Role Ambiguity and Corruption: Bureaucrat and Apparatchik in African Political Systems

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An important source of bureaucratic corruption in Sub-Saharan Africa lies in the blurring of the conventional distinctions between government officials - state bureaucrats - and officials of the ruling party (to use the Russian term, apparatchiki), particularly in the definition of their respective roles. This paper argues that insofar as government officials and apparatchiki both function to process and service the demands on the political-economic system, insofar as both operate as instruments of governance, members of the two groups come to see themselves not so much as components of parallel structures, but as parts of the same institutional nexus. In that context, not only does it become difficult (for the state bureaucrats) to maintain normative fidelity to legally-defined roles, but both they and the apparatchiki will tend to redefine those roles to permit the use of the resources at their disposal to enhance their own and the ruling party's extractive capacities. Observation suggests that this is particularly true in so-called single party systems, somewhat less so in one-party dominant ones.

Introduction

The regional director of Agence France-Presse in Dakar recently claimed that "Cape Verde is the only African country where there is no corruption." This is so, he added, "not because it [Cape Verde] is poor, but because the people there are honest" (Degioanni 1993:15). Even discounting for journalistic hyperbole and an impossibly high standard for general probity, and assuming that Degioanni probably knows what he is talking about, the (relative) absence of official corruption in Cape Verde makes that country the solitary outlier to a well-defined, generalized pattern of official corruption in Africa. Even more remarkable, the Cape Verde record was maintained through eighteen years of one-party rule by the *marxisant* (renamed in 1981) African Party for the Independence of Cape Verde (PAICV). That, again, sets Cape Verde against almost all other African single-party or single-party dominant systems where official corruption, more

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often than not, was institutionalized within the system. In any case, even if one includes Botswana as a second (relatively) honest outlier — official corruption never reached unmanageable proportions there — the two countries could well be the exceptions that disproved the currently predominating African rule.

Though the literature on the subject is still relatively sparse, the proposition that official corruption is well-nigh universal in sub-Saharan Africa has been noted and documented by a growing number of scholars of Africa (see bibliography). Most studies of official corruption in Africa have been state-centered and country-specific. For obvious reasons, Nigeria has received the most attention (at least five books, two collections, and dozens of articles), followed by Zaire and Ghana (each with at least three books and numerous articles), with Zambia, Equatorial Guinea, Ivory Coast, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Guinea, Togo, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Senegal the subject of at least a monograph and/or several articles. All this, of course, does not include the very large array of reports by official commissions, committees, panels, and the like in a variety of African states, all documenting the corrupt practices of government figures and bureaucrats at all levels.

Usually, the paradigm of analysis has included (like Médard 1986) discussion of the scope, scale, and heterogeneity of corruption, as well as its causes and consequences. Little scholarly work has focused on individual officials, their motives, *modus operandi*, operational context(s), and personal relationship to the regime and public(s) they serve. David Gould (1980), Richard Joseph (1985), and I (Le Vine 1975) may be among the few scholars of Africa thus far to explore this dimension of corruption. My own work in Ghana included a series of in-depth interviews with individuals targeted or cited by commissions of inquiry into the malversations of the Nkrumah regime. I propose here, *inter alia*, to draw on that work and subsequent unpublished explorations of that theme.

Bureaucrat and Apparatchik: The Cut of the Cloth

Admittedly, insofar as government officials and party officials function as members of bureaucratic structures, both are bureaucrats. Nevertheless, the distinction between party and government bureaucracies remains useful, particularly where — as in Marxist systems — the two operate as real or nominal parallel structures with ostensibly different functions: the former to mobilize and organize society to the aims of the regime, and the latter, to perform the classic rule-enforcing and administrative tasks of governance. This is not the place to rehearse the well-worn academic arguments (or the vast literature) that specify the differences; suffice it for present purposes to point out that the larger distinctions also reside in part in differences about role definitions and expectations. And in the African context, though the absolute numbers of single-party regimes has declined, it is that model, ultimately based on European and

Asian Marxist examples, where the issue of different sets of bureaucratic role expectations has been and remains salient. (This is also why in this essay, different words are used for the two groups: "bureaucrats" for the government officials, and *apparatchiki* for the party office-holders.) It remains salient because it helps locate a critical nexus of official corruption.

First, to define the differences in role expectations: governments in Africa universally organize their governing apparatuses on European models, even where they have included local African variants (e.g., assemblies of chiefs, traditional monarchies, traditional courts, etc.) into their structures. That has generally meant incorporating Weberian values and bureaucratic role assumptions into the operational codes governing their officialdoms, a fact reflected in the formal rules, laws, and job descriptions that define government positions (among others, see Adu 1965, Apthorpe 1960, Kirk-Greene 1965). That these values (meritocracy, efficiency, anonymity, and objectivity) tended to run counter to those prevailing in the post-independence African milieu, and that they were almost everywhere disregarded, even derided, does not even vitiate the importance of the Weberian model as an *organizing pattern* in African politics. Dele Olowu and James Wunsch (1990:308), citing Zolberg (1966), have it exactly right: ". . . centralized administration through the Weberian model of bureaucracy was the primary instrument of state-building which African leaders chose after independence." (For salient examples, see Gonidec and Bockel 1985.)

The picture becomes more complicated with the advent of single party systems in Africa, the dominant mode during the nineteen-sixties and seventies. Typically, in such systems, the ruling party creates its own bureaucracy, whose goal is to strengthen its own position within the circles of governance and the party's power in the polity. Also, the party bureaucracy comes to operate alongside the government bureaucracy, each interacting not so much directly with the other, as indirectly through mutual relationships with the public, the national legislature, the Cabinet, and the country's top leader(s). What Apter and Lystad described for Ghana held, and still holds true for most other African one-party states:

> The government bureaucracy has specifically defined responsibilities; it is a dependent group, specifically responsible to the Parliament through the Cabinet; it operates under a formal constitutional mandate. . . The party bureaucracy, on the other hand, has only diffusely defined responsibilities: it is an autonomous group, responsible to the party; it operates only under an informal mandate, that of public approval and allegiance (Apter and Lystad 1958:37).

Even where, as in Guinea under Sékou Touré, attempts were made to merge the two bureaucracies under alleged imperatives of Socialist efficiency (or where, in effect if not in formal fact, party and government became one), the efforts failed and the two groups were deliberately kept functionally distinct (Behrman 1967).

At any event, apparatchiki did operate under a different set of role expectations and definitions. Its outlines are familiar enough to students of the genre: whatever apparatchiki did — be it keeping files, collecting dues and recruiting party members, maintaining local and national party offices, producing and distributing party propaganda — they served the party and its mission(s), as defined by the party leadership. The apparatchik was expected, above all, to show dedication to the party, its leader(s), and its/their ideological line.

When the Lines Blur

However, when the respective roles and role expectations of bureaucrats and apparatchiki overlapped or became confuted, as they did frequently in one-party systems, particularly in the so-called Afro-Marxist regimes, a new nexus for official corruption was created. It goes without saying that bureaucrats and apparatchiki, operating separately, have always managed to find new and innovative ways of corruption; the record bulges with their accomplishments. The point is that when the two roles conjoin, be it in the same person or practice, role definitions can become blurred and restraints on official conduct become loosened even further.

Three stories from my interviews and field notes in Ghana and francophone Africa can serve as illustrations. (These are real people; all were promised anonymity in any published accounts of their activities.)

The Case of the Bedevilled Bureaucrat

Mr. A was a senior civil servant in Ghana's Finance Ministry during the Nkrumah regime from 1960 to 1966. He was also a loyal mid-level official in the hierarchy of the ruling Convention Peoples' Party (CPP). Among other duties, Mr. A was expected to provide final screening of all large-scale government construction contracts, advising the Minister whether or not he (the Minister) should sign them. Mr. A's function was to review the financial aspects of such contracts, with particular scrutiny of any foreign financing involved and Treasury obligations to be incurred.

In August 1964, he was presented with a proposed road and bridge-building contract between the Government of Ghana and a foreign construction company, to be financed in part by an international multilateral aid institution, but also involving high-interest, short-term suppliers' credit from a foreign bank. After reviewing the proposed contract, he concluded that the suppliers' credit arrangement imposed excessive, even potentially damaging, obligations on the Ghanaian Treasury, and that the contract needed to be re-negotiated on that point. He also knew that it had become standard practice in some ministries for

proposed government contracts to carry an informal 10-15 percent surcharge (on the value of the contract), to go to the CPP's coffers. His Minister had informed Mr. A that this contract carried such a "contribution" from the construction company and that he (Mr. A) should forward it without delay.

As a professional bureaucrat (Mr. A told me), his path was clear: he could not approve the contract as it stood. As an apparatchik, he understood that the welfare of the party was at stake (here, to the tune of a couple million cedis). "I really had no choice:" said Mr. A, "I could have resigned, but then the government would be left completely defenseless against bad contracts. So I favored the contract."[1]

The Case of the Angry Appratchik[2]

Mr. B was a lawyer in his mid-fifties, practicing in Dakar, the president of a local branch of the national lawyers' association, an affiliate of the ruling party, the Senegalese Socialist Party (PS). Because of his position in the party, he was frequently asked to handle some of the party's legal work. Loyal, dedicated, and effective, Mr. B came increasingly to be trusted with confidential missions by the party's Secretary-General.

In 1981 he was asked to make regular trips to Touba, headquarters of the powerful (Islamic) Mouride religious brotherhood, each time to deliver (as he called it) "*un sac de fric*" (a bag of boodle, in fact a package of high-denomination bills of foreign currency) to one of the deputies of Abdou Lahat M'Backé, the incumbent Khalifa-General, or head of the order. No records were kept of these transactions, and Mr. B's silence on the matter was required. Curious about the source of the money, he found out that it had been gently extorted by party agents from *cambios* (currency exchange agencies, including banks) in Dakar, St. Louis, and Rufisque, and then "contributed" to the Mourides by the party and the government. In any case, the gifts were clearly of dubious legality, probably bribes, and certainly one of the ways the regime kept the politically potent Mourides on its side.

Mr. B said he felt betrayed, angry at being used in "*affaires malhonnetes*" (dishonest transactions). As a lawyer and member of the Magistrature, he was duty-bound (he claimed) to denounce the payments, but as an apparatchik, he understood the necessity for them.

In the end, he explained, unable to resolve the conflict of roles and values but unwilling to compromise his party, he asked that thereafter, someone else make the deliveries. His request was granted.

The Case of the Competent Commissaire[3]

Mr. C was the *Commissaire de Police*, or local police chief in the town of N____, in southwest Cameroon, during most of the 1980s. He was also vice-president of the local section of the Cameroon National Union (CNU), the country's single and ruling party. Most of the inhabitants of N_____ are English-speaking, since N____. is located in an area of the country formerly (before 1961) ruled by Great Britain.

The inhabitants of N____ occasionally became unhappy about (what they deemed to be) the heavy-handed police methods of Mr. C, who was trained in "French" police methods in the French-speaking part of the country. In August 1981, repeated complaints to the local mayor, the regional prefect, and to the Ministry of Territorial Administration in the capital, Yaoundé, produced no results, and so finally, a large group of the citizens of N____ called on Mr. C, apparently intending to pressure him to mend his ways. Unimpressed, Mr. C had eight of the group arrested and thrown in jail for disturbing the peace. The local CNU chief heard of this, and immediately demanded that the eight be released. Mr. C, however, after discussing the matter with the CNU chief, his party superior, refused to let the eight go free until they had each paid Mr. C a "surety" (*caution*) of 25000 CFA (at the time, ca. US$100). Since the sums involved were relatively small, the required amount was found for each prisoner and all were released. According to my informant, Mr. C kept 5,000 CFA of each surety, and "donated" the rest to the local party treasury. It should be added that all this was done without benefit of legal counsel or resort to the local magistrate.

Later, Mr. C was commended by his official superiors for the competent way he had handled the situation. My informant said that other local police chiefs in the region, inspired by Mr. C's example, occasionally resorted to the same practice, but that in the latter cases, the sums extorted were considerably larger.

Conclusions and Intuitions

These are all cases in which an individual plays two roles, both important to him, and is confronted by a situation in which the demands of one role sets up real or potential conflict with the demands of the other. "Cognitive dissonance" theory (Leon Festinger *et al.* 1964) suggests that a dilemma of that kind, unless resolved, is likely to create some sort of psychic stress at best, at worst result in self-damaging behavior. Their explanations notwithstanding, I have no way of knowing if Messrs. A and B really underwent some such existential crisis in the above cases; what they did do, unambiguously, was open the door to, or facilitate, official corruption. Commissaire C, from the account, had no problem, cognitive or otherwise; he did what he did without afterthought, and was rewarded for it.

Needless to say, bureaucrats and apparatchiki, acting severally rather than as individuals with combined roles, do often collude in acts of official corruption, and we have considerable anecdotal evidence that such collusion occurs as readily - and frequently - in military regimes (where the apparatchiki are military personnel), as in regimes like those seen recently and presently in Sudan, where bureaucratic, military, religious, and partisan role-actors conflate or cooperate to facilitate or create various forms of official corruption.

What these cases also suggest (less clearly, to be sure), is a process of role *redefinition* by the officials involved. *Prima facie* this could be seen as a rationalization to resolve a possible role-conflict; in effect, however, what happens is that the individual restructures the logic that underlies the definition of his role. He not only re-writes the script, but does so in such a way as to iron out possible contradiction or dissonance. Robert Klitgaard posits the process as a set of options, a calculus of the expected utilities of being corrupt set within the principal-agent model he favors (1988:70-75). What his model lacks is the sense of context my three cases provide: in the real world of much of Africa, once a culture of political corruption is firmly established, principals are rarely, if ever, troubled by "negative externalities" generated by agents' corrupt acts. Role offers a way of incorporating context into the situation but keeping the focus on the individual official. In such situations, then, problems arise if and when there are challenges to the role definitions that structure official positions, and officials are likely to give themselves the green light to commit (or become involved in) corrupt practice if they can redefine their own roles.

This is clearly what Mr. A did in our first case: he assigned different priorities of importance to his two roles; whatever the reasons, his role as apparatchik was more important for him, and the choice he made was logical in that context. He may have hesitated at first, given the fact that the contract came to him in his role as bureaucrat. Once he decided that his role as apparatchik took precedence, however, his hesitation vanished, and I imagine that faced with a similar situation in the future, he would act in the same way. (And his line about refusing to resign because he wanted to stay on to protect the contract process sounds hollow at best, spoken because he wanted to put himself in the best possible light for me during the interviews. What he did do speaks much more clearly of his motives; *res ipsa loquitur.*) Moreover, I think it likely that the incident also affected the logic of his bureaucratic role: it was now redefined to include a new rule, to wit, "if your official behavior as a bureaucrat affects/ touches/impinges on your responsibilities as apparatchik, the demands of the latter role govern." And if Mr. A's account is truthful, he appears to have been able to do what he did without further reflection.

Mr. B did have a real problem: the magistrature in most of francophone Africa does carry a heavy load of normative expectations about probity, and I surmise (reading between the lines of my interview) that the risks of exposure had

become sufficiently great that he asked to change the arrangement. What is important in his case is that (again, his protestations notwithstanding) he chose a path that permitted the future uninterrupted delivery of the "bags of boodle," but by someone else.

A final word. This short paper is offered with some misgivings: it explores an area of motive and definitions of behavior — role — difficult to tap at best. People who are involved in official corruption do not normally like to talk about their actions, and when they do they naturally tend to be defensive and put self-serving glosses on their behavior. Hence my conclusions are tentative, but if my intuitions are correct, what is here described is generalizable to the larger world of official corruption in Africa.

Endnotes

[1]A similar case is discussed, but in much greater detail, in Le Vine 1975:53-64.

[2]This story was told to me in 1984 by the individual involved.

[3]This story was told to me by a Cameroonian chief familiar with the case of the individual involved.

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