

Corruption: When theft becomes survival

Three years ago, I walked through a beautiful eco-resort hotel in Uganda with a European friend, who owned it. It was the kind of place any country would be proud of—calm, luxurious, and built with vision. But he was selling it.

As we moved around the property, he turned to me and said something that has never left my mind: "George, every Ugandan is a thief. That's why I am leaving and going back to Spain. From traffic officers to city officials, to workers in my own hotel—everyone is a thief. I cannot operate in such a country."

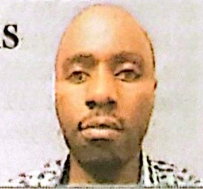
What we are witnessing in Uganda is no longer ordinary corruption. It is a complete system decay—deeply rooted, widely accepted, and shamelessly practiced. Corruption is no longer hidden; it is open, predictable, and in many cases, demanded. It has been normalised to the extent that many Ugandans, whether in public offices or private businesses, no longer depend on their salaries to survive. They must "find a way," and that way is often through theft, manipulation, or extortion or both!

A traffic officer does not expect to live on his salary; he survives on roadside bribes. A medical worker diverts government drugs or runs a private clinic where patients are quietly redirected for profit. Engineers steal materials and inflate project costs, delivering substandard work, while contractors underpay or abandon workers because they have to bribe heavily just to secure the contract. In this Uganda, survival is built on exploiting the next person.

Politics has become one of the most dangerous investments. Leaders do not go into office to serve; it's a gamble where they go to recover money.

You cannot spend Shs50m, Shs100m, or even a billion shillings on an election and expect to earn it back through a modest government salary. It is impossible. The system

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itself pushes leaders into corruption from the very beginning. Voters know this, and they too demand money during elections, openly saying, "after all, you will steal." This is no longer a secret—it is a shared understanding.

Even the moral voices have largely gone silent or, worse, joined the game. Many religious leaders have turned faith into business, collecting from both the poor and the rich without any accountability.

The rot is visible in everyday life. Loan officers openly demand kickbacks to process applications. Security guards charge you to park in places they are already paid to protect. Service workers depend on tips not as appreciation, but as a matter of survival. Everyone is pushing, extracting, or negotiating for something extra, because the system itself has failed them.

Even large corporations are not innocent. Telecom companies sell data bundles labeled "data for 4 days," yet when you buy it on Wednesday, it expires by Thursday morning at 6am. That is not a mistake; it is calculated.

It is organised theft, quietly draining billions from ordinary Ugandans. And where is the regulator, UCC? Silent.

The most frightening consequence, however, is what this is doing to the next generation. Children and young people are growing up in this environment, watching everything. They have seen classmates cheat exams and succeed. They have seen parents bribe their way into top schools. They have watched leaders abuse power without consequence. To them, hard work and integrity no longer pay. What pays is manipulation, short cuts, and connections. That is the reality they are internalising, and it is shaping the kind of society we are becoming.

This path is dangerous and unsustainable. No society can survive for long when dishonesty becomes its foundation. Institutions will continue to weaken, trust will disappear, and both government and the private sector will eventually collapse. Investors will keep leaving, just like my friend did, because no serious investor can operate in an environment where fairness does not exist.

What we are facing is not just corruption; it is a complete collapse of values. It is a country where survival has been tied to exploitation, where wrongdoing is justified, and where everyone is caught in the same cycle.

A small group made so rich through corruption while majority of the population are put at the margins that they are too vulnerable to avoid corruption! And so, the question we must confront is simple but deeply troubling: when theft becomes the norm, when everyone is involved, and when integrity is no longer rewarded—who will save Uganda from an eminent collapse?

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