

WITH THE Nationalist Government facing charges of abuse of power and financial corruption more serious than at any time in its history, has come the bland admission by Cabinet Minister Jacob de Villiers that “apartheid was the problem”.

But, he insists, the irregularities, amounting to seemingly incalculable millions in the often renamed department he now controls, “are in the past. The Government is committed to exposing the truth about them.”

In support of this claim he lists President F.W. de Klerk’s announcement of a judicial inquiry into allegations that members of the security forces were behind the murder of Eastern Cape community leader Matthew Goniwe and two others, the publication of the Pickard Commission’s report of the graft in the Department of Development Aid, and De Klerk’s instruction that the Goldstone Commission should investigate allegations of a secret police base from which ‘dirty tricks’ were planned.

Yet there is a perception in the broader world community and among white South Africans in particular that corruption is especially prevalent in black Africa.

Here COLIN LEGUM looks at why Africa is portrayed as exceptionally corrupt and the reason for the corruption that in fact exists in many African countries.

CORRUPTION

WHEN WILLIAM F. WELD, the US Attorney for Massachusetts, retired after serving in the Justice Department’s criminal division, he wrote: ‘I would like to underscore a concern that increasingly troubled me throughout my years of involvement in law enforcement. My concern is that, while Americans frequently deride other countries for corruption in their public institutions, they greatly underrate public corruption as a political and economic problem at home.’

What William Weld wrote about Americans applies no less to South Africans, the British, the Germans, Japanese and others. Their own record of corruption is generally treated as exceptional aberrations in their system, and not inherent in the system itself. Yet — and this is the first point I want to make — corruption is endemic in every country in the world and under every kind of political system.

As has now been shown, communism produced corrupt societies in the USSR and throughout Eastern Europe despite the high moral tone set by Marxists. Japan — one of the closest regulated countries in the world — has been rocked by a succession of corruption scandals that have toppled prime ministers, finance ministers and other top officials and financiers.

A trial has just concluded in Italy involving a dozen prominent bankers and industrialists, while its recent elections have been shot through with fraudulent practices.

The ‘pork barrel’ politics in the United

States, which involves rewarding politicians and their cronies, remains chronic. It has forced a former Vice President and several Governors out of office; currently threatens scores of Congressmen; involves leading figures in the biggest financial ramp this century (including President Bush’s son) over what we know as building societies; and it has in recent years rocked some of the most illustrious financial companies in Wall Street.

In Germany, there is the recent case of a finance minister being forced to resign over a scandal involving the creaming off of funds for political purposes, while a number of industrialists have been tried over illegal trafficking in weapons and chemical supplies.

Even in puritanical Switzerland, industrialists have been involved in illegal arms deals. This, too, has been discovered in Sweden over the controversial deal by the weapons-makers, Bofor, in a multi-million pound deal with India.

Britain has not yet recovered from the exposure of the role of top businessmen and city financiers over the Guinness affair, while even the prestigious Lloyds is trying to regain its former prestige — ‘A1 at Lloyds’ — after a series of scandals.

Name any country in the Arab world and in Asia (except for Singapore), or in Latin America, and one can list scores of scandals involving corruption. Nearer home, current cases involving corruption during the apartheid years, show that South Africa is among the most corrupt countries in the continent. At

present there are at least a dozen cases involving financiers who are on trial for financial malpractices involving hundreds of millions of rand. At least one former Minister was forced to resign because of corrupt practices; and the country is unable to deal effectively with businessmen who have illegally exported capital out of the country, estimated at some R17 billion. Some of this colossal sum has been transferred — under arrangements which make possible the evasion of laws governing exchange control regulations. For a country desperately short of investment capital the loss of such large sums of surplus wealth, this transfer of funds abroad is a national scandal.

Yet, nobody talks about South Africa, Japan, the United States, Britain or other countries as corrupt societies in contrast with the habitual reference to corruption in Africa.

Why are African leaders and governments stereotyped as corrupt? This portrayal of Africa is by now so imprinted on the minds of South Africans that if any newspaper reader is asked to apply a description of Africa they can usually be relied upon to say ‘corrupt’, ‘dictatorial’, and ‘nepotistic.’

I am reminded of a recent report by an experienced correspondent on African affairs writing for a Johannesburg paper who described the new Attorney-General of Zambia as one of the few lawyers of integrity to serve in such a capacity in Africa. How many attorney generals in the continent does this correspondent know to justify this kind of judgment? I have direct knowledge of at least 30

HISTORICAL NEED TO JUSTIFY WHITE SUPREMACY

attorney generals and other senior law officers in African countries since independence who have proved themselves to be men of scrupulous integrity, some of whom have had to pay the price for their efforts at curbing illegality.

This is not to suggest that there have been no dishonest law officers, nor that corruption does not exist in Africa. It certainly does. But since corruption is a universal phenomenon what lies behind the persistent denigration of African governments and leaders as if all, or most of them, are corrupt?

If I were to list the names of African leaders or governments that I know are honest and clean, this would be taken, quite correctly, as citing exceptional cases to disprove an accurate generalisation. But I cannot help mentioning just three examples of African leaders who have recently been described in the South African media as having secretly enriched themselves — President Mugaba of Zimbabwe, ex-president Milton Obote of Uganda, and ex-president Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia. The facts are that Obote is living in virtual penury in Lusaka; Kaunda has been left with no resources to sustain himself and his family; while Mugabe himself is completely clean despite the nefarious practices of some of his colleagues.

The purpose of this article is to raise two important issues: what lies behind the portrayal of Africa as exceptionally corrupt; and what are the reasons for the corruption that in fact exists in many African countries?

My answer to the first question is that the almost universal characterisation of Africa as riven by corruption is motivated by racism. It stems from the earlier, and still widely persistent, idea that blacks are somehow inferior and are incapable of governing themselves efficiently and cleanly. Nor is this racism confined only to the white world; it is to be found equally among Arabs, Asians and Japanese. Space prevents me from citing evidence of this non-white racism towards blacks; but if challenged to do so I can produce ample evidence to support this statement.

In the special case of white South

African attitudes there is an additional reason which helps to explain what lies behind the widespread denigration of Africa: it stems from their historical need to justify white supremacy.

This need gained greater significance during the apartheid years when Africa was regarded as the implacable enemy of white-ruled South Africa. It is an irony that a country that has been subjected to single-party, undemocratic and corrupt rule (just look at the government's role in buttressing the corrupt rulers of many of the Homelands) should have accused the whole of Africa with precisely these vices.

Now that the political climate in South Africa has happily changed, white South Africans are still imbued with the racist attitudes of the past. It is likely to take years for this mindset to change. What could help is the cultivation of more responsible reporting in the mass media of the true conditions in the continent now that it is opening up to coverage by South African journalists. One can only hope that the era of generalisations is drawing to a close and that Africa will be treated with greater responsibility in differentiating between what is good and what is bad in its governments and societies.

Accountable government, based on sound democratic principles, is the only sure way of ensuring that the period of the Second Independence won't be blighted by the misdemeanours and mistakes of the First Independence.

Turning now to the second issue — the reasons for corruption which undoubtedly exists in the continent. There are several different reasons to account for it.

First, there has been the absence of democratic government with counterbalancing institutions capable of curbing corruption. (This needs to be qualified by referring back to the universality of corruption even in countries where democratic governments have existed for years.

A second reason is the psychological drive of people emerging from poverty to acquire wealth. This has been true of all societies in the early stages of the development of democratic government; it is not confined only to Africans.

The easy way to achieving wealth has been through the gaining of political power. Gaining power and hanging on

to it have characterised most societies. The emerging new political class often consists of people drawn from an underprivileged society and who, for all their lives, have known dire poverty. Self-enrichment has been a universal feature of the exercise of unchecked power. Already, in South Africa, this process can be seen to be developing, most notably in the system of Homelands.

A third reason is that in the fragile, nascent period of independence those who have managed to gain power have never been sure of how long they will hold office; hence the need to make hay while their usually brief tenure of power lasts. Some African leaders have salted away their ill-gotten gains against a rainy day.

Now, over most of the African continent, has come a day of reckoning for the first generation of the post-independence political class. The coming of this Second Independence has been hastened by popular discontent over the abuse of power, the extent of corruption, and the absence of human rights. Democracy is on the march from north to south and from east to west. But unless the advent of democracy produces effective institutions capable of curbing the excesses of unrepresentative power,

there is the risk of the emergence of a new political class as greedy as the one they have replaced.

Nevertheless, in the longer term, accountable government, based on sound democratic principles, is the only sure way of ensuring that the period of the Second Independence won't be blighted by the misdemeanours and mistakes of the First Independence which was fought against alien rule.

This is a time of hope; but the process of democratic change will not come easily or quickly. It is important that the complexities of change be properly understood, and this calls for responsible reporting which will require, above all, recognition of the racism that is present, to a greater or a lesser extent, in every one of us, no matter how pious we might feel about our success in having overcome our own inbred attitudes. ●