan to eradicate qat.

On the other hand, hag-al-gat has helped plenty of people, including Ali Al-Saman, who was saved from unemployment because of hag-al-gat. In a country that suffers from a staggering 35 percent unemployment rate, Ali knew, with his 62 percent high school score, there was no way he could get a decent job. After struggling for months to find work, Ali was told he could buy a life-long governmental post for as little as 150,000 rial (US\$759). He took his chances and paid hag-al-gat. Today, he enjoys a decent government position and a new career.

During his school years, Ahmed would pay fees to his school to help pay to paint the classroom or renovate a laboratory, and so on. He never saw the implementation of those pledges and often wondered why. As he grew up, he realized that the school management and teachers were pocketing the money. He never dared to complain, because he knew he would be asking for trouble. In fact, he asked me not to publish his last name, fearing consequences from school management. (Most of the people interviewed for this story were unwilling to have their names published for similar reasons.)

The Yemeni press has published many stories about corruption in education, sometimes with disastrous consequences for the journalists involved. A Yemeni newspaper, Al-Wasat, was sued and its editor-in-chief kidnapped by armed forces after publishing the names of the sons of government officials. The paper alleged

that these students were improperly granted academic scholarships to study abroad.

Just as education is heavily infested with corruption, so is the health sector. According to a medical doctor, surgeries funded by international donors to support the poor are actually sold by public officials. Meanwhile, a professional at a public hospital told me that the cashier deducts at least 0.1 percent of the monthly salaries of most employees. “This may seem a small amount,” she said, “but when added up for all the 1,000-plus employees in the hospital, it amounts to more than two times his own salary.”

I spoke with a cashier, Abubakr, who works with a large army unit in the capital, Sanaa. He had nothing but good news to report.

“God has blessed me with a luxurious life, many real estate properties and brand new cars,” he said with pride, adding that his boss is quite happy with his performance. He is responsible for distributing salaries to a list of missing people and made-up names. They don’t really get paid, of course. Every month, he transfers about 18 million rial (US\$91,100) to his manager.

It is believed that corruption in the army, which receives close to 200 billion rial (US\$1 billion) in aid annually, is on a mammoth scale, but the regime’s unwillingness to reveal detailed expense reports makes tracking the embezzled money a serious challenge.

Abdullah works for the army and enjoys lots of financial resources from the military budget. When a batch of cars arrives to the military camp under the names of “imaginary” soldiers, most of those cars go directly to the top military officers. Some get sold on the black market.

“I sometimes get a decent commission selling car,” Abdullah said, adding that he is also allowed free gasoline and diesel daily.

Small-scale corruption takes place daily in various governmental institutions, including the Tax and Customs Authorities. According to Nasser, who works as a collector for the Tax Authority, his district sends about 3 million rial (US\$15,179) to the authority monthly. The actual amount collected averages 13 million rial (US\$65,776); meaning more than three quarters of the tax collected goes directly to the authority’s crooks.

Meanwhile, it’s another good day for Hamed, who works at the Customs Authority. “I’ve just received another 3,000 rial (US\$15) for exempting a fellow from customs duty,” he said, adding that this is nothing compared to the “millions” that the top officers at the authority get.

If you were importing goods into the country and wanted to avoid taxes or paperwork, you could pay an extra 25 percent to get your goods through without official documentation. As a result of these transactions, defective medicine has been smuggled into the country right through official border points.

Many government employees envy those working at the Bids and Tenders Committee headed by the Minister of Finance. Bids and Tenders is a fertile ground for corruption and produces massive commissions, which can make crooked officials millionaires. This is precisely what happened to a committee member who was quite poor when he entered the committee years ago. Today, he owns a villa worth 45 million rial (US\$228,686) in a modern district of the capital.

Meanwhile, the business sector has learned to cope with these tenders and bids, and through bribes, gifts and other means, many are able to win deals regardless of their qualifications.

But Finance isn't the only ministry that presents opportunities for graft. One accounting department employee at the Ministry of Information reports that the more than 2 billion rial (US\$10 million) is unaccounted for in his ministry. He expressed little hope of retrieving it or punishing those involved.

Ultimately, these examples are dwarfed when compared to the massive corruption taking place in the upper levels of the government, particularly when suspicious oil and international contracts are involved. It was recently revealed that 204 billion rial (US\$1 billion) has been illegally distributed, embezzled, uncollected or is otherwise unaccounted for in the Parliament.

Despite his 28 years in power, President Ali Abdullah Saleh confessed in many speeches that the time has come for him to fight corruption. Until June 2006, Saleh resisted calls to run for office again in the September 2006 presidential elections, arguing that he did not want to be an "umbrella for the corrupt."

But after deciding to enter the race, he ran on a platform of uprooting corruption, a phenomenon that pervades every government agency in this poverty-stricken country. Nearly everyone shares this view. Opinion surveys by Transparency International rank Yemen behind all countries in the Arabian Peninsula, except Iraq and occupied Palestine.

The irony is that there are many cases of documented corruption that could indict officials and their affiliates. Each institution is arranged like dominos – just one nudge could send the chain tumbling. However, legal action has never taken place, not even once, which reinforces the opinion that the government does not want any of these officials to be prosecuted.

Those in power will never allow the dominos to fall for fear that each, in turn, would knock the next, and the next, until every last piece is taken down.