Gaddafi's Empire Of Tuna Fish And Hotels In Uganda

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A few years ago I sat starting out onto the Mediterranean from the wrought iron balcony of an old café clinging onto the crumbling walls of the harbor at Syracuse, Sicily.

I can still taste the sublime ricotta-filled sfogliatella brought to my table with a tiny espresso by the lace-clad owner: the bronze, tightly wrinkled, skin on her wrists glimmering with confectioner's sugar.

In this way, Sicily was predictable: buzzing mopeds, trembling verandas, and narrow laundry-strewn alleyways. Everywhere I walked I breathed in the smell of clams simmering in olive oil or heavy frying dough emanating from the cloistered alleys reaching up from the seafront.

Yet my journey to the island had taken a far less predictable course. I had reached Syracuse from the deep Pacific waters off Suva, the Fijian capital, an obscure route even for me. I had arrived off the coast of North Africa where I was following the tuna fish an investigation into overfishing. Along this storied coastline I had stumbled across quite possibly the last thing I had expected: The sea bounty of one of the world's most notorious dictators.

Encircling the outer reaches of the island were rows upon rows of aluminum-framed spheres bobbing in the ocean. Complex webs of floating tuna farms, which I discovered were part-owned by none other than the Libyan dictator, Muammar Gaddafi. This was the summer of 2009. Two and a half years before the colonel would be found cowering in a ditch in Sirte and murdered after his own fashion, in cold blood.

The revelation that Gaddafi was bringing deep red sashimi to my table was a surprise to say the least. I later discovered the fish farms represented a tuna empire stretching far and wide across southern Europe from Malta to Gibraltar, which had turned the Libyan leader and his cohorts into some of the biggest seafood players in the Mediterranean, allowing them to establish partnerships with major Spanish fishing firms and Japanese importers.

My ears pricked up. I wanted to learn more about Gaddafi's money trail. A few months on from my visit to Syracuse, I found myself in a nightclub in the Kabalagala district of Kampala, where Gaddafi had built the city's national mosque, listening intently in a dark corner as details were poured out to me of the Libyan revolutionary's heavy investment in five-star hotels and shopping center construction across Uganda. By this time, details were also, independently, starting to emerge of his multi-billion investments in South Africa. Where did Gaddafi's financial reach end I wondered? Five years, a revolution and a murder later, it would seem we are all still none the wiser.

Since the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, a small but dedicated task force of lawyers and forensic accountants from Britain, the United States (US) and France have been scouring the globe for the Libyan dictators missing fortune. Tight-knit teams taking on underground bankers and mute government officials on four continents.

Theirs is a thankless task chasing shadows, rumors and, when they get really lucky, spreadsheets. But Gaddafi isn't the only quarry this small army of investigators have in their sights. As I write this, there are people hard at work tracking down the fortunes of fallen regimes from the deposed Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak to the recently prosecuted former Liberian leader Charles Taylor and the disgraced Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

To lighten the load of a heavy train of thought we could pause to consider the bizarre excesses of our most recent fallen despots. Gaddafi, who we know was partial to sushi and the occasional gold AK47, also had a penchant for baby grand pianos, infinity pools and Pierre Cardin carpets and upholstery. Not to be outdone, Mubarak, more of a tapas man, boasted no less than nine luxury Spanish villas. Ben Ali, rather predictably kept tigers in one of his many palaces and was running out of garage space for his 47 limousines, including an armored Maybach worth $1 million.

In 2014, financial crime among the globe's fallen dictators broadly relates less to their garish taste in sports car but a complex range of activities such as tax avoidance or evasion, corruption, bribery, money-laundering, price fixing and drug trafficking. All our embezzlement has many different labels.

But, finding a definition for Hague charge sheets and fighting through the legal minefield to get a prosecution isn't the biggest challenge. Finding the money after regime change is what takes real time and effort.

Last month, the US froze assets worth $458 million alleged to have been stolen from the country by the former Nigerian dictator Sani Abacha. A close relative of his admitted to keeping $100 million buried in his home, which we assume, given the bulk of cash, was a large property in itself.

Such an asset freeze could be seen as a major success. Yet Abacha's iron-fisted military rule reached its zenith in 1996, almost 20 years ago. Nigeria has, in the last few weeks, petitioned the US for the return of the uncovered funds. But the sum is only a large drop in the ocean. After two decades, the whereabouts of the bulk of the estimated $5-billion fortune remains unclear. Nigeria isn't even certain it has a claim on the US money.

It is a familiar pattern. In the wake of the Arab Spring, the ill-gotten gains hidden away by overthrown regimes remains one of Africa's greatest modern mysteries. The king of Africa's nation robbers is undoubtedly the disgraced and deposed Egyptian president, Mubarak, who amassed a fortune for his family, estimated between $40 billion and $70 billion, most of it is still missing. Gaddafi is thought to have taken some $30 billion out of the country.

In 2011, Tunisia's Ben Ali was sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment for inciting violence and murder and also convicted of wide scale theft. Efforts to uncover the bulk of his assets painstakingly roll on. What is beyond dispute here is the missing cash and valuables would provide a desperately needed boost for post-Arab Spring states like Tunisia who are hoping for economic recovery.

At an international level there is some interest to reach into the shadows and find the money. The European Union (EU) recently reiterated its claims that the recovery of assets stolen by the former dictators and regimes of Libya, Tunisia and Egypt was a moral and legal imperative. A team is currently working with officials from the Arab Spring countries to find ways of speeding up the process.

The Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative (StAR), a UN-World Bank project, also provides training and technical assistance to enable countries stripped of wealth. But its most important role is to foster ties between the countries seeking looted money and those sitting on it. That may simply be fixing meetings between their police, prosecutors and financial-intelligence experts. But there are concerns that the international response has led to only limited success in recovering misappropriated assets.

One country at the center of the money trail is Switzerland. Ben Ali, like many dictators, liked to visit Switzerland or at least take his money for a holiday there. The Swiss, known for their impenetrable banking system, are in the face of growing pressure, probably doing more than they are given credit for.

In the last few years, Swiss officials have worked with the Tunisian government to recover two executive jets, worth an estimated $30 million, linked to the family of the ousted Ben Ali. Switzerland also quickly froze more than $60 million in funds held in Swiss bank accounts linked to the Tunisian family. In addition, the Swiss government reprimanded and fined three major Swiss banks for improperly handling accounts belonging to family and close friends of Ben Ali. But questions remain around Mubarak's fortune. The former military leader's protracted exit may have allowed him precious time to move money around and hide significant parts of his fortune in Switzerland and elsewhere.

According to Swiss officials working on asset recovery matters, the European country has helped return nearly $1.7 billion to countries affected by corruption. Switzerland proposed last month a new law to make it easier to freeze assets stolen and safed away by foreign leaders and return them to their countries of origin.

Yet as important as it is to follow the money, or the tuna in Gaddafi's case, and return the misappropriated funds to the people, we cannot endlessly look to the past. The recovery of hard currency will ultimately not be the key factor in determining whether Egypt, Tunisia, Liberia or Libya become more prosperous, democratic nations.

The best thing we can do is gain a deeper understanding of how the money was so effectively stolen in the first place and how it can be prevented in the future. In Egypt, Hosni Mubarak was an army man and not a businessman. But, running a country with what was effectively a suspended constitution for 30 years allowed him to feed off every business deal in the country, benefiting from monopolies, bribery fees, red-tape and nepotism.

This applies as much to Tunisia as it does to often forgotten Liberia which claims to still be recovering from Charles Taylor's grand theft. A few years ago, I interviewed Thomas R. Cenal, an accountant from Chicago who has led the search into Charles Taylor's missing millions for the United Nations.

Retained by Liberia, he and three law firms developed new strategies to follow the money involving filing civil damage claims against companies, governments and international banks that they contend aided Taylor in illegal transactions. The goal, after investigators have succeeded in freezing only around $8 million held by Taylor's relatives and associates, is to win judgments for Liberia even if Taylor's accounts cannot be found.

The estimates of Taylor's hidden wealth from timber and diamond trades run from $280 million to $3 billion. Taylor himself claims to be a pauper. Stephen Rapp, the US ambassador at large for war crime issues and a former chief prosecutor on the case, said the hunt could continue for years.

"You will never find an account listed under Charles Taylor," he says. "In all of these asset recovery cases of former leaders who have been accused of corruption or worse, it has taken a long time to achieve recovery. So this is not going to end."

So what of preventative measures? All the plundering we have spoken of here has been linked to one key thing: a political elite's monopolistic control of regulatory bodies with no accountability to the people they represent.

Charles Taylor

As a consequence, state officials have used their resources to suppress institutions, thereby producing dictatorships and a country whose socio-political and economic policies prioritize the interests of the political and economic elite.

With respect to the domination and control of government structures, existing laws needs to be strengthened in order to compel state officials to declare and disclose their assets and bank accounts. The potential for abuse is further exacerbated by the immunity from legal action enjoyed by the political elite across Africa. Changing laws which exempt presidents, governors and their deputies from prosecution while in office would be a significant step in many African nations.

As we know in South Africa, tendepreneurship is a defining issue. All government contracts should go through public tenders and the lists of bidders and awarders be made publicly available. At the societal level, there also needs to be greater public awareness of what is happening.

Today, this can increasingly be achieved through freedom of information which would allow civil society organizations such as NGOs, the media, and labor unions, as well as individuals and whistleblowers, to challenge state institutions, and the anti-social practices of the government, its representatives and agencies.

In the absence of African leaders volunteering to host a summit dedicated to combatting corruption and establishing civil frameworks to overcome it, the best we can do is look to the African countries who are doing things right.

When he finally leaves this world, focus will inevitably fall on the personal riches of Robert Mugabe and his family. Enriched in recent years by huge diamond finds in the east of Zimbabwe, Mugabe's treasury has reaped in billions and offered little transparency as to where the money has actually gone. When measured against neighboring Botswana the comparison is stark.

On a scale of zero to 100, where zero counts as highly corrupt and 100 as very clean, Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index gave Botswana a score of 65. The figure placed the country in 30th position out of 176 countries measured, the highest of any African country. Zimbabwe was given a score of 20, which placed it in 163rd place – on a par with Equatorial Guinea, and only slightly above Somalia and Sudan.

To understand what has been Botswana's secret, Gareth Penny, the former CEO of De Beers and the Vice President of the Botswana Economic Advisory Council claims that business can play a role in ensuring transparency.

In his opinion, a stance on corruption doesn't just have to be written into a constitution but adopted as a source of pride and a means to attract investment and create jobs.

"Botswana has been a democracy since its independence with working opposition groups and real freedom of speech and press and it has been led by strong, democratically elected presidents, who have taken an uncompromising stance on corruption," he says.

"With the discovery of diamonds by De Beers, government brought in external and respected advisors to negotiate benefits for the country and not for specific individuals. This led to the creation of Debswana, a 50:50 joint venture between De Beers and government, which has been the driving force in Botswana's economic development over the past 50 years. It is an outstanding example of a public-private partnership, which has acted in the interests of the country."

But the lead can also be taken by technology. With more than 650 million owning mobile phones in Africa, people are becoming increasingly well connected, in turn providing a powerful opportunity for citizens to access critical information about their parliaments and to report on human rights violations, corruption and poor service delivery.

Crowdsourcing techniques like Kenya's Uhabidi can be used to report incidents of bribes or corruption. Similar initiatives are springing up all over Africa; with stopthebribes.net in Nigeria, and No bakshish in Cameroon. These platforms allow people to make their voice heard.

In South Africa, where corruption is a growing concern and undermining the popularity of the ruling party, the African National Congress, the Open Democracy Advice Centre has created a platform where citizens can submit freedom of information requests. A data repository has been created online, enabling journalists, analysts and campaigners to utilize this information to hold government to account and campaign for improved service delivery.

ICT has the power to bring the voices of citizens closer to government and is a significant contributor to ensuring that governments serve the interests of their citizens.

To some, this might sound a little idealistic in the face of dictatorships but ICT improves transparency in more fundamental ways. For the new wave of despots and rogues, hiding cash in palace trap doors is becoming increasingly difficult.

Looking at the longer game, the very presence of ICT in government may not immediately decrease corruption and secret activities but it could have the very thing that investigators burning the midnight oil are looking for: fingerprints and audit trails to ease prosecutions after a regime change.

Above all though, most African ruling parties and leaders still lack the political will needed to genuinely tackle corruption. Legislative gaps in dealing with corruption must be strengthened across African countries and the enforcement of internal anti-corruption controls within states must be improved.

One thing I would like to see, as someone who has spent years as an investigative journalist, is more quantifiable and hard-hitting studies on the impact of corruption on the poorest people on the continent.

We often only see the eye-watering figures and forget that corruption undermines the delivery of healthcare, public housing, access to water, sanitation and electricity. In an age where finding employment for Africa's burgeoning youth is paramount, corruption also diverts financial and other resources that could have been used for development with respect to job creation; a fact that the Arab Spring showed can create the ultimate resistance to the corrupt who le

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28-DAY PILATES CHALLENGE ACCORDING TO THE AGE

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