

A Meditation on Corruption

Jackie Selebi is now in jail. Found guilty of engaging in illegal financial transactions for personal gain, otherwise known as corruption, he is serving a 15-year jail sentence. Many will feel "justice has been done". A highly credentialed "big fish" of the new dispensation has finally been put behind bars.

Who will be next among high-profile candidates who feature prominently under a cloud of suspicion in the national news? Who among them will be the next to fall from grace?

But there is another question that deserves attention: just how far can the tide of this social and economic epidemic be significantly reversed by the arrest and imprisonment of the prominent corrupt when they are its viral agents?

The scourge of corruption, as we all know, cannot be entirely eliminated. Keeping it at bay effectively is what most societies try to do at best. The successful ones keep it at bay through strong governance systems and highly professionalised institutions.

These derive their mandate, authority and legitimacy from legal instruments founded on their respective national constitutions. Strong value-based institutions exert ethical and moral constraints over and above legal ones.

But what happens where the scourge seems to be growing at a rate faster and more persistent than the social capacity of the state to contain it? What if the seeds of its spread are to be found in the social conditions of the society itself?

Consider that Jackie Selebi has been a member of a powerful social group that shares the circumstances that finally sent him to jail. Moeletsi Mbeki has made an incisive analysis of social groups in current South Africa in the context of which one can understand certain dynamics.

Since 1994, Selebi's particular group, which Mbeki describes as the "bureaucratic bourgeoisie" has been in control of the state and has managed its wealth, largely a social and economic legacy of South Africa's

history of colonialism and racist oppression.

This accumulated wealth suddenly became available and accessible to Selebi's ascendent group through political power.

It has wielded this power in conditions in which the genuine personal material needs of its members, shaped by historic deprivation, brutally compete with social commitment that once gave meaning to the struggle for liberation. In this tension, personal needs, with political power now at their disposal, will tend to trump social commitment. And the more that power yields material gratifications of all kinds, the deeper grows the impulse to hold on to it.

Access to accumulated state wealth reduces any inclination there may ever have been to re-order society to create new conditions for new wealth. The wealth now available will be spent far more than it can be replaced or grown.

In such situations, justifications to hold on to power abound. These may include messianic notions of permanent power, "until Jesus returns"; or notions that no one else can bring about the necessary social transformations – only the leaders of the group in power can.

For such consecrated leadership, constitutional rule soon becomes an impediment. It imposes the requirement of effort that is often too demanding on personal and group capability.

Indeed the collective capability immediately available to the group sets the standards and the norms for maintaining group cohesion.

These norms and standards are then reproduced internally and become more and more distant from external realities and the pressures they may impose.

The group then becomes prone to new solidarities that eventually become corruptive.

Soon, group interest substitutes for constitutional rule. The once revolutionary commitment to radical social transformation is replaced by opportunisms of the moment.

Selebi's social group further defined its character when it fractured into two sub-groups.

One sub-group negotiated with the moneyed asset holders who have historically built South African capitalism, to share its assets. Black Economic Empowerment was designed as the preferred mechanism.

The second sub-group successfully mobilised both the working class and the underclass of millions of the poor and unemployed to gain political power.

With direct access to enormous state wealth, it began an unprecedented looting of the fiscus at various levels of fiscal management. Examples of splurging abound to indicate a looting well under way.

Meanwhile, traditional capitalists, overwhelmingly white, lost the buffer of the sub-group that first negotiated with them, and are now directly exposed to the sub-group in power. They are vulnerable to various forms of extortion.

At this point, the political indulgence of personal material needs results in something far more deeply menacing for the body politic. It results in corruptive collusions.

These collusions become new foundations of group solidarity. They effectively replace the old solidarities of struggle. The latter, though, can continue to be invoked and retained more as a necessary mantra of commitment, and far less as an objective to be pursued.

Corruptive collusions offer group protection and will be hostile towards any regulatory measures, whatever their merits, which emanate from outside the group. Even the national constitution is an outside phenomenon.

Any guilt from abandoning struggle values the group will share through ritualistic recalls of past heroism and numerous political declarations of intent and a plethora of policies.

They deploy the mantras of "poverty reduction", "job creation", "combating crime and corruption". These mantras have high appeal. But their effect weakens only because the more the sub-group in power

asserts itself through a corrupted perspective, the less capability it demonstrates for solving social problems that require committed and principled effort.

Thus, the corrupted perspective achieves a defining outcome: it conceals the real power of personal material needs and its enormous capacity to violate a committed and principled attention to radical social transformation.

Corrupt concealment becomes the primary mechanism by which corruption in general spreads throughout the body politic. The impact on state governance is severe. Corruption becomes a principle of solidarity. It feeds and maintains solidarity.

The political party thus infected becomes itself the very agent of corruption. Corruption becomes its *raison d'être*, lived but never declared; condemned generally, never specifically; and threatened but never rooted out.

So, no matter how many Jackie Selebis can be jailed, many more are concealed under the cloud of the cohesive power of corrupted solidarities. The corrupted system, in order to preserve itself, will never expose them.

Instead it will work to evolve more inventive, and increasingly more invasive, ways of concealing their presence and their dark intentions.

Corruption in South Africa then comes across as both transactional and then as a mode of perceiving the political and economic reality and the possibilities that reality offers. Concealment is its necessary method of operation.

Indeed, corruption and concealment are two sides of the same coin. Seen from this perspective, South Africa may currently be moving through a dangerous transitional phase from the ad hoc practice of corruption to its steady institutionalisation through law and regulation. It is a phase that once crossed, will be difficult to reverse.

The contours of formal consolidation are already discernible in the emergence of the intelligence services as the preferred apex driver of state security. They are the source of the recently passed Protection of State Information Bill, largely characterised by a concerned broad public

as a “secrecy bill”.

The entire process is reminiscent of the Zanufication of the state in Zimbabwe through a constellation of intelligence services, the armed forces, the police service, the broadcasting services, and the veteran and youth movements which then answer not to the citizens through parliament, but to corrupted and centralised solidarities in the party in power. Add to this the unending attempt to weaken the judiciary.

The overall effect is to substitute sectarian political interest for professional and public accountability in the workings of these institutions.

What we are dealing with then is corruption as a systemic phenomenon. This phenomenon involves more than stealing from the public purse, more than obtaining the undeserved tender from colluding cronies in power.

Rather, it becomes something more existential when it occupies the very thinking and affective processes people use in making survival decisions.

All this does not mean that the vast majority of individuals in a corrupted system choose to live corruptly. Many may probably abhor the system. But it can mean that many fail to demonstrate an inclination to resist the system, and that by their failure they permit the system to taint them. Through such accommodation, the corruptive culture triumphs.

The power of corruptive culture is in its ability to deter dissent through the diffusive effect of corruptive collusion.

So when the party orders those that are ashamed and wish to resign over the “travelgate” scandal revelations, to stay at their posts, the party takes over the ethical and moral lives of its members.

In this way, the party consigns its own members to the purgatory of ethical anguish. The party then goes on to get Parliament, in which it is the majority, to write off R12 million in outstanding debt owed to it by members of Parliament who were implicated in the scandal, allowing them to steal from the public with impunity.

Next, they are all summoned to vote in favour of the Protection of State Information Bill generally understood by a sceptical public as the

protection of the corrupt information bill. How do these members feel after the voting victory? More loyal? More patriotic? More owned? Compelled to feel triumphant? Protected? Abused? Anguished? Low-esteemed? Depressed? Indifferent? It could be all of the above, graphically illustrating the existential impact of a corrupt culture.

Existential anguish is the price to be paid by those who live in such a culture and opt to ignore the inner voice of conscience in favour of the deceptions and illusions of corrupted solidarities.

Such anguish can afflict an entire society. Vaclav Havel captured for global posterity a form of such a society in his essay *The Power of Powerlessness*.

Where the drivers of our particular form of emergent society are redress/redistribution and development/social transformation, redress has become the entry point to entitlement (a vehicle for corruption), and social transformation a niggling ethical burden.

The scenario could lead us to a form of government by revolutionary sentiment in which the revolution is never articulated; loudly invoked, but never explained.

In effect, explanations are impossible since the most manifest effect of such a government is the increase of social inequality partly through the legislated privileges of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie to access state wealth with decreasing impediment.

We are not quite there yet. But we may be if the National Council of Provinces should decide to endorse the parliamentary vote on the Protection of State Information Bill.

At that point we will have gone way beyond law enforcement in combating corruption. Not only could law enforcement itself have been compromised, but also because systemic corruption invades the very human capacity to imagine anything other than the corrupted world it has created.

It attacks the public's capacity to imagine a different future of freedom so it becomes hostage to a lower order of aspiration.

This understanding introduces us to a new terrain in the quest for human freedom in South Africa. It is about re-orientating the state away from the assured decay towards which we have been travelling as a result of some of the decisions we have taken since 1994. But we cannot re-orientate by uncritically restoring the objectives of the struggle for liberation. Some of those have become the comfort zones of the corruptive culture.

The fact is we still need more freedom, not less. We need to work more with what we now know since 1994 and then re-imagine our real possibilities for what we want to be by 2030 and beyond. How we will make this happen is the greatest challenge of our time.