Civil society groups in Cape Town, South Africa, protested against the Protection of State Information Bill, dubbed the secrecy bill. Local and international critics saw the bill as a pretext for covering up state corruption. Africa Media Online/Sara Gouveia

The rise of civil society groups in Africa

These groups have become major actors in the fight against corruption

By **André-Michel Essoungou**

Under the glaring sun of a recent Monday, an unusual group of protesters marched on the streets of Kampala, Uganda's capital, all dressed in black "to mourn the loss of Uganda's public money through corruption," as some of them pointedly explained to reporters. "Return our money and resign," read one of the slogans they brandished. Since November 2012, on the first Monday of each month, the Black Monday Movement—a coalition of local NGOs and civil society groups—has taken to the streets to highlight the effects of corruption in Uganda and to press public officials to act.

Coincidentally, a month before the movement's launch, a corruption scandal rocked the country. Media echoed a damning report by Uganda's auditor general accusing public officials—including some in the prime minister's office—of diverting some $15 million. The money had been intended for development projects in the conflict-affected northern region. "Massive theft" occurred, Prime Minister Amama Mbabazi admitted at a press conference.

Uproar ensued among foreign donors. Ireland, Britain, Norway and Denmark suspended financial aid. Ugandan authorities ordered an investigation and handed administrative dismissals to those allegedly involved. "This government is determined to clamp down on corruption," Prime Minister Mbabazi forcefully declared, adding, "What we are beginning to see is the beginning of a cleanup that will happen. We will look everywhere; we will turn everything upside down until we discover what may be wrong."

For the Black Monday activists, however, this case is only one among many. They allege that the more than two dozen high-profile incidents of corruption over the past decade have led to the loss of millions of dollars in public money. Rarely have culprits been brought to court, they claim.

Although its popularity remains limited, the movement has emerged as a remarkable feature in the country's public sphere. Through astute tactics and media strategies, it has managed to generate coverage and spur heated debates. The movement follows in the footsteps of a number of civil society groups fighting corruption across Africa: it is a phenomenon that has gathered steam in recent years and led to the emergence of new approaches and tactics.

Diverse paths

In South Africa since the late 1990s, for example, civil society mobilisation against corruption has often been part of a wider effort involving the government and other institutions. In 1999, the government held the first anti-corruption summit. Two years later, it launched the National Anti-Corruption Forum, which brings together civil society, business and government in the fight against corruption. The forum subsequently adopted a comprehensive Public Service Anti-Corruption Strategy committing the government to combat corruption within the public service. More anti-corruption summits were held in 2005 and 2008 and each time civil society actors have been closely involved.

In its 2006 report on South Africa's efforts on good governance, the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)—a self-monitoring mechanism founded in 2003 by African leaders—noted that "the development of key partnerships between the government, civil society and the private sector in fighting corruption" is one of the central aspects of the country's effort.

Some groups independent of those partnerships also aggressively campaign against corruption, a problem some perceive as worsening in South Africa. The country has been falling on the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, going from number 43 out of 179 countries in 2007, to number 69 out of 174 countries in 2012. In January 2012, community leaders, trade unionists and civil servants launched Corruption Watch, a civil society organisation that "relies on the public to report corruption, and...uses these reports as an important source of information to fight corruption and hold leaders accountable." The watchdog reports that in its first 11 months of operation, it received 1,227 reports alleging corruption, many of them sent through Facebook or via text messages,

highlighting the modern character of the campaign.

Allegations of corruption have often swirled around oil exploitation in the Republic of the Congo. Only in the late 1990s however did the fight against corruption start gaining momentum, first through a campaign led by Catholic bishops, then starting in 2003 through a group of NGOs assembled under the national chapter of the Publish What You Pay coalition, a global network of civil society organizations calling for openness and accountability in the extractive sectors. Since then their relentless denunciations have led to significant attempts at transparency by public officials.

Civil society mobilisation against corruption in Africa has also been at the heart of recent waves of protest on the continent. Tunisia's autumn of discontent that led to the ousting of former president Ben Ali in 2011 started as a reaction against the corrupt ways of the ruling elite. These had been exposed through American diplomatic cables made public by Wikileaks, a website that publishes secret information from anonymous sources and whistle-blowers.

In 2011 and 2012, anti-corruption campaigners in Senegal contributed to the downfall of former president Abdoulaye Wade, his son and heir apparent, Karim Wade, and a number of formerly powerful members of his government. Many now stand accused of corruption. Senegal's anti-corruption campaign proved a powerful force as popular artists like the rapper Ndongo D of the group Daara-J joined journalists and activists in mobilising the public. Their movement, *Y'en a marre* ("Enough"), rallied protesters on the streets of Senegal's capital, Dakar, in the last months of Mr. Wade's presidency.

Unsurprisingly, such mobilisations followed the advances in democratisation that have been taking place on the continent since the early 1990s. Before that period, one-party systems and strongman-led regimes dominated, living no room for independent groups to mobilise against corruption. Yet, notes Marianne Camerer, a South African political scientist and anti-corruption activist, "Corruption frequently takes place in societies where there is considerable discretion for public officials, limited accountability and little transparency in governmental operations; in such societies civil society institutions are often weak and underdeveloped."

External actors

Since the dawn of the era of political openness in Africa, external civil society groups have also contributed to the fight against corruption on the continent. Their support has brought global visibility to national activists, as well as much-needed resources.

Indeed, Congo's civil society mobilisation against corruption in the oil sector benefited from support from the national chapter of Publish What You Pay. Through its wide reach among policymakers and global media, the coalition helped shield its Congolese partners from harassment, in part by publicizing threats against them. Along with other external groups, it supported a high-profile corruption lawsuit in a French court against three African presidents, including the president of Congo.

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Equally active is the Berlin-based Transparency International (TI), founded in 1993 by former World Bank official Peter Eigen and nine partners. Mr. Eigen witnessed the negative impact of corruption during his time in East Africa. TI has since emerged as one of the most visible anti-corruption advocates. Its Corruption Perception Index—feared in many circles—is widely cited. A number of African countries have ranked low, earning themselves bad reputations. The bottom five on the corruption index in Africa last year were Zimbabwe, Burundi, Chad, Sudan, and Somalia. To assist its 94 national chapters, of which 14 are in Africa, TI provides them with tools and training to curb local corruption.

Based in Washington, D.C., Global Integrity, another anti-corruption group, has gained notoriety in the eyes of offenders in recent years. Co-founded by investigative journalist Charles Lewis, his researcher Nathaniel Heller, and South African activist Marianne Camerer, it brings to the fight against corruption a new tool: information sharing in real time through an online platform known as Indaba Fieldwork. Global Integrity relies on a network of contributors, including many across Africa. Recently it announced that in collaboration with the Mo Ibrahim Foundation—active in the field of good governance in Africa—it will soon publish its own index, the Africa Integrity Indicators. The stated objective of this index is to assess key social, economic, political and anti-corruption mechanisms at the national level in over 50 African countries.

Persisting challenges

Despite their courageous, sometimes heroic actions, and support from vocal outsiders, civil society groups involved in the fight against corruption in Africa face significant challenges. For many, harassment and threats to their lives are not rare. In their monthly bulletin, Uganda's Black Monday activists chronicle their difficult interactions with the country's police. In Congo, members of the Publish What You Pay campaign have faced what they consider "judicial harassment" by the authorities.

Another more insidious threat to civil society mobilisation against corruption is its inability to maintain momentum in some contexts. In Nigeria, for example, laments Debo Adeniran, executive chairman of Coalition Against Corrupt Leaders, "Our arsenal as civil society organisations is being depleted by the powerful cabal who keep on poaching on our rank and file." In an interview he told *Punch*, a Nigerian daily, "Many anti-corruption campaigners have switched over and joined the bandwagon of institutional corruption in various tiers of government. Unfortunately, they now see things differently."

The good news remains, however: civil society groups in Africa have become actors in the fight against corruption on the continent, a noticeable contrast from just two decades ago, when they were virtually absent. Yet combating corruption effectively also takes engagement by governments, official watchdogs and justice systems. As Marianne Camerer puts it, in Africa as much as elsewhere, "the involvement of civil society actors is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to reduce corruption."