

A GOOD MAN IN GOMORRAH: How shame died in Kenya, why seppuku is alive and well in Japan

I recently watched with interest a video of four senior Japanese officials bowing and apologizing to the public. I was curious. I wanted to know how many deaths these officials had caused or what a lifestyle audit had revealed about each one of them. I was curious to know if they too had been involved in approving contaminated food into the market, or rigging elections.

“It’s deeply regrettable that this misconduct took place. We’re sorry,” said one of the Japanese officials as the other three looked on gravely.

The misconduct was that one of their workers had been leaving work three minutes ahead of his lunch break. It was not just the public apology that took place. The worker was reprimanded and fined, losing thousands of Yen. This is how seriously public service is taken. It is about ethics and integrity.

I found this remarkable, especially during a week in which in my own country, public servants had done far worse things and shown no remorse. A week in which those entrusted by the public with their safety and security had probably been bribed to allow the importation and sale of contaminated sugar into the country.

Looking at the downcast faces of the four Japanese officials reminded me of how on 1 September 2017, I was tasked with preparing what was supposed to be a major statement following a historic decision by a key organ of government. The draft started with a public apology. Later, in consultations,

reference to even the barest sense of remorse was deleted. To date, no apology has been offered. Not from me or any of my colleagues. Nobody has been made to account for the lives lost, the money lost, the time lost and the complete running down of the state institution. Instead, in small regular doses, we are treated to theatrics.

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Corruption, impunity, state capture and lack of integrity make for a toxic mix. Nobody feels responsible for failure. No shame. No possibility that one of these individuals, driven by guilt, will suffer a nervous breakdown because of the plunder of state resources. Or failure to uphold the Oath of Office. Not the President or any State Officer. Political leaders consciously lead their supporters to their deaths to increase their political bargaining power with their adversaries and feel no remorse. The police use violence to quell peaceful protests causing deaths and yet there will never be an apology, resignation or firing. The conclusion is simple: if I will not be held responsible for my actions, why apologize? If I can steal and still remain in office, why resign?

In hindsight, I should not have been surprised by the video of Japanese officials resigning. Tolerance levels for scandals in Japan are extremely low. Except for its current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has been in office since 2012, Japan's Prime Ministers since the Meiji Restoration in 1868, have served for an average of only two years. Prime Minister Abe, is facing public pressure to resign for actions that would be considered frivolous in Kenya or even in Donald Trump's United States.

Abe is accused of cronyism in a case in which an old friend of his sought regulatory approval to open a veterinary medicine department at his university. This is not illegal in Japan. Another “scandal”: Abe is accused of assisting the owner of a kindergarten to buy a plot of land from the national government at around 14 percent of the market value in order to set up an elementary school. I must stress, that this was not a case of a public official trying to “convert” a school playground into private property. The details of that land controversy in Japan are nowhere near the Ksh 1.5 billion Ruaraka land scandal, or the myriad frauds documented in the Ndung’u Land Commission report.

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The private sector in Japan is not spared from scrutiny either. It is fairly common for Japanese chief executives to step down and take responsibility for unethical actions in their firms. The list is long including the CEO of Dentsu, Japan’s biggest advertising agency, who resigned in 2016 over a worker’s suicide due to overwork (there is a formal term for this: *karoshi*); Toshiba’s CEO who resigned due to an accounting scandal; the CEO of Olympus who resigned after a scandal over hefty advisory fees; and the CEO for Tepco over the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant crisis in 2011.

We are yet to have a resignation or even an apology from any of the entities involved in the pingpong corruption scandals in Kenya. The Central Bank and several other banks that

facilitated the corrupt transactions have not taken responsibility for their actions. The Kenya National Chamber of Commerce, Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA) – the lobbies always the first to appeal for peace and calm in the aftermath of rigged elections, have been silent, as though the companies involved in corrupt practices are from Jupiter.

I am not implying that Japan is scandal-free. Far from it. They have their share of scandals. Public officials have been found guilty of corruption, cronyism, name it. The difference is the way their leaders deal with these situations, the society's high bar of expectation, the shame accompanying these acts, and the legal processes designed to deter reoccurrence.

For sure, they have had sub-standard food approved for sale in the market but the officials involved have not waited for litigation. They own up to their actions, apologize to the public and face the full force of the law. In our case, public officials approved the importation and sale of contaminated sugar – whether it contains mercury, gold or bronze. Others approved the purchase and storage of contaminated maize and watched as their bank accounts bulged. What level of greed is this? Why would we not protect the lives of those we have been charged to serve? Why would we consciously approve the sale and distribution of “fake” fertilizer to unsuspecting struggling farmers? The answer lies in a combination of corruption, lack of basic ethical behavior and the lack of value for life.

Public officials receive bribes and look the other way when sub-standard construction of buildings and dams are done. Engineers and architects are willing to sacrifice the lives of hundreds of people for their personal gratification. And even when Solai Dam tragedies happen, there is no accountability. No heads roll. No apologies are given. No prosecution. We move on and wait for the next tragedy.

If Japan sounds too remote for us to analogise, there are examples closer to home worth looking at. In March this year, the President of Mauritius, Ms. Ameenah Gurib-Fakim was accused of using a credit card given to her by an NGO to cover travel expenses. Instead, she used the \$27,000 to buy clothes, jewelry and other personal items. She refunded the money and stepped aside with Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth saying that she had done so in “the interest of the country”. And we have Ministers and Governors in office who have been accused of stealing millions of dollars! It is no wonder that Mauritius ranks 50th in Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index and we rank 143rd out of 180 countries and territories.

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Like many others, I often wonder what makes countries such as Botswana, Japan and Mauritius exceptional in their approach to leadership and governance. Some argue that for Japan, the magic lies in their education system that makes moral education compulsory. The principles of reflecting on one’s relationship to others, the relationship to nature and relationship to society. They credit Confucianism for it: “man’s relationship with the world around him, man’s relationship with others, with family and man’s relationship with nature”. Then again, we are taught all these morals in Kenyan schools – but only for the purpose of passing exams. We are super religious with a healthy competition between the number of religious centers in our communities and the bars. But as we know, teaching is one thing and practicing the ethos

is another. This is why Japan, Mauritius and Botswana pull ahead. These countries have continuously led the pack in setting the pace for leadership and good governance.

Some would argue that we are evidently on that path too since there are countries setting plans to visit us and “benchmark” our fight against corruption! I am all for the fight against corruption. It is a fantastic idea to prosecute all those found guilty of siphoning money from the National Youth Service and other bodies. I could even support lifestyle audits, if I understood their methodology. And even the lie detectors if they were not so obviously a technological decoy designed to further mystify the basic question of public integrity.

But beyond the Machiavellian drums of corruption that we keep beating, we need to develop a national ethos that is beyond making a quick buck. We need to build a critical mass of leaders that will do to Kenya what the people of Mauritius, Botswana and Japan have been able to attain so far. Change does not need millions of people, it requires a few people committed to leadership and integrity. It needs individuals conscious that the path we are following will only lead to total annihilation of the nation. It requires strong men and women who are ready to challenge the status quo. Men and women, who are willing to challenge the corruption within their ranks.

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This leadership is absent. Like many African countries, we

face a leadership deficit. We lack a few men and women of integrity who are ready to take on the challenges ahead of us. Many of us are still waiting for the 2022 elections to usher in change, on the basis of a misleading assumption that voters decide who leads Kenya! This difficult work of change must begin in earnest now. Those who previously presented themselves as leading anti-corruption crusaders in the Opposition side appear to have thrown in the towel. Even as we collectively criticize them for doing so, we should seize the moment and begin nurturing that critical mass of change makers. As I have argued in these pages in the past, the millennials should seize this moment and fill the current leadership vacuum!