

By Sarah Akrofi-Quarcoo

Last year, surveys by Transparency International showed that more people in Ghana believe the country has a corruption problem. Upon hearing this news, I was jubilant. For me, the increasingly negative views showed that our society is cleaning up. A change in perception implies a change in attitude. Ghana was saying no to “*Abaayeni*” – a Ga expression that literally means “man must chop.”

The culture of the “chop,” the need to eat, is still pervasive in Ghana. But with increasing frequency, there are people willing to decry the status quo and expose corruption.

As I write this report, a committee of enquiry set up by the Interior Ministry is sitting on one of the country’s biggest scandals ever. It is a case of alleged bribery and drug trafficking; at its core are the Ghana Police service and other security agencies.

The scandal revolves around the enquiry committee’s investigation of a May 2006 raid of an impounded vessel, the MV Benjamin. On board were 2,000 kilograms of cocaine that allegedly belonged to a Venezuelan living in Ghana. The massive drug bust has sprawled into a political scandal, as it suggests that a number of high-ranking police officials are collaborating with the drug barons.

The director general of police operations has been suspended, on the orders of the Interior Ministry, after the discovery of a tape that revealed his meeting with four suspected drug traffickers. The secretly recorded tape was passed from a high-ranking official of the Food and Drugs Board to the head of state and now, figuratively, hangs around the director general’s neck.

The scandal continues. Immigration officials, when questioned, failed to produce documents regarding the travel history of some South Americans linked to case. A star witness for the committee claims she received 2.8 billion cedis (US\$300,000) from the Venezuelan. The money, she says, was intended to bribe the police.

In some countries, such a public disgrace would be unmentionable. But the press, radio and TV have been awash with stories on the scandal. Thanks to a pluralistic environment, a more vibrant media is up to the task of providing up-to-date

information and engendering public discussion on the committee's proceedings, which have so far been open to the press. However, media accountability for the quality of reporting has come under intense public scrutiny as some newspapers have begun to politicize the issue.

People I interviewed about the drug scandal have called for wholesale resignations of the inspector general of police (IGP) and all those connected to the crime. Their position has resonated in radio phone-in programs across the country. Callers were outraged over news reports that the IGP and one of the drug barons have been friends for more than 20 years.

Long before this scandal broke out, public perception of the police and corruption has been generally negative. The police have often been openly condemned in the media, and in conversations on the street for taking bribes from motorists, during vehicle registration and when handling court cases – events seen as “eating places” by some officers. Not surprisingly, the police topped a list of negatively viewed organizations in a 2005 Ghana Integrity Initiative (GII) study.

In a recent scandal, a police prosecutor plotted with the accused's counsel, allegedly accepting bribes to tamper with a rape case he was handling. The prosecutor, as reported by *The Mirror*, gave the victim and her mother the wrong date for the court hearing and managed to secure bail for the accused. In this case, Nana Oye Lithur, a human rights lawyer, intervened and exposed a plot that otherwise would have succeeded.

Undoubtedly, the police are not the only ones who “chop” in Ghana. In the case above, the accused reportedly bribed not only the prosecutor, but also two uncles of the victim.

The average Ghanaian believes “*Obiara didi wo ni edzuma hu,*” meaning that all people “chop” around their place of work. That is how Ghanaians are able to live despite poor salaries and working conditions; the average Ghanaian is paid about 9200 cedi (US\$1) a day. In a public opinion survey published by GII in 2005, 70 percent of respondents admitted they had “been involved in bribery and corruption either as victims or perpetrators and accept the practice as normal.

The police are not the only institution with a reputation problem; the GII report also listed the Ministry of Education, the Judiciary Service, Public/Civil Service, Ministry

of Health, Customs, Excise and Preventive Service and the Immigration Service among the least trusted organizations. A report by the Public Affairs Committee of Parliament named the Ministries of Education and Health as engaging in an array of corrupt practices including embezzlement, payments not supported by vouchers, vouchers not presented for audit, non-retirement of advances, unearned salaries, items not routed through accredited stores and payment of unearned salaries to officers.

The report also cited the Value Added Tax Services, Ghana's internal revenue service, for failing to collect taxes, and the Customs Excise and Preventative Service for failing to collect annual warehouse renewal fees.

There is no empirical evidence to indicate how much money public officers collect through bribes. One can get an indication, however, through personal stories of victims. My friend Catherine told me she paid a bribe of 15 million cedis (US\$1,630) to someone connected to a customs official at the harbor, in order to facilitate the clearance of a container of goods she imported for sale. Despite the bribe, no receipt was issued for the transaction. She forgot that there were other customs and road traffic officials on the route to her destination, many of whom cashed in on the fact that she had no official documents covering the goods.

I spoke with Florence Dennis, executive secretary of the Ghana Anti-Corruption Committee, about corruption in Ghana. She said she believes the country is improving. Dennis argued that Ghanaians perceive corruption to be rising because of the intense media spotlight on the issue. The Freedom of Information Bill "when passed, will further empower the media to expose wrongdoing," she said.

Ghanian journalists can take some pride in their recent record. They exposed what became known as the "Hotel Kufour Saga" that led to the investigation of the president by the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ).

In another case, the media dug up a case of impropriety involving Dr. Richard Anane, then the Minister of Health, who later appeared before the CHRAJ. It is risky to generalize from the two instances and argue that the government's openness and accountability are improving. There is no doubt, however, that the media is a positive force in the fight to hold government accountable.

The government itself has also made efforts. The Whistleblower Law was passed in August 2006. Currently before Parliament is a new bill – the Proceeds of Crime Bill – aimed at empowering the security agencies to investigate and compel people to declare their sources of income and how they have acquired their property. Apart from exposing corruption among public officers, the proposed law is expected to bring about more openness and accountability to all sectors.

The political will to fight corruption has been clearly declared by the ruling government. Media and common citizens are likewise growing impatient with the culture of the “chop.” Translating this will into action, however, remains a challenge.