

The case of John Githongo and Kenya

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I'm now the author of three books on Africa. With the first two, I became accustomed to a certain chronology of events. You wrote the book, it was published, you promoted it energetically on the radio, television and at the odd conference. And then, after about three months - six at most - the interview requests and invitations dribbled away and you would be left in peace to start the next one.

With my latest book that's not what happened. More than two years after publication, I'm still being invited to talk about it. I can't really claim this is a tribute to the prose. What it indicates, rather, is the universality of the themes explored in the book, and how many people see their own daily moral dilemmas in those of its protagonist, John Githongo, who in 2006 blew the whistle on a massive corruption scandal at the top of Kenyan government.

Strangers email or befriend me on Facebook from across Africa. "Change a few names and this is us you are talking about," say readers in Sudan, Zambia, Malawi, Nigeria and Zimbabwe. But the messages come from beyond the continent, too, because there's nothing uniquely African about the situation depicted in the book's pages. I have heard from Malaysians, Bangladeshis and Croatians. "This is my society you are describing," they claim.

And now the Arab spring provides a whole new set of echoes. Disgust with corrupt state systems and contempt for the elites who benefit from them is one of the factors that has brought young people out onto the streets and squares of Egypt, Tunisia and Syria. What is happening in the Maghreb and the Middle East illustrates one of the key points I argue in the book, that corruption – which is too often dismissed by development experts as unappealing but essentially trivial – does more than eat away at a country's economy. It can, if left unaddressed too long, lead to the violent implosion of a state.

John Githongo started out as a magazine columnist and then became director of Kenya's branch of Transparency International, the international anti-corruption organisation. When Kenya's opposition movement won the 2002 elections, John was appointed anti-corruption czar by the new president, Mwai Kibaki. The opposition had won the elections promising to sweep away the sleaze of the previous 24 years under Daniel arap Moi. Euphoric Kenyans declared it was time to root out the culture of "kitu kidogo", in which every official transaction required the payment of a 'little something', with that 'little something' turning out to be hundreds of millions of dollars when it came to government's upper echelons.

One of the big decisions John swiftly had to make was whether his work was going to be "ethnically sensitive". John was a Kikuyu, part of the same ethnic community as Kibaki. His father was a political fundraiser for Kibaki and he comes from the same small, well-off social set. John knew that what you have in Kenya is essentially a rotating system of tribal elites who feel that control of the presidency, a key ministry or a parastatal, gives them the right to "eat".

“Eating” is a wonderful euphemism for “gorging at the public trough”. Each political Big Man tells his ethnic community: “Vote for me and I will provide jobs for our boys, contracts for our businessmen and investment in our constituency, irrespective of merit and experience. And if I get fat, if you see me buying flashy cars and building large villas, if my wife and daughters are spotted on shopping sprees in Manhattan and London, turn a blind eye. Because it’s all part of the deal. I’m really stealing for all of us.” This is personal greed camouflaged as a civic duty, a noble service to the tribe.

In the African societies in which I’ve lived, the favoured “us” and the despised “them” who are to be conned and ignored under this arrangement are defined by ethnicity. That’s a fact rooted in Africa’s history of recent nation states – Kenya, for example, has only been an independent country since 1963. But the same patterns of behaviour are repeated across the globe, with different criteria determining the ‘us’ and the ‘them’. In a country like Lebanon, application of the “it’s our turn to eat” philosophy might be premised on whether one is Christian or Moslem, for example, in Northern Ireland whether one is Protestant or Catholic and in Bangladesh, I’m told, clan membership is the deciding factor. This is a zero sum game, with an individual’s survival chances determined by not his skills, intelligence or hard work, but by the question of whether he does or doesn’t belong to the favoured set.

Very soon, John Githongo was presented with situation that went to the heart of who he was and what he believed in. He began to get strong indications of a new procurement scandal being hatched by ministers, involving 18 military and security contracts worth nearly a billion dollars. It was easy enough to promise to investigate the scams hatched under Moi, a Kalenjin. But would John, a Kikuyu working for a Kikuyu president and Kikuyu-dominated regime, show the same enthusiasm when investigating his own people?

The predicament he faced is one that confronts millions of civil servants and company workers every day: to turn a blind eye, behave in the way expected by his peers, or to do the job he had actually been paid for. He had every reason to stay silent: good job, nice house, decent perks, a family that wanted a quiet life, a girlfriend who hoped to get married.

Amazingly, John not only chose **not** to exclude Kibaki’s most trusted ministers from his investigations, he made them a special target. That’s partly because of who he was: a deeply moral, highly religious, urbanised and very cosmopolitan Kenyan, who believed in a non-tribal system of rule. He was disgusted by the phrase “It’s Our Turn to Eat.”. He thought of himself as a Kenyan first, a good Christian second, a Kikuyu third. When ministers appealed to him to keep quiet for the sake of his community, they were, in his eyes, perverting the very concept of ethnic pride.

He did something unacceptable in the eyes of many of his fellow Kikuyu, secretly recording the conversations of the ministers involved in Anglo Leasing, as the 18 dodgy contracts became known. He finally fled Kenya when he realised Kibaki was no more interested in fighting corruption than his ministers. He hid up in London – in my flat, amongst other places – and eventually, having mulled the issue over one long, agonising year, went public with the taped material.

The purpose of my book was not simply to attack a corrupt set of cabinet ministers and a complacent president. My target is also the Western donor governments and international finance bodies like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, who routinely play down the importance of corruption, including that festering within their own ranks. They shrug their shoulders, pretend not to see, and in the process they become complicit in a political elite's systematic looting of a state, a state they are supposed to be strengthening and shoring up with their aid.

They may do this for the best of intentions – it's time-consuming, costly, and fiddly to prevent 'leakage', as economists delicately label corruption – but the result is a betrayal of both Western taxpayers who fund foreign aid and the African citizens who are meant to benefit from it, but so rarely do. The problem is not merely that money goes missing. The kind of corruption I describe is immensely destabilising, because large sections of the population realise they are being brushed aside and, increasingly, blame their problems on the favoured group. The rivalry becomes toxic.

In Kenya's case, the country went into its 2007/8 elections with hostility between its big ethnic blocs at an unprecedented high. The country's other tribes became convinced the Kikuyus were rigging the polls in order to "eat" indefinitely. The ethnic cleansing that followed left 1,500 dead and created hundreds of thousands of internal refugees. They were the most violent elections in Kenyan history and the country stood on the brink of a military takeover, or full-fledged civil war.

Those wounds have yet to heal. Many fear that the next elections, due in 2012, could see a second bout of bloodletting, as retribution is sought for the rapes, killings and farm evictions five years earlier. John Githongo, who is now back in Kenya working in the non-governmental sector, says the looting at the top of the transitional government has reached gargantuan proportions as each political party prepares its war chest. But there is one difference with the past. A massive shift in perception has taken place amongst the ordinary public, if not the elite. An agonising process of self-examination is taking place. Corruption is seen as absolutely intrinsic to the country's woes.

One has to be wary of generalisations. The temptation to see sweeping similarities between radically distinct societies can be blamed for what is looking like an increasingly foolish military intervention in Libya, for example. But I believe certain broad motifs emerge from the John Githongo story.

The first is that rampant corruption is rooted in a sense of entitlement. In Kenya's case, the Kikuyu elite was convinced it was entitled to run the country. The founding father of modern Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, was a Kikuyu. The community was the first to be exposed to Western capitalism and embraced modernity with a vengeance, assimilating faster than any others and becoming the economically dominant tribe. Then it was boxed out of power by a Kalenjin president for 24 years. It felt it was morally justified in making up for the lost years. The longer a group spends in the cold, the more keenly the sense of entitlement becomes, and the greedier the regime that follows. A vicious cycle of alienation and outrageous plundering forms.

Another lesson is the importance of personal example. We all model our behaviour on those above us, and particularly on the person at the top of the chain. If your president says – as happened in Zaire under Mobutu Sese Seko – that it’s acceptable to “steal a little”, you will act accordingly. If, in contrast, your president is Nelson Mandela, you will be inspired to try and live up to a higher ideal. The John Githongo story matters not so much because of its eventual outcome – no one has yet been sentenced or jailed over Anglo Leasing – but because it gave Africans an exciting new role model. It was the first time in African history that a civil servant of such stature and prominence decided to obey his conscience rather than play the game. In future, others will look at this case and think: “John Githongo did that, and he survived. It’s possible.”

Another lesson is that the creation of anti-corruption commissions and units, something enthusiastically encouraged by Western donor nations in the past, is not the answer. Such institutions, with their top-down methodology, are easily co-opted or emasculated by the powerful. In South Africa, the Scorpions unit were disbanded. In Kenya, the Kenya Anti Corruption Commission was shown to be part of the problem during Anglo Leasing. In Sierra Leone a series of anti-corruption chiefs have come and gone. Tellingly, John Githongo now focuses his energies on grassroots mobilisation, the painstaking task of showing people how they can hold their councillors and MPs to account at a local level.

The fight against corruption boils down to boring, laborious work: boosting the independence of the judiciary, establishing the integrity of the public prosecutor’s office, cleaning up the police force and shoring up parliament. This is a job that can take decades, but there is no silver bullet, no short cut. It’s hard work, but altering human behaviour always is. And the work will not be done by outsiders, it will come from citizens who decide to reject the “eating” philosophy of old, because they are hungry for change. As the Arab spring has reminded us, revolution is a domestic product.

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