Corruption and identity politics in divided societies

Corruption and Identity Politics

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Abstract
Corruption is a major problem for populations in various parts of the world. This article argues that to understand the problems and dynamics of corruption, we need to understand how discourses and practices of corruption (and anti-corruption efforts) are intertwined with the construction and contestations of identity. Identity politics is a salient feature in peaceful political struggles, as well as in contemporary armed conflicts which are often characterized by the politicization of collective identity (ethnic, national, religious) for the violent pursuit of power. This article outlines and discusses four ways in which identity politics and corruption intersect. First, it points to the often blurred lines between private and collective benefit from corruption, revealing implications of group identity for how corruption is conceptualized. Second, it shows how corruption may exacerbate grievances along identity lines. Third, it highlights how corruption can be used strategically in identity-based conflicts. Finally, it explores how corruption may encourage cross-ethnic solidarity and mobilization that defies conflict divides.

Key words: corruption; identity politics; ethnicity; conflict

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Introduction

> Corruption and the discourses of complaints it generates are at the core of contemporary events, shaping collective imagination and driving social action.[1]

> Corruption and its corollary – lack of rule of law – create a multitude of local points of contention, sense of exclusion and abuse, lingering angers at past abuses. This increases the risk for new dynamics of violence to take root…[2]

> [I]t is not the absolute levels of corruption that complicate matters politically but the extent to which they exacerbate perceptions of economic inequality among different ethnic groups.[3]

Corruption is a major problem for populations in various parts of the world.[4] Large-scale graft and experiences of everyday corruption affect people's lives and society in general

and leads to poor service delivery, increased inequality and a sense of powerlessness, while also contributing to disillusionment with politics, democracy and societal relations.[5] As indicated in the quotes above, it is not only the concrete practices of corruption that impact on the lives of individuals and functioning of societies – discourses and politics in relation to corruption have become increasingly significant, particularly so in societies divided by political conflict or violence.

This article contends that to understand the problems and dynamics of corruption, we need to understand how corruption (and anti-corruption efforts) is intertwined with the construction and contestations of identity. The 'construction and assertion of identity' has emerged as a 'fundamental lever of social change'.[6] While identity politics is a salient feature in peaceful political struggles, it has also been noted that contemporary armed conflicts are often characterized by the instrumentalization and politicization of collective identity (ethnic, national, religious etc.).[7] In post-conflict societies, entrenched divides between identity-groups are a key challenge for reconciliation.

The mistrust and grievances that are the basis of mobilization of collective identities are often deeply intertwined with problems of corruption. At the same time, politics of corruption and anti-corruption often intersect with politics of identity.

This article analyzes the ways in which practices and discourses of corruption are linked with the construction and politics of identity. The article outlines four main ways in which corruption and identity politics are intertwined. First, it points to the often blurred lines between private and collective benefit from corruption, displaying the implications of group identity for how corruption is conceptualized and understood. Second, it shows how corruption can exacerbate grievances along identity lines. Third, it highlights how corruption can be used strategically in identity politics and identity-based conflicts. Finally, it explores how corruption may encourage cross-ethnic solidarity and mobilization that defies conflict divides. The article draws on examples predominantly from Nigeria, Kenya and Sri Lanka. These countries have all experienced conflict along ethnic lines and corruption has fed into the conflict dynamics and politicization of identity.

The article continues from here with a discussion of identity politics before it goes on to suggest that corruption needs to be studied both as practice and as discourse. Thereafter the four main ways in which corruption intersects with identity politics are analyzed, before conclusions are drawn.

Identity politics and conflict

Identity politics can be understood as the use and expression of cultural traits or identities in political projects; a claim to power based on the articulation and mobilization of a particular group identity.[8] Identity politics is a salient feature of power struggles in the contemporary world. It is significant in democratic politics (where political projects based on group identities may clash with the principles of individual rights), collective action (where group identities are central to social movement formation), armed conflicts (which often build on identity-based grievances and mobilization) and post-conflict reconstruction.

Identity politics is particularly urgent to understand in societies where identity-based conflicts have taken violent expressions. While individuals hold multiple identities and the options for politicization are many, ethnic, national and religious identities are the most salient identities to be mobilized in violent conflicts. Violent mobilization along class lines has declined after the end of the Cold War, while gender identities – although highly relevant to the understanding of conflicts – are rarely made into an explicit conflict line during wars and their aftermath.

Root causes of conflict often revolve around access to power and resources. In the pursuit of this, ethnic and religious identities can be mobilized.[9] Identity politics can be *politics of domination* – the construction of a state that represents and imposes a certain, national identity through language policies, cultural and religious symbolism or unequal access to political influence, employment and development resources. Identity politics can also be *politics of resistance* – marginalized groups that mobilize a struggle for rights and power on the basis of a shared identity.[10] Ethnic nationalism of a state can thus be resisted by ethnic nationalism by excluded groups – the two nationalisms reinforcing each other and encouraging polarization between identity groups.[11]

Identity politics has a strong attraction partly because ethnic or religious identities appeal to the needs of individuals for belonging, meaning and recognition. Identity politics however entail a paradox: One the one hand, individuals experience identity as something ‘natural’, as an authentic core of the self. On the other hand, identity is a social construct; a ‘production’, which is ‘never complete, always in process’ and in which the self is constructed in relation to an ‘other’, who is different.[12] This production of the self in relation to the ‘other’ strives to generate seemingly stable categories built on difference.[13]

In an armed conflict, identity-based mobilization, polarization, segregation and (in some cases) ethnic cleansing conceals the ambiguities and the arbitrariness by which the lines between self and other are drawn and redrawn in different historical contexts. The war-time checkpoint – established to protect society from the enemy by screening those passing the point – illustrates well the process of drawing (supposedly) sharp lines

between identity groups. During the genocide in Rwanda, the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and other violent conflicts, checkpoints served as locations where identities were fixed and the identity bearer's fate was determined. Based on information on the identity card individuals passing the checkpoint were classified as 'friend' or 'enemy', 'harmless' or 'dangerous'. The checkpoint thus reinforces the sense of sharp and 'natural' boundaries between identity groups, while at the same time being a site where difference is negotiated and constructed.[14]

The production and expression of collective identities and their mobilization for – or victimization by – political projects have both very concrete and symbolic outcomes. Discrimination and marginalization can be tangibly experienced as difficulties to access employment or state resources, or through language politics, restrictions on mobility and targeted violence. However, the mobilization of collective identities in response to domination may be anchored as much in perceptions as in real circumstances of unequal treatment. The process of producing and politicizing collective identities often combines people's felt grievances with discourses produced by leaders in their pursuit of political projects. Identity politics, therefore, involve complex processes in which power is exercised and contested, and where identity functions as a major mobilizer, producer of meaning and categorizing factor.

Corruption as discourse and practice

> In many ways, corruption has become the dominant discourse of complaint in the post-colonial world, symbolizing people's disappointment with democracy and development, and their frustrations with continuing social inequality.[15]

Smith identifies corruption as an increasingly important discourse that provides ways of expressing discontent. Corruption is at the same time a range of different practices in which persons in power illegitimately and/or illicitly make use of their positions, and a discourse used to voice concerns over dishonesty and societal decay. It is concrete experiences people have in contact with authorities, instances of large-scale graft, and a sense of living in a malfunctioning society.[16]

Scholars and policy makers often use a broad definition of corruption as 'misuse of entrusted power for private gain', covering a wide range of practices, such as bribery, mismanagement of public assets, embezzlement, extortion, favoritism and nepotism. Problems with such a broad definition have been pointed to, for instance by Cheng and Zaum who argue that each of the social problems that are joined together under the corruption label 'requires a distinct response and cannot be understood through the same conceptual lens and addressed using the same instruments'.[17] Dominant definitions of

corruption have also been criticized for presupposing a clear division between public and private, and for making political systems with more clearly defined regulations of what is 'misuse' appear more corrupt.[18] Anthropologists have also emphasized that corruption cannot be understood outside its social and political context – 'any study of corruption is also the study of practices which exist beyond corruption', for instance practices relating to power and networks, influence, nepotism or favors.[19] Corrupt practices need to be understood as power relations: corruption is simultaneously enabled by power and reproduces power. The corruption concept, as it has emerged academically and in policy making and activism, can thus be said to at the same time capture 'too much' (when putting one label on a wide range of different practices) and 'too little' (when it tries to separate corruption from the cultural, social and power structures in which it is embedded).

In popular imagination and political discourse, corruption has a distinctly moral character – it is 'evil', 'a cancer in society'.[20] Taking people's perceptions and conceptualizations of corruption as a point of departure lends some support to a broad definition of corruption, seeing it as 'a corruption complex'.[21] In francophone Africa, the term 'bouffer' (stuff) connotes a wide range of ways in which persons in power enrich themselves illicitly,[22] while in many contexts the term 'eat' captures a wide popular understanding of corruption-related enrichment.[23] Similarly, the much used expression '419' (referring to a law paragraph) in Nigeria includes a wide range of behaviors deemed to be corrupt, including cheating by politicians, administrators, individual swindlers and deceitful romantic partners.[24]

Being a concept that can be filled with so many meanings, the discourse of corruption can be incorporated in different other discourses and political projects, and act as an imaginary and catalyst of political change.[25] A study of corruption therefore warrants a critical analysis of how the concept is used, by whom and for what purposes. Like other words linked to strong moral condemnation, the corruption label risks obscuring the ways in which corruption may be a rational response to certain structures, a survival strategy, or how it forms part of social relationships. As corruption has become a political slogan and a globally prioritized area of policy action it has come to form part of the struggle over how problems are to be defined and where resources are to be channeled.[26] Corruption as a dominant discourse of complaint, and a moral evil, makes it useful in identity politics, where the self can be constructed in relation to a corrupt and evil 'other'. This can be seen in domestic politics where anti-corruption initiatives sometimes are mere smoke screens for attacks against opponents and competitors. In the global politics of anti-corruption a 'corrupt other' is frequently constructed through ideas that poor and/or post-conflict countries need to be 'civilized' through the help of Western-led anti-corruption and good governance initiatives.[27]

This dichotomization of the non-corrupt self and the corrupt other makes little sense considering that corruption often has the dynamics of a collective action dilemma – i.e. corruption is a systemic problem fuelled by the expectations that others are also corrupt and therefore no single individual benefits from acting in a non-corrupt way.[28] From a collective action perspective, corruption is a structural problem, not moral, and the politics of allocating blame for corruption need to be understood as the appropriation of a powerful discourse for various political projects. As this article goes on to discuss the four ways in which corruption is interlinked with identity politics, it approaches corruption both as actual practices and experiences and as discourse and perceptions.[29]

Blurring the boundaries between individual and collective gain

'Private gain' is a key component in most understandings of corruption. How private interests are interlinked with the interests of broader identity groups is however a central question for understanding the logics of corrupt practices, as well as conflict dynamics. Philp highlights the need to 'recognise corruption where the benefits accrue more widely to social or ethnic groups, networks, or organisations'.[30] In fact, to understand corruption we need to acknowledge that individual and collective interests are often inseparable. Joseph writes in the case of Nigeria that

> the very *perception* of the welfare and interests of individuals become intricately connected with those of his or her group. Indeed, the fundamental social process in Nigeria is one in which these two propositions – (a) I want to get ahead and prosper, and (b) my group (ethnic, regional, linguistic) must get ahead and prosper – cannot logically be separated, whether in the context of behavior, action or consciousness.[31]

The obligation towards kin and identity group is well illustrated by a quote from a prominent civil servant in Nigeria:

> Even if I wanted to avoid the practice of awarding contracts on the basis of favoritism, I could not. My people would say that I am selfish and foolish. Who gets to such a position of power and then refuses to help his people? Only the worst kind of person.[32]

Smith goes on to say that 'A man who enriches himself through emptying government coffers is, in his community, despised only if he fails to share enough of that wealth with his people.[33] Chabal and Daloz articulate this reasoning when saying that 'whoever does not rob the state robs his kith and kin'.[34] It is important to note, though, that from a

constructivist perspective, 'my people' and 'kith and kin' are, at least partly, socially and politically constructed ideas whose definitions may vary across time and context.

The moral obligation to favor one's own identity group can cause conflicts to escalate in ethnically divided societies. The expression 'it's our turn to eat' indicates that when the ethnic 'other' has robbed the state when in power, the 'self' is compelled to do the same. As Githongo states in the Kenyan case: 'Corruption becomes easier to justify on the basis of the need to fund politics, because one ethnic elite feels it needs the fire to fight the fire of the corruptly accumulated financial resources of the previous elite'.[35]

The introduction of multi-party elections in Kenya has, de Smedt argues, created opportunities for ethnic 'big men' to 'profile themselves as the defenders of their ethnic groups on the national platform, promising a piece of the national economic cake, including jobs, favours, and hard cash, in return for votes'.[36] The shifts of power in Kenyan politics have spurred ethnic polarization closely interlinked with nepotism and corruption. When Moi replaced post-independence leader Kenyatta in 1978 he broke the dominance of the Kikuyu ethnic group. Instead, the Kalenjin were favored and authoritarianism and corruption increased. Kibaki came to power in 2002 on an anti-corruption platform, but were gradually caught in the logic of the need to 'feed' one's own, replacing initial ethnic diversity in key positions with mono-ethnic (Kikuyu) governance, while engaging in grand corruption. Kibaki had given a former anti-corruption activist an official government position to fight corruption. However, implicit expectations not to confront misconduct by leaders from his own ethnic group circumscribed his work. When he finally exposed grand corruption he was widely seen as a traitor of the Kikuyo.[37]

In Sri Lanka, conflict along ethnic lines has formed the ways in which leaders are expected to satisfy the needs of their own ethnic group. Alliances formed between political leaders and the majority Sinhalese masses during post-independence democratization favored the Sinhalese both symbolically and in concrete terms, through politics of language, religion and land allocation. A separatist struggle launched by minority Tamils, who had enjoyed a privileged position during British rule, and an ensuing civil war between 1983 and 2009 contributed to making ethnicity the collective identity that overshadowed all other group interests. Throughout the conflict, a centralized state enabled a Sinhalese elite to benefit from resources both licitly and illicitly, blurring the lines between ethnic politics and nepotism.[38]

The ambivalence of what is private and what is collective gain in relation to corruption indicates that to understand both what corruption is and how it is motivated we need to understand how identity groups and loyalties are constructed and maintained. The perceptions of loyalty with and solid boundaries between identity groups are particularly

salient in conflict contexts, possibly making corruption (both as a variety of practices and as a discourse about who and what is 'evil') a cause of and a 'weapon' in the conflict.

Grievances and corruption

Identity-based conflicts are often rooted in a sense of grievances – a sense of being, as a group, marginalized, repressed and excluded from expected access to power and resources. What Uslaner and Rothstein call 'the inequality trap' offers some clues to how grievances and corruption are interlinked: 'The roots of corruption […] rest upon economic inequality and low trust in people who are different from yourself. Corruption, in turn, leads to less trust in other people and to more inequality'.[39] Corruption can be seen both a cause and a consequence of inequality. Corruption tends to transfer resources from ordinary people to elites, and from the poor to the rich, functioning as an extra tax on citizens, and diverting resources from public expenditure. At the same time, inequality contributes to higher levels of corruption.[40]

High levels of inequality and corruption also, according to Uslaner, leads to high levels of mistrust towards the state, fellow citizens and society at large. Importantly, corruption is encouraged by and causes weak generalized trust, but strong trust within one's own identity group: 'corruption thrives on particularized trust, where people only have faith in their own kind (or their own small circle of malefactors)'.[41] Cheating the 'other' does not generate the same moral condemnation as poor behavior towards your own group.[42] At the same time, corruption reinforces the idea that 'others' cannot be trusted.

However, a constructivist understanding of identity challenges the clear distinction between in-group and out-group, drawing attention to the constructed and (partly) flexible nature of collective identities. What may be defined as an in-group has its own self-other divisions within, and lines are continuously drawn between the trustworthy and the dangerous or corrupt within the group. For instance, in Sri Lanka, a Tamil does not necessarily see all Tamils as trustworthy. On the contrary, throughout the conflict certain Tamils have been labelled traitors to the Tamil cause. Moreover, corrupt acts perpetrated by those belonging to the so-called in-group may cause mistrust between persons sharing the same ethnicity, as in the cases of Igbos in Nigeria and Tamils in Sri Lanka who are disillusioned with the corruption of 'their own people'.[43]

The overlap between inequality and ethnic identity (or other identities) is one key problem behind grievances in divided societies. In the Kenyan case, there is a pattern of marginalization of certain regions, and by extension certain ethnic groups, illustrated by for instance unequal access to piped water and electricity, and differences in life expectancy between regions. Following the patterns of the colonial power, subsequent political power-holders have distributed resources to favor a ruling 'minority'. However,

it is often not only the concrete facts of inequality that matters for ethnic grievances, but perceptions of inequality. It may not be corruption as such that cause grievances, but the fact that one's own group does not reap the benefits of it:

> Corruption, particularly the egregious conflict of interest on the part of leaders perceived as hailing from one group, and their conspicuous consumption in a flagrant manner, profoundly exacerbates public resentment with regard to graft, even within the context of a growing economy. So, ironically, it's not the corruption in itself that people object to but the fact that it is perpetrated predominantly by an elite from one ethnic group to the exclusion of others, *especially theirs*.[44]

In Kenya, grievances have in some cases been used to motivate ethnically based violence. An estimated 1,100 persons were killed and 350,000 displaced in 2007 when ethnic groups who had thought it was 'their time to eat' protested what they believed were manipulated election results.[45] Grievances linked to ethnicized and nepotistic allocations of land has also been behind violent clashes along ethnic lines.[46]

In Nigeria, Igbos fought and lost a battle for separation in the late 1960s, leaving almost one million dead, including the victims of a war-induced famine. Decades later, many Igbos still hold grievances against a government run by ethnic 'others'. The endemic corruption of the Nigerian state is a main reason why many Igbos favor separation – they would be much better off on their own. The federal police are seen both to be highly corrupt and to consist of ethnic others, while Nigeria's oil riches are exploited by top leaders with whom Igbos lack connections.[47] While most Nigerians are aggrieved by the country's pervasive corruption, Igbos couple their experiences of corruption with their perception of ethnically based marginalization. For instance, election rigging in 2003 was described by Igbo leaders as 'an anti-Igbo plot'.[48]

In Sri Lanka too, corruption feeds into the sense of ethnic grievances. While all ethnic groups are affected by corruption, some Tamils believe that they, as a discriminated minority, are worse affected. In a survey from 2007, 8.5% of the sample consisting of people from all ethnic groups stated that they had paid bribes during the last year (a figure that may be too low to reflect reality, as people are often reluctant to speak about their own involvement in bribery). However, of the Tamils surveyed, 40% said that they had paid bribes during the previous year.[49] In interviews conducted by the author, Tamils in some cases claimed that they had to pay bribes more often and in higher amounts than persons from other ethnic groups. 'If it is a Sinhalese person, the cost will be 100 rupees. If it is a Tamil person, it will be 1,000 or 2,000 rupees', one woman said when talking about bribery in local authorities. Persons from the Sinhalese majority, when affected by

corruption, did not tend to see this as related to their ethnicity – rather they believed they were suffering from corruption because they were poor.[50]

Corruption related grievances can be politicized and made sense of in different ways. Scott proposes that:

> Corrupt practices which favor the wealthy, regardless of who the wealthy may be, are less disturbing to a nation divided along ethnic or religious fissures than such practices would be in a community divided along economic class lines. The test, then, is whether the predominant form of corruption cuts across or reinforces existing cleavages; ethnic-based corruption would accordingly be less politically disruptive in a class-oriented community than in an ethnic-oriented one.[51]

Scott notes, though, that wealth and ethnicity overlap in many societies. However, a constructivist understanding of identity highlights the difficulties in making clear distinctions between societies divided along class and ethnic lines. When frustrations with corruption are interpreted and expressed in ethnic terms, this may in fact conceal class-based inequalities that are maintained through practices of corruption.

Using corruption strategically

Scott argues that corruption can be understood as a means of political influence. Such methods of influence are rational when there is a gap between administrative behavior and the law, or for groups who are not well organized. He also notes that

> [w]here a minority is discriminated against and its political demands are regarded as illegitimate by the governing elite and the general population, its members may feel that open pressure group action would destroy what little political credit they enjoy. They may therefore turn to the corruption of politicians and/or bureaucrats to safeguard their interests and avoid damaging political attacks from more powerful groups.[52]

Scott made this observation in his study of the Chinese community in Thailand, but also argues that there are many examples in Southeast Asia and East Africa of groups who are doing well economically but are perceived as 'aliens' by much of the local population. According to Scott, '[t]hose who feel that their essential interests are ignored or considered illegitimate in the formal political system will gravitate to the informal channel of influence represented by corruption'.[53] Along similar lines, a study of Burmese illegal immigrants in Malaysia shows that the migrants pay bribes to the police to secure their stay in the country. For them, corruption is both a threat, since it undermines their economic survival, and an opportunity, as it saves them from

deportation.[54] Used strategically by minority groups, corruption can potentially, and to some extent, be a tool in politics of resistance or survival.

Corruption can however also be used as a tool for the politics of dominance. Cheng and Zaum point out that petty corruption – although it normally does not distort laws and procedures of government as severely as grand corruption – can have devastating consequences since it is experienced directly by the population. Petty corruption can be 'a vehicle for targeting ethnic and political groups; in this way, the routine nature of petty corruption can destroy the perception of state neutrality'.[55] The ethnic or political 'other' may in this way become victim of corruption. In Sri Lanka, Muslims and Tamils involved in trade state that they as minority groups are asked to pay far higher 'commissions' to the Sinhalese-dominated customs when importing goods than are Sinhalese traders. The minorities have long dominated much of the business sector in Sri Lanka, and the post-war strengthening of Sinhalese nationalism and dominance may have opened up opportunities to use corruption strategically to challenge minorities in the private sector. This example also illustrates that it is difficult to distinguish between the strategic use of corruption as politics of dominance and as politics of resistance. Tamils and Muslims would see the difficulties they face as politics of dominance by a powerful majority group, while Sinhalese traders may see it as politics of resistance against the dominance by minority groups within their particular business sector.[56]

Examples from Kenya show how corruption and nepotism in land allocations have been strategically used and linked with violence along ethnic lines. In connection with the 1992 elections, ethnic clashes, causing about 1,500 deaths, primarily took place in areas where the state was the allocator of land rights. Politicians could mobilize support in elections – including instigating violence against opponents – 'using land rights as a patronage resource'; they could 'reward supporters with land rights and […] revoke the land rights of nonsupporters'.[57]

Another way in which corruption may be strategically used in identity politics is through the politicized use of 'anti-corruption' to discredit or do away with opponents and critics. Since the mid-1990s a global anti-corruption discourse has gained prominence, and also been adopted in domestic politics. It has been noted that 'what unites corrupt leaders today is their outspoken interest and determination to fight corruption'.[58] Anti-corruption campaigns often do not only or primarily aim to fight corruption, but form part of a political power play where accusations and measures against corruption may increase the domestic and international standing of a leader, while undermining his/her opponents.[59] In Nigeria, President Obasanjo created two commissions to deal with financial crimes and corrupt practices in 2000. Their investigations led to a number of indictments of government officials and politicians, but to very few convictions. A general opinion was

that those who indeed were prosecuted were targeted because they had fallen out with the president.

> Nigerians commonly believe that almost every prominent politician is guilty of prosecutable offenses, but assume that the state apparatus is only turned against those who have committed some other offense that has antagonized the president or his powerful allies.[60]

In Sri Lanka, the extent to which power-holders can engage in corrupt behaviors with impunity reveals that anti-corruption measures are often political strategy. Shortly after the war had ended in 2009, the commander of Sri Lanka's Armed Forces, General Fonseka, challenged President Rajapaksa in presidential elections. Rajapaksa won and Fonseka was prosecuted and jailed on corruption charges. This was an efficient way for Rajapaksa to do away with the general who enjoyed considerable popular support, while also sending a strong signal as to what may happen to anyone who dares to challenge his increasingly authoritarian leadership.[61]

Politics of anti-corruption can take on ethnic or other divisive dimensions. Belloni shows how allegations or investigations of corrupt practices can be rejected as politically motivated if they are directed against someone from a different ethnic group. In the case of post-war Bosnia, accusations leveled against leaders by the ethnic other have been politicized and described as expressions of ethnic conflict rather than sincere anti-corruption efforts.[62]

In Sri Lanka, scandals in the higher education system illustrate how accusations of corruption can be ethnicized. In 2012, the disproportionate number of Muslim students admitted to a prestigious Law College led to allegations of corrupt practices during exams. This was largely framed as Muslim favoritism, in a post-war environment where Muslims had become the target of criticism and physical attacks by Sinhalese nationalist groups. A parallel scandal about a leak of question papers for Ordinary Level exams, where those responsible for the leak and the favored students were Sinhalese, however, was not framed in ethnic terms, leading analysts to point to the strategic ethnification of corruption perpetrated by persons from a minority group.[63]

With corruption as a hugely important discourse both in politics and in everyday talk, framing oneself as not corrupt and competitors, opponents or enemies as the corrupt other can be highly strategic. Discourses of corruption and anti-corruption hence make up an arena for the continuous drawing and maintaining of boundaries between an honest and righteous 'self' and an unscrupulous and evil 'other'. This logic is further reinforced by a general tendency to see corruption as outside the self, where typically, '[o]nly the practice

to which one falls victim or from which one is excluded are denounced as being corrupt'.[64]

The condemnation of corruption can be used to mobilize opposition and motivate violence. An anti-corruption discourse has been used to legitimize military coups,[65] armed struggles and popular revolts. In Sri Lanka, for instance, the LTTE framed itself as a scrupulous and well-organized liberation movement, fighting the corrupt Sri Lankan state.[66]

While there may be various interests behind the politicization of corruption, another option may be to make use of ethnic or other conflict divides to conceal or divert attention from issues of corruption. LeBillon notes that

> Post-conflict mismanagement and embezzlement of reconstruction assistance can […] delegitimize the local government and lead to social unrest. To cover this up, local political leaders may resort to divisive politics of hatred and fear, pushing corruption issues into the background.[67]

In Sri Lanka, the war and the entrenched ethnic divides provided a useful distraction from large-scale graft and a justification for lack of transparency and media freedom. Violent conflict along ethnic lines bestowed leaders with an image of heroism, masking their responsibility for imprudent spending of public resources.[68] Similarly, in Kenya corrupt ruling elites have historically been able to 'generate and benefit from a series of localized "clashes" in its struggle to remain in power'.[69]

As we see from the above discussion, corruption can be strategically used in identity politics and conflict both as actual practice used to make one's own group 'get ahead', and as a discourse through which other groups and individuals are discredited and attacked.

Solidarity and mobilization across divides

So far we have seen how corruption as practice and discourse can work and be used to exacerbate grievances and deepen identity-based conflicts. However, there are also examples of how corruption may forge links and encourage solidarity across ethnic or other divides in conflict-prone societies. In ethnically diverse Indonesia, Palmier suggests that 'Indonesia's pervasive corruption binds together elite members of different ethnicities, so that one of its functions is to maintain the politico-social unity of the country'.[70] With a shared interest in preserving the profit-making opportunities provided for instance by foreign aid and loans high-ups form strong solidarity across ethnic divides, which may function as a counter-force to ethnically based separatism. Similarly in Bosnia, corruption has fostered interethnic and inter-religious cooperation at an elite

level, as ‘political parties are the vehicles through which former bitter enemies frequently collude to guarantee the smooth operation of their illegal activities’.[71] These examples bear similarities with the ‘buying peace’ phenomena that may be observed in connection with the negotiation and implementation of peace settlements, where peacemakers often feel obliged to allow for corruption to create stability and entice former armed actors to work together and support a stable peace.[72]

Corruption tends to involve large networks where a considerable number of individuals are involved and benefits in one way or another. This creates incentives for supporting each other – if one individual would fall, so would everyone else too. The result is a certain type of ‘solidarity’. The structures of power and the extent to which the political system has been ethnicized will determine whether this solidarity merely enforces in-group loyalties and ethnic divides, or whether it may actually bridge conflict divides. The examples from Nigeria, Kenya and Sri Lanka – where ethnic divides are deeply entrenched – suggest an overwhelming dominance of corrupt practices that strengthen in-group solidarity.[73]

However, popular discontent with elite corruption may provide space for mobilization and solidarity across ethnic and other lines. Corruption is a problem that causes much anger and which can be framed as an evil that people can unite against. In the case of Burundi, Uvin argues that corruption has generated disappointment and feelings of exclusion in a post-war context, and that this risks leading to renewed violence. However, corruption can trigger an alternative dynamic too:

> the near-universal unhappiness with its continued prevalence contains the seeds for a new (non-ethnic) politics. Condemnation of corruption and a widespread desire among all citizens to be treated more equitably and transparently by the state suggest that people are ready for a different political game.[74]

The change from a Tutsi dominated regime to a Hutu dominated one made it clear that the problems lay within the system, rather than with individuals of a particular ethnic identity, something which could form a basis for cross-ethnic collaboration. In Bosnia-Herzegovina a wave of protests against government malfunctioning and corruption emerged in early 2014. Mass demonstrations have been largely free of nationalist expression, and have to some extent unified groups across otherwise deep ethnic and religious divides. This was illustrated by the slogan ‘You are all disgusting, no matter what ethnicity you belong to’, directed to the ruling elite.[75] In Hong Kong and Singapore, Uslaner suggests, the threat from an external ‘other’ – China – helped unite the population and provide support for an anti-corruption drive.[76]

A study from Cambodia shows how a shared identity has developed amongst victims of corruption. People's experiences of corruption reinforced the identification as 'poor', as opposed to the rich 'other' who benefitted from corruption.[77] This poor-rich dichotomy was however complicated by the fact that the poor did not only see the rich as the corrupt other, but also as persons who should be respected and with whom they wished to establish relationships that may become useful when navigating in a corrupt society.

Examples from Kenya and Sri Lanka point to the deep difficulties involved in endeavors to unite people across conflict lines to combat corruption. The great ambition of President Kibaki to fight corruption as a problem that affected all ethnic groups ended up falling into the pattern of corruption being fought only if political opponents were involved. Persons attempting to challenge this logic put their lives in danger.[78] In Sri Lanka, whether one is a journalist disclosing top-level grand corruption or a villager criticizing mismanagement in local authorities the risks are considerable. Moreover, a cross-ethnic coalition against corruption has been precluded by the strong sense of grievances which is held by the Tamil population and politicized by Tamil leaders, making corruption appear far less urgent than the discrimination and subordination of Tamils.[79]

Conclusions

This paper has discussed how corruption – both as a range of practices and as discourse – feeds into, forms part of and shapes politics of identity construction and mobilization in societies affected by violent conflict. We see how perceptions, moral views and actual circumstances and experiences of corruption shape people's understandings of conflicts and are made use of in the construction and politicization of identity. We also see how identity issues may determine how corruption is understood, engaged in or fought. This has implications for both further research and policy making in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Those working in and on identity-based conflicts and post-conflict reconstruction would benefit from the recognition that corruption and anti-corruption make up important arenas where conflicts are played out and lines between identity groups are drawn and deepened. Corrupt systems, large corruption scandals or everyday experiences of corruption have the potential to trigger or deepen conflicts and social divides. This article shows that grievances along identity-lines may be enhanced by practices of corruption. At the same time, corruption complaints may provide a way of expressing grievances and protesting the exclusion from power, resources – and from the benefits of corruption. The article also analyzed various ways in which corruption is strategically used in conflicts. For instance, identity groups may resort to corrupt behaviors as means of domination or as resistance to domination. Both identity and corruption can be instrumentalized in ways that are often intertwined: ethnic polarization and conflict may be used to ward off

attention from corruption, while corruption charges and anti-corruption campaigns may be used to discredit or do away with adversaries. However, there are also examples of corruption-related cooperation and solidarity across conflict divides – either motivated by a need to protect the corrupt, or by shared resentment against corruption. Actors striving to support peacebuilding in conflict-affected societies need to recognize that curbing corruption is critical. At the same time, however, anti-corruption strategies often get caught in the logics of identity politics and conflicts. How to instead build on shared concerns about corruption to bridge divides is an issue peacebuilders can fruitfully explore further.

Researchers of corruption can benefit from a focus on identity politics, particularly if it highlights identification, mobilization and politicization of identity as dynamic processes. Such perspectives can reveal the complex ways in which popular grievances may be historically related to inequality and corruption, and the ways in which politicization of corruption/anti-corruption and identity-based conflicts matter for how corruption impacts on people's trust in each other, the state and society in general. A process-oriented understanding of identity also destabilizes any attempts to draw clear lines between an 'in-group' and an 'out-group' and hence complicates our understanding of how trust (generalized and particularized) relates to corruption. Moreover, an analysis of identity politics is useful if we wish to understand motivations, logics and dynamics of corruption, as this can rarely be understood merely as the wish of individuals to profit. Instead, expectations of and obligations to a wider identity-group plays a central role, sparked by previous corruption by an ethnic other. Policy makers and practitioners striving to organize or support anti-corruption initiatives hence need to understand how their efforts risk being immersed in social conflicts and identity politics, as they challenge social contracts and expectations of in-group solidarity, or are strategically used against opponents.

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End notes

1. Smith, *A Culture of Corruption*, xii.
2. Uvin, "Corruption and Violence in Burundi," 19.
3. Githongo, "Inequality, Ethnicity and the Fight against Corruption," 21.
4. See LeBillon, "Corrupting Peace?" 62; Gordon, Harding and Akinyemi, *Corruption and its Discontents*; Smith, *A Culture of Corruption*.
5. See Rothstein, *Quality of Government*; de Sardan, "A Moral Economy of Corruption."
6. Castells, *The Power of Identity*, xvii.
7. Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*; Mello, "In Search of New Wars."
8. See Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, 7.
9. Mobilization also requires resources. Clientelist networks and corrupt practices can play an important role generating resources that enable violent conflict.
10. Cf. Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 8.
11. See Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*; Nederveen Pieterse, *Ethnicities and Global Multiculture*.
12. Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 222.
13. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 99.
14. See Jeganathan, "Checkpoint"; Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us*, 55, 61, 157.
15. Smith, *A Culture of Corruption*, 9.
16. See Myrdal, *Asian Drama*, 940.
17. Cheng and Zaum, "Selling the peace?", 4.
18. See Scott, "The Analysis of Corruption"; Blundo and de Sardan, *Everyday Corruption and the State*.
19. Blundo and de Sardan, *Everyday Corruption and the State*, 12.
20. Underkuffer, "Defining Corruption," 37.
21. de Sardan, "A Moral Economy of Corruption."
22. Ibid., 28.
23. See Wrong, *It's our Turn to Eat*.
24. Smith, *A Culture of Corruption*, 86.
25. Koechlin, *Corruption as an Empty Signifier*, 5.
26. Krastev, *Shifting Obsessions*.
27. See Pugh, "Corruption and the Political Economy of Liberal Peace."
28. See Rothstein, "What is the Opposite of Corruption?"
29. Understanding corruption as both discourse and practice does not necessarily assume clear-cut lines distinguishing the two. Notably, work on discourse highlight how discourse and practice are mutually constitutive. See van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice*.
30. Philp, "Conceptualising Corruption," 30.
31. Joseph, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics*, 53f; see also Smith, *A Culture of Corruption*, 54.
32. Cited in Smith, *A Culture of Corruption*, 65.
33. Ibid.
34. Chabal and Daloz, *Africa Works*, 107.
35. Githongo, "Inequality, Ethnicity and the Fight against Corruption", 22.
36. de Smedt, "No Raila, No Peace!", 584.
37. Wrong, *It's our Turn to Eat*.
38. See Lindberg and Orjuela, "Corruption and Conflict."
39. Uslaner, *Corruption, Inequality and the Rule of Law*, 4; see also Rothstein, *Quality of Government*.
40. Rothstein, *Quality of Government*, 156; Rose-Ackerman, Corruption and Government", 53; Uslaner, *Corruption, Inequality and the Rule of Law*.
41. Uslaner, *Corruption, Inequality and the Rule of Law*, 49.
42. Ibid., 50, see also Rothstein *Quality of Government*, 156f.
43. Orjuela, Lindberg and Herath, "Corruption and Ethnic Divides"; Smith, "Corruption Complaints".

44. Githongo, "Inequality, Ethnicity and the Fight against Corruption," 21, italics in original.
45. de Smedt, "No Raila, No Peace!", 581.
46. Boone, "Politically Allocated Land Rights."
47. Smith, "Corruption Complaints."
48. Smith, *A Culture of Corruption*, 204.
49. CPA, *A Survey on Corruption*.
50. Orjuela, Lindberg and Herath, "Corruption and Ethnic Divides."
51. Scott, "The Analysis of Corruption", 331.
52. Ibid., 327.
53. Ibid., 328.
54. Franck, "First They Ask for the Passport."
55. Cheng and Zaum, "Selling the peace?", 6.
56. Orjuela, Lindberg and Herath, "Corruption and Ethnic Divides."
57. Boone, "Politically Allocated Land Rights," 1312f.
58. Rothstein and Tegnhammar, "The Mechanisms of Corruption," 40.
59. Lawson, "The Politics of Anti-Corruption Reform."
60. Smith, *A Culture of Corruption*, 116.
61. Lindberg and Orjuela, "Corruption and Conflict."
62. Belloni, "Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?", 234.
63. Perera, "Improved governance."
64. de Sardan, "A Moral Economy of Corruption," 34.
65. Ibid., 29.
66. Lindberg and Orjuela, "Corruption and Conflict."
67. LeBillon, "Corrupting Peace?", 72.
68. Lindberg and Orjuela, "Corruption and Conflict."
69. Klopp, "'Ethnic Clashes' and Winning Elections", 475.
70. Palmier, "Indonesia," 155.
71. Belloni and Strazzari, "A Deal among Friends."
72. Le Billon, "Buying Peace or Fuelling War"; Cheng and Zaum, "Selling the peace?"
73. Cf. Uslaner's and Rothstein's argument that high levels of corruption are linked with low out-group trust and high in-group trust, Uslaner, *Corruption, Inequality and the Rule of Law*; Rothstein *Quality of Government*.
74. Uvin, "Corruption and Violence in Burundi," 19.
75. Nikolova and Mirescu, "Protesters Unite against Corruption."
76. Uslaner, *Corruption, Inequality and the Rule of Law*, 19.
77. Nissen, "Living Under the Rule of Corruption," 42.
78. Wrong, *It's Our Turn to Eat*.
79. Orjuela, Lindberg and Herath, "Corruption and Ethnic Divides."