

By Global Integrity

The pay slip of a civil servant in Zimbabwe bears the following inscription: “Live within your means; shun corruption.”

Here in Zimbabwe, corruption in both the public and private sectors is endemic. In fact, things are so bad here that in 2005 President Robert Mugabe established an entirely new ministry, the Ministry of Anti-Corruption, as well as an Anti-Corruption Commission chaired by a former comptroller and auditor general.

Nevertheless, for Zimbabweans, graft is a part of life and death alike. Zimbabweans of all classes – from the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) elite to the impoverished vast majority of the population – have no qualms whatsoever about bribing public servants to get documents such as birth certificates, national identity cards, passports – even death certificates.

The amount of the bribe varies according to the importance of the document. A brown envelope with \$10 million Zimbabwe dollars (US\$41) secures most public documents available through the national registrar’s office. However, passports, which are in great demand as impoverished Zimbabweans seek opportunities overseas and in neighboring South Africa and Botswana, command a steeper bribe in order to be processed in under a week.

Both petty and grand-scale corruption have been steadily increasing over the last five years, according to Transparency International of Zimbabwe (TIZ) and the African Parliamentarians Network Against Corruption (APNAC), two advocacy groups campaigning against graft.

Speaking in hushed tones, public officials say they need the bribes to supplement meager salaries in a country where the average person survives on less than a dollar per day.

Tobaiwa Mudede, the Registrar General, heads the national office that issues birth certificates, national identity cards, travel documents and other public documents. In January 2005, he fired eight senior passport officers for demanding bribes. “We have zero tolerance for corruption,” Mudede told this reporter. The corruption is not only in public offices, but also in other sectors of the tottering economy, which is in its seventh consecutive year of recession. In 2005, several high-ranking banking, business and legal executives who were facing corruption charges fled the country and its anti-corruption dragnet, which has to date successfully prosecuted only petty offenders.

James Makamba, a former ruling party central committee member and ZANU PF legislator, jumped bail in August 2005 over allegations of externalizing foreign currency. High Court Judge Benjamin Paradza also skipped the country after being convicted on two counts of corruption for allegedly attempting to influence two other judges to release a passport of a business colleague facing murder charges.

Both the businessman and the judge, who are reportedly hiding out in the United Kingdom and New Zealand respectively, alleged political prosecution by President Mugabe's government—charges authorities in Harare, the capital city, vehemently deny.

When President Mugabe's favorite nephew, Leo Mugabe, was arrested in October 2005 for allegedly smuggling contraband valued at \$150 billion Zimbabwe dollars (US\$621,858) to Mozambique, impoverished Zimbabweans held hope that the government was finally cracking down on graft at the top. This was less than six months after the president spoke out against corruption and set up the Ministry of Anti-Corruption.

But three weeks later, Leo was acquitted due to lack of incriminating evidence, despite the truckload of flour and fertilizer—contraband items under Zimbabwe law—that was impounded and traced to Leo's company. The items were later sold at public auction by Zimbabwe revenue authorities.

"People come up with all sort of allegations because I am related to the president," Leo told this reporter in an interview during which he denied involvement in the smuggling of goods to neighboring Mozambique.

"These are my political enemies who are just jealous of my business and political success," he said. "I am not corrupt. My business dealing is above board. I have been acquitted by the courts of the land on the smuggling, and that's that."

Leo says he does not understand why his name always pops up when graft or corruption scandals are written about in the local media. "I am not a litigious person, if I were, most newspapers would be in hot [water]," added Leo, who was also named in the controversy surrounding the construction of the new Harare International Airport in the early 1990s.

Anti-graft campaigners in Zimbabwe say that despite speaking out publicly against graft and setting up the Ministry of Anti-Corruption, President Mugabe's anti-corruption efforts seem fruitless, since the ministry has failed to take action or successfully prosecute any culprits.

In interviews with this reporter, anti-graft campaigners accused the president of not "walking the walk."

Since independence from colonial Britain, the campaigners pointed out, President Mugabe has set up several commissions to investigate corruption, but their findings have never been publicized because they involved either senior government officials or the rich.

The findings of the Willowvale car scandal (which became known as "Willowgate"), for example, in which government ministers acquired cars at concessionary rates and later sold them at exorbitant prices to unsuspecting members of the public, were somewhat swept under the carpet (though several ministers were ultimately forced to resign). Findings that the War Victims Compensation Fund was looted by government ministers and party officials, as well as accusations that President Mugabe's inner circle awarded themselves

more than one farm each under the president's land reform program have also gone relatively unnoticed (though some veterans were ultimately compensated).

Sunsleey Chamunorwa, editor-in-chief of the country's leading financial and political weekly, has this advice for the Zimbabwean leader: "Actions speak louder than words, Mr. President," Chamunorwa wrote in one of his weekly columns. "To a visitor from Mars, President Mugabe easily passes for someone who takes umbrage at corruption if only public statements and their elaboration tones are anything to go by," he wrote. "To Zimbabweans, the sincerity, commitment and political will of President Mugabe's government to rid the country of corruption remains highly debatable."

Zimbabwe continues to score high on the corruption charts despite spirited attempts by Harare to root out the scourge pervasive in both the private and public sectors, added Chamunorwa, whose paper regularly exposes corruption.

Mary Jane, a researcher with Transparency International of Zimbabwe, says although the country has ratified various international protocols and entered into regional partnerships to fight corruption, it continues to move up the corruption barometer due to massive illegal deals, which have become the normal way of doing business.

"Much of the government's fight has proved to be only rhetoric as allegations of grand corruption cases involving high-level officials go uninvestigated and consequently unpunished," said Jane. "If investigations of corruption do not lead to prosecutions, then public confidence on the legitimacy of the government's political will to fight corruption wanes."

Kindness Paradza, the secretary general of APNAC and former ruling party legislator, added his thoughts on the state of corruption and accountability in Zimbabwe:

"The absence of the rule of law and poor governance are fueling graft with senior [ruling party officials] and ZANU PF officials [are] becoming immune to prosecution."