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Corruption costs the country an estimated $1 billion annually, the office of the Auditor General notes. ILLUSTRATION / MARIE PATRICIA NATAKWA

The sins of the filthy rich

WEALTH
DEOGRATIUS WAMALA

Two books. Five centuries of greed. And everything they explain about the world we are living in right now.

If a monkey hoarded more bananas than it could eat while the rest of its troop starved, scientists would study that monkey to figure out what the heck was wrong with it. When humans do it, we put them on the cover of Forbes. And when the monkey is a senior government official in one of the poorest countries on earth, we call it governance, tolerate it for decades, and then act surprised when the Rolls-Royce appears.

In Mid-May 2026, Ugandans woke up to photographs of a 2025 Rolls-Royce Cullinan, worth Shs3.4 billion, or the annual salaries of roughly one thousand primary school teachers, being loaded onto a flatbed truck outside the Kigo mansion of Anita Among, then Speaker of Parliament.

The car had been airlifted, not shipped, from Britain. Among confirmed ownership on a conference call with the Uganda Revenue Authority. "It was a birthday gift," she said.

What followed is familiar. The raids. The seized phones. Members of Parliament (MPs) deleting her photographs from their WhatsApp profiles with the efficiency of people removing evidence.

And most instructively, the near-simultaneous endorsement of her replacement of a man cited in the same Karamoja iron sheet scandal that generated international sanctions against her, celebrated at a thanksgiving function attended by over 200 MPs while security teams were loading her cars onto trucks.

Two books explain everything about this moment. Not just the Rolls-Royce. All of it.

The book that started with a monkey

Peter Coleman's Sins of the Filthy Rich, published in 2025, is built on a simple observation: the hoarding monkey is not an exception in human history. It is the rule.

Coleman takes the Catholic Church's seven deadly sins, which comprise greed, gluttony, pride, lust, sloth, wrath, and envy, and uses them as a filing system for five centuries of spectacular human selfishness, asking at every turn what the same money could have achieved if redirected toward human need rather than human vanity.

Greed gives us Marcus Licinius Crassus, Rome's wealthiest citizen two thousand years ago, who organised a private fire brigade of 500 slaves not to save burning buildings but to buy them cheaply while panicked owners watched in the street.

"Greed," Crassus reportedly said, "is but a word the jealous inflict upon the ambitious." He died when enemy soldiers poured molten gold down his throat.

The ancient world had a sense of justice that we appear to have misplaced.

Takeaways

- Extractive institutions concentrate power in a few hands, redirect public resources toward private accumulation, and apply rules selectively, firmly to those without connections, gently to those with them.

Pride gives us Elizabeth Holmes, the Silicon Valley founder who convinced investors and hospitals that her company, Theranos, had invented a machine capable of running hundreds of medical tests from a single drop of blood. It had not.

Patients received false diagnoses. Holmes sustained the fraud using a deliberately deepened voice and eye contact so unwavering that investors mistook it for integrity. She is currently serving 11 years in a federal prison in Texas.

Gluttony gives us Imelda Marcos, wife of Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, who accumulated 1,060 pairs of shoes while 52 percent of Filipinos lived in poverty and the national debt reached $26 billion.

"I am my little people's star and slave," she told journalists, standing in a designer dress in the Manila slums. Her little people wanted hospitals. The shoes were for her.

Coleman's most lethal device is what he calls the "Alternatively" calculation, asking what the same money could have achieved if redirected toward human beings.

Among's Rolls-Royce valued at Shs3.4 billion could have funded 181,000 mosquito nets. The Against Malaria Foundation estimates roughly 600 nets prevent one child's death from malaria.

That single car could have saved over 300 children from a disease that a two-dollar net prevents. They were not saved. A birthday present was bought instead. But Coleman's deepest argument is not about individual extravagance. "The sin," he writes, "is not merely personal. It is structural."

Among did not materialise from thin air. She was built, protected, and celebrated by the same system now investigating her, a system that doubled the parliamentary budget during her tenure, cleared her of the Karamoja allegations until international sanctions made that position embarrassing, and allowed billions in self-awarded service awards without scrutiny.

The Rolls-Royce is the symptom. The system is the disease, which is precisely where the second book begins.

Nobel Prize-winning explanation

In 2012, economists Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson published Why Nations Fail, a book twenty years in the making.

In October 2024, the Nobel Committee awarded them the Economics prize for its central argument: "Countries are not poor because of bad luck, bad geography, or bad culture. They are poor because of bad institutions, specifically, institutions designed to funnel wealth toward the few rather than the many."

The popular explanations for poverty, they demonstrate, are wrong. It is not geography. North and South Korea, for instance, share the same peninsula, mountains, and rivers, divided in 1945 by exhausted diplomats drawing a line across a map.

Today, South Korea makes Samsung phones. North Korea has famines. "What separates the two Koreas," Acemoglu and Robinson write, "is the border." It is not natural resources.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo, for instance, sits on $24 trillion in mineral wealth and remains among the poorest countries on earth. At the same time, Singapore has almost nothing underground and is one of the highest-income countries in the world.

What determines prosperity, they argue, is whether a country's institutions are inclusive or extractive.

Inclusive institutions distribute power broadly, enforce the same rules for everyone, and allow any person with talent to build something and keep what they earn. Extractive institutions concentrate power in a few hands, redirect public resources toward private accumulation, and apply rules selectively, firmly to those without connections, gently to those with them. The Nobel insight is that this is not primarily a moral problem. It is an incentive structure. When political power is the most reliable route to wealth, talented people stop building businesses and start cultivating patrons.

Route

'When political power is the most reliable route to wealth, talented people stop building businesses and start cultivating patrons.'