

Kleptocracy as the Underlying Disease

How Years of Looting in Central Africa Undermined the COVID-19 Response

By Elsa Peraldi¹



Corruption and kleptocracy is rife in oil-rich Central Africa.² The discovery of oil in the region brought vast resources into the countries' coffers, but those in power have funneled that money into their own pockets or those of their allies to fund lavish lifestyles.³ The common feature among these states is that corruption is the operating system,⁴ aided by lax regulation in democratic countries and a network of enablers who help kleptocrats launder and stash their ill-gotten gains overseas.

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Despite the riches that natural resources could provide to these countries, their rulers' actions have left citizens poor and human development indices flat. In 2018, Congo-Brazzaville, Equatorial Guinea, Chad, and Cameroon all ranked at the bottom of the United Nations' Human Development Index.⁵ The ruling elite has prioritized their pockets over social development. Presidents in all four countries have appointed allies and friends to key government positions and used anticorruption investigations to remove their foes, a tactic that has allowed them to remain in power for decades.⁶ As investigative reporting uncovers the extent of this corruption,⁷ and corruption-related judicial cases around the world provide a wealth of detailed information to support these claims,⁸ the public has learned that these kleptocrats' ambitions are enabled by networks that facilitate mass looting and the use of repressive measures to maintain control of their governments. Yet even the best possible intentions to address these concerns have been derailed, to some extent, by the problem of the new coronavirus—which in itself has opened up opportunities for the unscrupulous to attempt to profit from global catastrophe.

The kleptocrats' response to the health crisis

Kleptocracy is the norm in these Central African states. When a crisis occurs, their institutions are inherently weaker and less able to respond effectively. Ministries are not staffed with experienced, knowledgeable civil servants, but with the family and friends of the ruling class.⁹ When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the region in March 2020, institutions could respond neither effectively nor efficiently—if, indeed, they could respond at all.¹⁰ The governments followed their usual formula when creating COVID-19 response teams: they chose to appoint close allies instead of the doctors and technical experts who could provide valuable knowledge for a proper response.¹¹

Favoring oversized security and defense budgets, governments in the region have long neglected the necessary investment to advance their social sectors, including health and education.¹² Healthcare facilities throughout the region have paid the price. In Congo-Brazzaville, medical personnel worked without pay for months even before the global health crisis.¹³ Hospitals and doctors have gone without proper training, adequate supplies, medical equipment, and hospital beds for years, well before the surge in demand caused

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by the new coronavirus.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, when personal gain presides over the good of the people, ordinary citizens consistently lack access to basic services. In many regions throughout these countries, people have been forced to endure poor sanitation, decaying hospitals, and even a lack of clean water. Citizens in these countries face far greater risks of dying from COVID-19 because of the underlying kleptocratic conditions that have resulted from decades of looting by the ruling elite.¹⁵ These preexisting conditions came together in a lethal combination, leaving states ill-prepared to respond when the global health crisis hit the region.

Much as with other government resources, funds to combat the spread of the new coronavirus—including government budgets, donations, and international aid—have been managed without transparency. In Cameroon, certain donations and contributions do not appear in the information published by the government,¹⁶ and in-kind donations have disappeared from the state's budget.¹⁷ In Congo-Brazzaville, government mandates required that those exposed to the virus be quarantined in hotels belonging to the ruling family, and in-kind donations of personal protective equipment and sanitizer were distributed to commercial stores or channeled for political activities.¹⁸ In Chad, money for its COVID-19 response has been diverted to the pockets of government officials, and protective equipment has been advertised for resale.¹⁹ With little accountability, it is difficult to determine the true depth of the corruption—or the likely cost in lives that has resulted from it.

Exploiting the pandemic: sustain oppression and continue looting

Central African governments have not allocated sufficient financial resources from state budgets to respond to the pandemic. Instead, they have relied heavily on private or international donations and aid requests. In Equatorial Guinea, for example, government officials and private companies owned by relatives of the ruling family donated masks or money to support the government, even as they used their positions to circumvent the restrictions imposed during quarantine for their personal benefit.²⁰ In Cameroon, the pandemic has opened up profitable business opportunities, while conflict-of-interest allegations have marred the response to build COVID-19 health units.²¹ In all cases, the public health crisis has taken second place to the private interests of medical profiteers.

Although some independent, critical voices have attempted to sound the alarm on these issues, civil leaders and independent journalists who express dissent in these Central African countries are regularly harassed and jailed.²² Others who might speak out are silenced by a tacit fear of retaliation. This environment of hostility fostered by kleptocrats has been key to their ongoing rule: it has successfully disrupted and controlled the flow of information and ensured that kleptocrats remain able to operate unencumbered by the checks and balances that otherwise could supply counterweights to their authority. From the earliest weeks of the pandemic, kleptocrats throughout Central Africa continued to influence public opinion and leave their citizens in the dark by restricting the publication of COVID-19 figures and manipulating datasets on case rates, hospitalizations, and fatalities.²³ It is important to note that just as the COVID-19 virus is not limited by national boundaries, neither is transnational kleptocracy. Kleptocrats consolidate their power at home in part by integrating themselves with the elite in democracies. This reputation laundering, in combination with the enabling

role democracies often play in transnational kleptocracy, causes reputational damage in democracies. The flow of illicit funds through the political and financial systems in democratic states has a deeply corrosive effect on governance in those settings.

Furthermore, the pandemic has offered a unique opportunity for kleptocratic and authoritarian regimes to pass even more restrictive measures to control their citizens and secure their grip on power. In Congo-Brazzaville and Equatorial Guinea, local police have used quarantine measures to harass citizens, demand bribes, and beat those who have not complied with restrictions.²⁴ In Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, and Equatorial Guinea,²⁵ those who criticize the government response face retaliation ranging from job suspension to jail time. In such repressive circumstances, there is little room for the sort of hard-hitting investigations that might force kleptocratic actors to face justice.

How to beat a kleptocrat

Kleptocrats take control of state institutions to ensure that there are few accountability mechanisms and mobilize state resources to quash dissent. Yet, just as the kleptocratic machine is oiled by a network of enablers, those fighting kleptocracy need to use similarly collaborative and proactive tactics to help build an accountability ecosystem that will put in place the countermeasures needed to oppose kleptocratic rulers. Because kleptocracy is a systemic problem, one that cannot be addressed by a singular or isolated approach,²⁶ national and international civil society should explore four interrelated responses:

- **Raise citizen awareness:** Citizens need to feel personally affected by the looting to understand the link between kleptocracy and the lack of services. An important step would be to highlight that the hardships that citizens suffer on a day-to-day basis—which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic—are the result of the kleptocrats who rule their countries. Because this can be difficult to achieve in the tightly-controlled settings of source countries, the international community must be made aware of the corrosive effect of transnational kleptocracy in their countries, as well as their countries' role in facilitating it.
- **Build broad coalitions:** Investigative reports and cases prosecuted in Western countries provide detailed information about how elites have robbed their countries' coffers. However, this information does not always resonate with citizens or reach them in ways they can comprehend. Coalitions of local and international civil society organizations and journalists need to translate this detailed information for domestic and international audiences in a way that will have a real impact on public awareness.²⁷
- **Adapt delivery methods to context:** In Central Africa, most people have only limited access to internet and technology, so information needs to be shared through the channels available to citizens, such as WhatsApp or Facebook.

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- **Collaborate across borders:** By building partnerships with influencers, artists, international organizations, and media, opponents of kleptocrats in Central Africa can amplify messages of hardship and its link to the looting of resources at the international and national level.

These actions will help build a citizenry that is informed about the ways kleptocracy affects them at home and forge connections with international partners who can help increase pressure against kleptocrats. Building and reinforcing the foundations of engaged citizens who demand accountability and change from their governments is a necessary prerequisite for holding leaders to account.

Kleptocratic networks today branch out with speed and ease, reaching into virtually all corners of the globe. Given its complexity and the way it reverberates between countries seen as kleptocratic source settings and those with rule of law, the problem can be addressed only through diverse, complementary efforts by local, regional, and international actors. These suggested actions lay the foundation for the systemic change required to curb kleptocracy.

Endnotes

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