

THE ILLUSION OF CONSEQUENCE: CORRUPTION AND IMPUNITY IN AFRICA

By Dr. Stephanie M. Burchard

Corruption and graft are not unique to the African continent. But the scope and scale of such activities suggest a persistent and widespread problem—the [vast majority](#) of countries in Africa have at some point in the recent past been accused of mishandling state revenues. Many of the countries implicated are repeat offenders, and, unsurprisingly, the accused are rarely held to account. When punishments are handed out, they are disproportionately weak in comparison to the gravity of the crime. This fuels a cycle of corruption, scandal, and impunity. Transparency International describes the problem in Africa as a “[situation of endemic corruption](#)” and one of the primary contributors to the continent’s perpetual underperformance in terms of economic and social development. [more...](#)



President Jacob Zuma, center, behind bulletproof glass, stands to attention during the National Anthem at his inauguration ceremony in Pretoria, South Africa, Saturday, May 24, 2014. Zuma was sworn in to serve a second term after the country’s fifth democratic elections. (Source: AP Photo/Ihsaan Haffjee, Pool.)

Dr. Stephanie M. Burchard is a Research Staff Member in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

COUP ATTEMPT IN THE GAMBIA LEADS TO CRACKDOWN

By Alexander Noyes

On December 30, 2014, a coup [attempt](#) was launched in The Gambia to unseat authoritarian President Yahya Jammeh, who came to power via a military coup in 1994. Jammeh was out of the country in Dubai when his presidential guard thwarted the coup attempt, [killing](#) four in the process. Cherno Njie, a U.S. citizen of Gambian descent who owned several businesses and lived in Texas, [allegedly](#) led the attempt and planned to take over from Jammeh if the coup succeeded. The small group of coup plotters also included two former U.S. soldiers of Gambian origin and the former head of the presidential guard, Lieutenant-Colonel Lamin Sanneh, who was [killed](#) in the attempt. In the aftermath of the coup attempt, Jammeh has cracked down, arresting [dozens](#) and [reshuffling](#) his cabinet. [more...](#)



A giant billboard of Gambia President Yahya Jammeh sits on an empty street in Banjul, The Gambia, Wednesday, Dec. 31, 2014, one day after a coup attempt was launched. (Source: AP Photo.)

Alexander Noyes is an Adjunct Research Associate in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

About IDA

The Institute for Defense Analyses is a non-profit corporation operating in the public interest.

IDA’s three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

IDA’s Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

THE ILLUSION OF CONSEQUENCE: CORRUPTION AND IMPUNITY IN AFRICA

By Dr. Stephanie M. Burchard

Corruption and graft are not unique to the African continent. But the scope and scale of such activities suggest a persistent and widespread problem—the [vast majority](#) of countries in Africa have at some point in the recent past been accused of mishandling state revenues. Many of the countries implicated are repeat offenders, and, unsurprisingly, the accused are rarely held to account. When punishments are handed out, they are disproportionately weak in comparison to the gravity of the crime. This fuels a cycle of corruption, scandal, and impunity. Transparency International describes the problem in Africa as a “[situation of endemic corruption](#)” and one of the primary contributors to the continent’s perpetual underperformance in terms of economic and social development.

Scope and Scale of the Problem

According to the United Nations, illicit financial flows into and out of Africa may total more than [\\$50 billion per year](#). In Nigeria alone, it was alleged by the former Central Bank governor that [\\$20 billion was missing](#) and presumed stolen from state coffers in 2013. That same year, almost [\\$250 million](#) was found to be missing from state accounts in Malawi. It is believed that several high-ranking officials were complicit in the theft. In 2014, a public audit found that approximately [\\$24 million](#) may have been improperly spent by South African President Jacob Zuma for so-called security upgrades to his private residence in Nkandla. Such upgrades included the installation of an in-ground swimming pool that the government defended as a necessary “[fire pool](#)” meant to serve as an emergency source of water in case of fire.

Tanzania was ranked [111th out of 177](#) countries in Transparency International’s 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index. The public energy sector in particular has repeatedly come under fire as the result of corruption allegations. The 2008 [Richmond scandal](#) involved opaque contracting and millions paid to an unregistered international energy company (Richmond Development Company), which promised to construct an oil pipeline and provide electricity during a national shortage. The company did neither. Most recently, the Tanzanian government has been rocked by a series of scandals involving the misappropriation of at least [\\$120 million](#) through the Tanzanian Electric Company Limited (Tanesco). The attorney general, prime minister, and minister of energy, among others, [have been implicated](#).

Consequences?

The penalties for public corruption are generally minimal. Too often, the punishment for corruption is limited to the political and electoral arena. Politicians may lose elections and cabinet ministers may lose their positions temporarily, but rarely are offenders prosecuted. Almost always, the alleged stolen funds are [retained by the accused](#). In response to public pressure, government officials may open a formal inquiry, but these inquiries typically experience frequent delays, and the final reports are vague or inconclusive. In Nigeria, for example, the government has repeatedly [stalled](#) releasing the findings of its report on the 2013 missing funds. The opposition has accused the ruling party of deliberately [suppressing](#) the report and accused the president of using much of the money as a slush fund for upcoming elections.

In [Malawi](#) and [South Africa](#), corruption scandals featured heavily in recent elections. In both cases, the opposition used these scandals in an attempt to discredit the ruling party. In Malawi, this strategy may have been successful—some have linked the corruption scandal to [the defeat of incumbent president](#) Joyce Banda in the 2014 polls. In South Africa, the African National Congress still won the majority of the vote—[62 percent](#)—but this is the smallest majority the party has received since the transition to multiparty elections in 1994.



President Jacob Zuma, center, behind bulletproof glass, stands to attention during the National Anthem at his inauguration ceremony, in Pretoria, South Africa, Saturday, May 24, 2014. Zuma was sworn in to serve a second term after the country’s fifth democratic elections. (Source: AP Photo/Ihsaan Haffjee, Pool.)

Unfortunately, even political consequences can be quite limited and short-lived. In Tanzania, a 2012 government audit found that several ministries were responsible for the “[rampant misuse](#)” of funds. In response, President Jakaya Kikwete [reshuffled his cabinet](#), and six cabinet ministers lost their positions. All six retained their parliamentary seats, however, and will likely run again in 2015. None have been prosecuted. The prime minister who oversaw the Richmond contract, Edward Lowassa, [resigned](#) his position in disgrace in 2008. This was the [second time](#) he had been forced out of his position due to allegations of corruption, the first occurring during his tenure as land minister under the previous president. He remained in political exile for a brief time in 2008 but is now being discussed as a [front-runner](#) for the ruling party’s presidential nomination. With consequences like these, it would seem that politicians and officials have few incentives to avoid acts of corruption.

Conclusion

Widespread corruption in Africa has many causes. In some instances, reliance on natural resource royalties rather than taxes to fund the government budget creates [a disconnect](#) between the governing elite and the citizenry. Weak political and social institutions—the judiciary and media in particular—also create a situation where corruption is infrequently or inadequately reported on and where the state lacks the capacity or will to follow through with prosecution. When made aware of extreme instances of corruption, the international community will respond by withholding aid or assistance until some action is taken, as happened in [October 2014 in Tanzania](#). This donor freeze prompted the government to pressure current Prime Minister [Mizengo Pinda](#) to resign, although he has not done so to date. But as evidenced by the rise, fall, rise, fall, and rise of Edward Lowassa, such a punishment would likely be only a temporary measure. Until substantive reform takes place within individual countries and there are meaningful consequences for offenders, government corruption in Africa is likely to continue.

Dr. Stephanie M. Burchard is a Research Staff Member in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

COUP ATTEMPT IN THE GAMBIA LEADS TO CRACKDOWN

By Alexander Noyes

On December 30, 2014, a coup [attempt](#) was launched in The Gambia to unseat authoritarian President Yahya Jammeh, who came to power via a military coup in 1994. Jammeh was out of the country in Dubai when his presidential guard thwarted the coup attempt, [killing](#) four in the process. Chernu Njie, a U.S. citizen of Gambian descent who owned several businesses and lived in Texas, [allegedly](#) led the attempt and planned to take over from Jammeh if the coup succeeded. The small group of coup plotters also included two former U.S. soldiers of Gambian origin and the former head of the presidential guard, Lieutenant-Colonel Lamin Sanneh, who was [killed](#) in the attempt. In the aftermath of the coup attempt, Jammeh has cracked down, arresting [dozens](#) and [reshuffling](#) his cabinet.



A giant billboard of Gambia President Yahya Jammeh sits on an empty street in Banjul The Gambia, Wednesday, Dec. 31, 2014, one day after a coup attempt was launched. (Source: AP Photo.)

“The Worst Dictatorship You’ve Probably Never Heard Of”

The Gambia is a small West African country with a population of less than 2 million. Jammeh has ruled The Gambia for the past two decades in an increasingly authoritarian fashion. He has faced recent [criticism](#) from human rights groups over various human rights violations, including stifling dissent, limiting press freedoms, torture, and extrajudicial killings. In 2014, the European Union [suspended](#) a \$186 million aid package to The Gambia over a harsh anti-homosexual law, and last month the United States removed The Gambia from eligibility for the African Growth and Opportunity Act. Last week, Public Radio International [referred](#) to Jammeh’s government as “the worst dictatorship you’ve probably never heard of.” In the wake of the coup attempt, Jammeh [warned](#) any other potential plotters: “No force can take this place and nobody can destabilize this country . . . Anybody who plans to attack this country, be ready, because you are going to die.”

A Coup Born in the U.S.A.

Both Njie and Papa Faal, a former sergeant in the U.S. Army who lived in Minnesota, survived the shootout with Jammeh’s guards and managed to flee to the United States via Senegal. On their return to the United States, they were arrested and [charged](#) with weapons violations and attempting to overthrow Jammeh. Njie and Faal are being charged under the Neutrality Act of 1794, which [forbids](#) “any military expedition or enterprise” from the United States against “any foreign prince or state of whom the United States was at peace.” The 22-page FBI affidavit [filed](#) on January 3 outlining the charges against Njie and Faal reveals many details about the planning and the coup attempt.

The document outlines how Njie and his associates hatched the coup plot—allegedly to restore democracy in The Gambia—in August 2014 in the United States. [According](#) to the affidavit, “They hoped they would be able to take over the country without having to kill any Gambians.” The group bought up to 30 weapons at gun shops in the United States. Those weapons were smuggled into The Gambia, along with night vision goggles and other supplies. Njie allegedly was the main financier of the operation, which had a [budget](#) of roughly \$220,000. The document also reveals that the plotters believed that they had the support of members of the Gambian military, noting that they “expected to be joined by up to 160 members of the local Gambian military who supposedly agreed to the coup.”

Since Jammeh, a former military officer, came to power, there allegedly have been [eight](#) coup attempts. Each has been followed by military purges and executions. Maggie Dwyer [argues](#) that existing tensions and internal divides within the Gambian military—at the highest levels—contributed to the most recent coup attempt. After the December 30 shootout, the military demonstrated its loyalty to Jammeh, marching on January 5 with banners [saying](#), “Gambians [sic] soldiers are behind you President Jammeh,” and the army chief announced, “We love you, Your Excellency, and this bond of love and leadership is eternal.”

The Inevitable Crackdown

As after past coup attempts, Jammeh has cracked down harshly, allegedly [arresting](#) “dozens” of civilians and military personnel suspected of being involved in the plot. An activist in Dakar [told Voice of America](#) that up to 22 relatives of those believed to be involved in the coup attempt had been detained. Four military officer suspects have also [reportedly](#) fled to Guinea-Bissau. In addition, Jammeh has [shut down](#) Taranga FM, an independent radio station. After the failed attempt on his office, Jammeh promised to [hunt down his attackers](#): “I am going to set an example. The last time I said it and people begged me to have mercy, this time it is going to be an eye for an eye. And I am going to get rid of these elements one by one until the last person.”

The November 14, 2014, [edition](#) of *Africa Watch* highlighted [research](#) by Clayton Thyne and Jonathan Powell arguing that coups in authoritarian regimes can often lead to democratic transitions by acting as necessary “shocks.” The authors also [argue](#) that even failed coup attempts in authoritarian states may help foster democratization: “We view failed coups as credible signals that leaders must enact meaningful reforms to remain in power.” Based on past coup attempts and this most recent one, the case of The Gambia appears to suggest otherwise. While the longer term effects of the recent coup attempt in The Gambia remain to be seen, it is clear that the plot has prompted a severe crackdown in an already repressive country, a development that bodes ill for prospects of democratization in The Gambia, at least in the near term.

Alexander Noyes is an Adjunct Research Associate in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.
