

## **Corruption a Way of Life in Zimbabwe**

**Author:** [Joseph Sithole](#)

The government's new corruption survey is merely another way for the authorities to be seen to be doing something, without taking resolute steps to root out the problem.

Corruption is seen in many societies as a cancer to be fought with relentless determination. In Zimbabwe, President Robert Mugabe appears content not only to live with the disease, but to allow it to flourish unchecked among close political associates.

This reluctance to curb corruption has created a climate in which it can spread uncontrollably, while those at the top look on complacently.

The most celebrated example of corruption in post-independence Zimbabwe was the Willowgate scandal of 1989, in which government ministers were accused of buying vehicles cheap and reselling them at a substantial mark-up. When the media broke the story, Mugabe quickly set up a commission of inquiry, but he went on to grant pardons to those who were implicated.

At that point, people began doubting whether the justice system was up to the job of dealing with corruption.

Things got worse in the Nineties, with the "VIP housing scandal" of 1995 in which government officials and politicians allegedly looted funds contributed by civil servants to build or buy homes. Most of the civil servants who contributed money on the promise that the government would build houses for them remain homeless to this day. Nobody was prosecuted or punished.

This scandal was followed soon afterwards by the plunder of the War Victims' Compensation Fund, set up to help those who had participated in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle of the Seventies. Once again, there were no arrests or prosecutions.

But this case did provoke 50,000 rank-and-file war veterans to start demanding monthly benefits from the government. They were aggrieved that some of their leaders had abandoned them and were living an ostentatious lifestyle far in excess of their salaries. After the veterans staged street protests and threatened to march on Mugabe's official residence, he was forced to order payments of 50,000 Zimbabwean dollars per person in October 1997.

Because this allocation had not been set aside in Zimbabwe's annual budget, it led to the collapse of the currency a month later on November 14, in what became known as "Black Friday". Analysts agree that this marked the beginning of Zimbabwe's current economic troubles.

The land seizures instituted from 2000 onwards only served to accelerate the economic slide and trigger a political crisis as well. The chaotic takeover of white commercial farms - ostensibly in the interests of a fair redistribution to landless Zimbabweans - soon became fertile ground for misappropriation. Mugabe's officials and cronies ignored the ZANU-PF policy of "one man, one farm", with some acquiring several properties and passing them on to relatives.

Mugabe has so far instituted seven land audits, all of which have confirmed the obvious - that most of his

ministers and senior police, intelligence and military officials possessed more than one farm. In August 2003, he declared that he would deal with those who had seized more than one property, but the threat was greeted with stony silence. To date, no looted farms have been returned, and no action has been taken against the culprits.

In an angry outburst recently, Reserve Bank Governor Gideon Gono lamented the presence of what he described as “career land occupiers, vandalising farming equipment from one farm to another”.

One would expect such an indictment from a senior establishment official to be followed by swift action by the authorities. Predictably however, no action was taken.

Production on these farms has all but ceased, so that the country has gone from being an exporter of maize to importing grain to feed itself. No one wants to undertake the arduous work of farming, it appears. Mugabe himself once complained that the seized farms had been turned into “weekend resorts”.

Finally, there are the allegations that emerged last year concerning misappropriation of funds at the Zimbabwe Iron and Steel Company, the country’s sole steel producer. Following an official inquiry, parliament conducted hearings in which allegations were made against a number of senior politicians said to have benefited from payments made by the company.

These days, President Mugabe is less reticent about the failings of some of his officials. In an interview to mark his 83rd birthday on February 21, for example, he complained that ministers were greedy and that some were involved in smuggling of gold and diamonds. The police and Central Bank say they have named names to the president, but as usual his policy is not to expose those accused, but to utter dark hints about unacceptable behaviour.

The failure to act on this long series of corruption has created a widespread perception that there is a tacit acceptance of corruption in high places, and that even pledges of resolute action will come to nothing. Thus it was that most Zimbabweans reacted with cynicism when they heard in February that the government plans to conduct an eight-month baseline survey on corruption, at a cost of 800,000 US dollars.

The anti-corruption minister, Samuel Undenge, said the survey was needed so as to give a definition of corruption, which manifests itself in many forms and mutates as circumstances change. “It is expected to highlight a comprehensive list of the types of corruption most prevalent in Zimbabwe, and identify institutions across all sectors where corruption is considered most prevalent,” he said at the launch event,

A political scientist at the University of Zimbabwe, who requested anonymity, dismissed the plan to research corruption patterns as a ploy to give the public the impression that something was being done.

“Why do we need a survey to define corruption when we all know the people who are abusing national resources?” he said. “This is a waste of resources. Mugabe [practises] policy symbolism, pretending to be doing something when in fact what he is doing is giving time and warning to his corrupt ministers and officials to cover their tracks.”

The analyst said that in most countries, the failure to tackle the problem effectively was often due to corruption within the law-enforcement agencies, whereas in Zimbabwe, the government’s own selective application of the law had a corrosive effect on policing.

“In which other country in the world do you have the police waiting to be instructed by politicians on whom to arrest and whom not to arrest?” he asked.

He concluded, “There is simply no political will to fight corruption in Zimbabwe. It has become a way of life.”

Joseph Sithole is the pseudonym of an IWPR contributor in Zimbabwe.

**Location:** Zimbabwe

**Focus:** Zimbabwe Crisis Reports

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**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/corruption-way-life-zimbabwe>