

# Pope Francis Scratches the Surface of Africa's Ethnic Rivalries, Political Corruption

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*Pope Francis' unprecedented message during his African tour early February relates sustainable peace and unity, economic development and citizenry welfare. The messages also touch on social questions especially how to forge an illuminating future devoid of ethnic rivalries, corruption and distrust that have fueled so many bloody conflicts in Africa. The 86-year-old pope brilliant words were received with resonating applause, especially crowds consisting the youth, down-trodden and marginalized citizens during his tour to Africa.*

Pope Francis was urged conflict-ridden African countries to work towards peace and reconciliation. For decades, many African countries still bear the scars of civil war. The political differences and horrific atrocities have affected much-needed Africa's unity. It has further contributed to weak institutions, slowed down development, and the under-development consequently provides grounds for new conflicts. Across Africa, most of the civil wars leave thousands of people dead, million displaced, and deeply impoverished.

The Pope underlined the fact that lands in the great African continent have suffered greatly from lengthy conflicts, and these conflicts were driven by greed for resources at the expense of innocent victims, and denounced "economic colonialism" in the continent. Pope Francis demanded that foreign powers stop plundering Africa's natural resources, and the multinational extraction industries. He recalled how many people arrive in north Africa hoping to cross the Mediterranean into Europe, only to find themselves "taken to camps, and suffering there. Let us pray for all those people."

Across Africa, during political campaigns, almost all the potential candidates eyeing for the presidential position make skyline promises and pledges to uproot corruption. Military also use corruption as one of the reasons for overthrowing constitutionally elected governments. The practical reality is that corruption has become part and particle of African political culture, and politicians are always getting involved in flagrant violations of constitutions.

Transparency International, a Berlin-based global NGO that focuses on reducing graft, these past years, has attempted researching and documenting reports on corruption. It says

corruption, in practice, is worldwide. It ran a survey in sub-Saharan Africa in 2022 to attempt to measure the level of corruption.

The latest survey report says only a few countries, though, stood out as remarkably clean across Africa. Its report for 2022, indicated that there is a seated corruption in the majority of African countries, except few countries such as Botswana, Seychelles and Cape Verde. The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) reveals that 124 countries have stagnant corruption levels, while the number of countries in decline is increasing. This has the most serious consequences, as global peace is deteriorating and corruption is both a key cause and result of this.

It also show that corruption and conflict feed each other and threaten durable peace. On one hand, conflict creates a breeding ground for corruption. Political instability, increased pressure on resources and weakened oversight bodies create opportunities for crimes, such as bribery and embezzlement. Unsurprisingly, most countries at the bottom of the CPI are currently experiencing armed conflict or have recently done so.

On the other hand, even in peaceful societies, corruption and impunity can spill over into violence by fuelling social grievances. And siphoning off resources needed by security agencies leaves countries unable to protect the public and uphold the rule of law. Consequently, countries with higher levels of corruption are more likely to also exhibit higher levels of organized crime and increased security threats.

Corruption is also a threat to global security, and countries with high CPI scores play a role in this. For decades, they have welcomed dirty money from abroad, allowing kleptocrats to increase their wealth, power and geopolitical ambitions. The catastrophic consequences of the advanced economies' complicity in transnational corruption became painfully clear following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In this complex environment, fighting corruption, promoting transparency and strengthening institutions are critical to avoid further conflict and sustain peace.

“Leaders can fight corruption and promote peace all at once. Governments must open up space to include the public in decision-making – from activists and business owners to marginalized communities and young people. In democratic societies, the people can raise their voices to help root out corruption and demand a safer world for us all,” explained Daniel Eriksson, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Transparency International.

Under the presidency of Jacob Zuma, who ruled South Africa from 2009 to 2018, corruption was at its highest. Zuma participated in anti-apartheid struggle until South Africa finally attained its independence in 27 April 1994. He held various positions in ruling African National Congress (ANC) until he was elected president of South Africa. Before that, he was the deputy to President Thabo Mbeki, but was dismissed of corruption over arm deals. There were multiple graft scandals, that he was forced to step down in February 2018, and currently spends time in prison, and faces corruption allegations in court.

In January 2018, as elected president of the African National Congress, Cyril Ramaphosa has raised hopes that he will stamp out corruption.

“Corruption must be fought with the same intensity and purpose that we fight poverty, unemployment and inequality. We must also act fearlessly against alleged corruption and abuse of office within our ranks,” Ramaphosa declared in his maiden speech after

his election. “We must investigate without fear or favor the so-called ‘accounting irregularities’ that caused turmoil in the markets and wiped billions off the investments of ordinary South Africans,” he added.

Last May 2021, the South African commission investigating corruption and graft, Ramaphosa acknowledged that the ruling ANC party did little to prevent corruption, including by his predecessor Jacob Zuma.

“State capture and corruption have taken a great toll on our society and indeed on our economy as well,” Ramaphosa said. “They have eroded the values of our constitution and undermined the rule of law. If allowed to continue they would threaten the achievement of growth, development and transformation of our country.”

South Africa is not an isolated case. It’s neighboring southern States including Mozambique and Angola have similar horrible cases. After 38 years of rule, in 2017 President dos Santos stepped down from MPLA leadership. In efforts to fight corruption, Angolan leader João Lourenço removed many of the country’s top politicians including Isabel dos Santos who were seriously corrupt under Jose Eduardo Dos Santos.

From the Maghreb coastline to Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia are all engulfed with corruption. Sudan, located in northeast Africa, has economic crisis, social problems despite its huge natural resources. Apparently, Omar al-Bashir, who had ruled the country for 30 years, did little for native country, his motherland, monopolized political power and ran deeply corrupt government. The New York Times wrote that Sudan’s economy was largely shattered due to political tyranny, deep-seated corruption and poor policies.

Peter Fabricius, Research Consultant from the South Africa’s Institute for Security Studies (ISS), cited corruption, poor policies and strategies quite recently in his article headlined - African Coups Are Making A Come Back - as some of the factors affecting sustainable development in Africa.

Nigeria has also experienced the worst and the highest levels of corruption. In an interview, Ambassador Uche Ajulu-Okeke with thirty-year achievements in the Nigerian Foreign Service spoke about the present-day Federal Republic of Nigeria, located in West Africa. Several years after its independence, the leaders have not succeeded in rebuilding the state institutions enough to reflect all-inclusive ethnic diversity, let alone in adopting Western-style democracy that takes cognizance of different public opinions on development issues in the country. The struggle for and misuse of power have brought the country into a stalemate, disrupting any efforts to overcome the deepening economic and multiple social crisis.

She further pointed to nepotism at all levels and institutions of government. Morbid corruption. Endemic kleptocracy. Ethnic cleansing and persecution of Christians and ethnic capture of the military and security apparatus of the state. Massive corruption and widespread kleptocracy with indigenous ethnicities in power making strenuous effort to capture state resources to the exclusion of other ethnic groups.

Still in West Africa on the Atlantic coast, Guinea said it would prosecute former president Alpha Conde, who was toppled in a military coup last September, for mismanagement, misuse of power and corruption, for murder and other crimes committed during his time in office. Conde will be among 27 former senior officials to face prosecution.

Mineral-rich but deeply poor and saddled with a reputation for corruption, Guinea has enjoyed few periods of stability since gaining independence from France in 1958. Many Guineans initially welcomed the coup but there is growing discontent in the nation of 13 million people.

Reports documented extravagant lifestyles of a small elite class in Africa. Such lifestyles are not separately linked to corruption and misuse of siphoned funds. The case of the following: British Broadcasting Corporation reported last September 2021, quoted an official statement that “wherever possible, kleptocrats will not be allowed to retain the benefits of corruption” and that was the case relating to the Justice Department of the United States decision to seize \$26.6m (£20m) from Equatorial Guinea’s Vice-President Teodorin Nguema Obiang Mangue.

He is popularly known for his unquestionable lavish lifestyle, he has been the subject of a number of international criminal charges and sanctions for alleged embezzlement and corruption. He has a fleet of branded cars and a number of houses, and two houses alone in South Africa.

Teodorin Nguema has often drawn criticisms in the international media for lavish spending, while majority of the estimated 1.5 million population wallows in abject poverty. Subsistence farming predominates, with shabby infrastructure in the country. Equatorial Guinea consists of two parts, an insular and a mainland region. Meanwhile, Equatorial Guinea is the third-largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa.

In Mozambique, Armando Ndambi Guebuza, the oldest son of of the former President Armando Guebuza has been targeted and accused of allegedly receiving the biggest share of the money embezzled from the loans mobilized with State guarantees, having pocketed US\$33 million (equivalent €28 million). With the money, Armando Ndambi Guebuza bought top-of-the-range cars, some of which he gave to friends, and in addition purchased real estate inside and outside the country and paid for super high-class leisure trips. Armando Ndambi Guebuza used his influence with his father to make business schemes possible and to take advantage of his wealth for himself and his associates.

Still in southern Africa, and back to Angola which has its own corruption tales. As known, it is a country on the west coast of southern Africa. It is the second largest Lusophone (Portuguese-speaking) country in both total land space and by population (behind Brazil), and is the seventh largest country, endowed with natural resources, in Africa.

Understandably, this is just one isolated case here. Isabel dos Santos amassed an empire worth more than \$2 billion as the daughter of the former president. Dos Santos has come under scrutiny after a number of media outlets, including the New York Times, the BBC and The Guardian published articles based on the “Luanda Leaks” – a cache of some 700,000 documents related to her allegedly corrupt business dealings that were released to the International Consortium of Investigation Journalists (ICIJ).

Dos Santos was appointed to head Angola’s state oil company Sonangol in 2016 when her father was still the president of the country. (He finally retired in 2017 after ruling Angola for 38 years.) Growing revenue from resources including oil has created opportunities for corruption, an estimated \$32 billion disappeared from government under Dos Santos administration, according a report by Human Rights Watch (HRW).

President João Manuel Gonçalves Lourenço asserted in his many speeches, promised to scale up the fight against systemic corruption, at least, a new narrative for Angolans and the entire Africa. Arguably, he has the mandate to discharge that responsibility for the benefits of his people. Whether João Lourenço will deliver his dedication in tackling corruption head-on and reducing economic graft in his country, time will definite tell. The society is watching.

Angola, Mozambique and South Africa are members of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). Notwithstanding so many problems that hinder Africa's development, the postcolonial period has seen quite an array of oppressive systems. The so-called democratic but dictatorial regimes, many previous military dictatorships have primarily failed to develop the economic, leaving dilapidated structures. Siphoning state coffers through dubious and opaque means is still the order of the day.

While African politicians continue blaming foreign actors and external factors for their economic woes. The statist economic systems of the past fifty years miserably failed to create free and prosperous African societies, even while they have been incredibly beneficial to Africa's ruling elites and people who are politically connected.

William Gumede, an Honorary Associate Professor, Public and Development Management, University of the Witwatersrand; and author of the recently released bestselling 'Restless Nation: Making Sense of Troubled Times' wrote a briefing paper for the Foreign Policy Centre in which he criticized Western countries for protecting their allies by turning a blind-eye to official corruption by ruling parties and leaders in the name of the so-called 'war on terror' or craftily overlooked corruption in order to secure mineral or oil rights as well as lucrative contracts.

"Civil society in Western countries and new emerging powers entering Africa should also hold their governments and businesses to account to ensure they are not overseeing corrupt and opaque operations. Corrupt governments, businesses and individuals - from Western as well as new emerging powers must be named and shamed in order to feel the reputable effects of corrupt activities," he suggested in the policy paper.

Corruption in business is often not seen in a serious light by business leaders either globally or locally. The global financial crisis was essentially caused by corrupt and greedy bankers, traders and those working in the corporate sector. Yet, many of these business leaders and companies now flourish in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, as if they are blameless. Companies should be compelled to adhere to a set of integrity standards (in which they would foreswear corrupt activities) when trading in government contracts.

African public officials often dismiss international organizations' corruption reports on Africa, saying these reports are infused by Western bias. African critics claim that such analysis overlooks corruption in Western countries and only focuses on developing countries. This is of course true, but only to some extent. The hypocrisy issue is a valid but separate debate and should not downplay the real seriousness of corruption at home.

Alternatively, Western countries look the other way when corrupt African governments are their allies, this has in fact encouraged corruption. Western business organizations also exacerbate corruption by colluding in corrupt practices. China, as a new emerging power on the block, has continued these age old practices in return for investment opportunities.

The organs of the state, that is the executive, the legislature and judiciary and the fourth

estate (media must necessarily do more effective investigative journalism to uncover wrongdoing) must engage in “checks and balances” – this to a considerable extent, will scale back corruption in society. The political leader and the executive must periodically account for certain decisions in parliament.

In the long-term, the best antidote to corruption is to foster values (fairness, transparency, public accountability) across the continent which reward honesty and discourage dishonesty. Besides setting up anti-corruption committees and commissions, civil society organizations at the grassroots should step up public campaigns across Africa against corruption. The masses must know the extent of corruption, the impact it has on public service delivery, and how to monitor as well as report it, and the importance of holding their elected leaders and public servants more vigorously to account.

In final conclusion, it is worthy, at least, to keep in mind the suggestion made by the Republic of Ghana’s Vice President, Mahamudu Bawumia, who in May 2022 stated: “Building strong institutions means putting in place the right systems and practices that ensure transparency and brings about efficiency. As the saying goes, the biggest disease is corruption and the vaccine is transparency. The fact is that corrupt people hate transparency and public accountability.”

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*Kester Kenn Klomegah, who worked previously with Inter Press Service (IPS), is now a regular contributor to Global Research. As a versatile researcher, he believes that everyone deserves equal access to quality and trustworthy media reports.*

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