

The Fight Against Corruption: Drawing Lessons from Leaders and Laggards in Africa

Gijs de Bra*

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* Graduate, J.D. 2025

ABSTRACT

This Note compares the social and legal developments of two African countries: one that has improved its anti-corruption efforts, and one that has not. Angola has seen a tougher stance against large-scale corruption since its regime change in 2017, whereas Liberia continues to struggle with small-scale corruption despite regime changes. Yet this Note finds that both countries fail to hold individuals accountable, even though Angola has its eyes on corporate malfesants and Liberia's open society continues to shed light on corruption. Liberians perceive more corruption than Angolans because they have more lived experience with corruption, while their country's democratic principles promise them more. Liberia thus lags behind its own aspirations as much as it lags behind other countries. Angola has set an example by changing its tone at the top and working with other countries in recovering billions in assets from abroad, but it must turn those symbolic victories into sustained reform if it wants to lift its people out of poverty and become a true leader.

INTRODUCTION

Corruption involves instances of “abuse of entrusted power for private gain,” such as bribery of public officials or embezzlement of public funds.¹ When corruption is all around, every basic need comes at a price. People pay extra just for access to medicine, electricity, and work. Corrupt physicians steal pills to sell them on the black market;² corrupt plant managers “load-shed,” forcing people to find other, expensive sources of power;³ and corrupt surveillants extort street hawkers for bribes just to let them keep operating.⁴ Even freedom comes at a cost, when police officers demand bribes in exchange for release from custody.⁵ In corrupt societies, the people bear the costs, and as a result, they “swelter in extremely high levels of poverty and material deprivation”⁶ and lose trust in their government.⁷

When corruption is controlled, on the other hand, those costs go down and the economy flourishes. Corruption is a dark cloud that hangs over a developing economy—blocking its sunlight. But when the cloud of corruption shrinks, countries unlock great potential. One study found that a sustained decrease in corruption over ten years boosted income per capita by about 25 percent.⁸ It also helps countries remove barriers to attracting foreign direct investment.⁹

With corruption pervasive in many developing countries, efforts to fight it have attracted attention from civil society and governments the world over. A common objection to fighting corruption abroad, though, is that it ignores cultural differences because in some places, corruption is considered an accepted part of life.¹⁰ But the fight is still worth it. Aside from the objective harms noted above, corruption also causes subjective harms. Even if corruption is endemic, voters hate it: they believe it impedes

1 *What Is Corruption?*, TRANSPARENCY INT’L, <https://www.transparency.org/en/what-is-corruption> (last visited Mar. 13, 2026).

2 See John Mukum Mbaku, *International Law and the Fight Against Bureaucratic Corruption in Africa*, 33 ARIZ. J. INT’L & COMPAR. L. 661, 669 (2016).

3 See Travis Kavulla, *Electricity in South Africa: Postcard from a Dystopian Future*, 8 AM. AFFS. 115 (2024), <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2024/08/electricity-in-south-africa-postcard-from-a-dystopian-future/> [<https://perma.cc/3WJ2-5RV4>] (reviewing ANDRÉ DE RUYTER, TRUTH TO POWER: MY THREE YEARS INSIDE ESKOM (2023)).

4 See Mbaku, *supra* note 2, at 674.

5 See *id.* at 684.

6 *Id.* at 699.

7 See *id.* at 705.

8 See Jamie Bologna Pavlik et al., *Two Birds with One Stone: Reducing Corruption Raises National Income*, 104 SOC. SCI. Q. 406, 412, 414 (2023).

9 See Mbaku, *supra* note 2, at 701–02.

10 See Shoeb Mohammad & Sofiane Baba, *Rationalization of Corruption: A Discursive Legitimation Approach*, in SUSTAINABLE FINANCE AND FINANCIAL CRIME 189, 191–92 (Michel Dion ed., 2023).

their personal lives and wealth,¹¹ and they grow unhappy with corrupt governments.¹²

Voters have reason to be especially unhappy in Africa, where corruption is an “intractable” problem and a “major constraint to inclusive economic growth and development.”¹³ Cases from African countries regularly make the headlines. In 2016, for example, a \$2 billion tuna-bonds scandal in Mozambique revealed hidden government debts that public officials issued in exchange for bribes, and that news shook the economy and raised the cost of living.¹⁴ More recently, companies have faced criminal penalties at home for bribing African officials. In January 2025, commodities trader Trafigura and a former executive were convicted in Switzerland of bribing Angolan officials to secure oil contracts from 2009 onward.¹⁵ And in August 2024, Boston Consulting Group (BCG) handed over to the US government millions of profits that it earned on Angolan contracts obtained through bribery between 2011 and 2017.¹⁶

In this Note, I analyze how African countries deal with corruption, successfully or not. Using the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) from Transparency International, I selected one country that has steadily improved and one that has deteriorated. Comparing a leader and a laggard—even if just speaking in relative terms—will reveal social developments and legal mechanisms that combat corruption or aggravate it. As the figure below shows, Angola has been on the rise, and Liberia on the decline. Their corruption problems are both unique stories to tell.

I do not use any other corruption statistics, such as estimates of losses to corruption, because scholars have found that they are often “unsubstantiated guesswork.”¹⁷ Corrupt actors go to great lengths to hide their “clandestine” offenses, so direct measures are rarely reliable.¹⁸ But there is no doubt that African countries lose a significant portion of their GDP to corruption.¹⁹

11 See Mbaku, *supra* note 2, at 674.

12 See Matthew C. Stephenson, *Corruption and Democratic Institutions: A Review and Synthesis*, in GREED, CORRUPTION, AND THE MODERN STATE 92, 94 (Susan Rose-Ackerman & Paul Lagunes eds., 2015).

13 Mbaku, *supra* note 2, at 662.

14 See, e.g., *A \$2bn Loan Scandal Sank Mozambique’s Economy*, THE ECONOMIST (Aug. 22, 2019), <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/08/22/a-2bn-loan-scandal-sank-mozambiques-economy> [https://perma.cc/JR7N-MTHH].

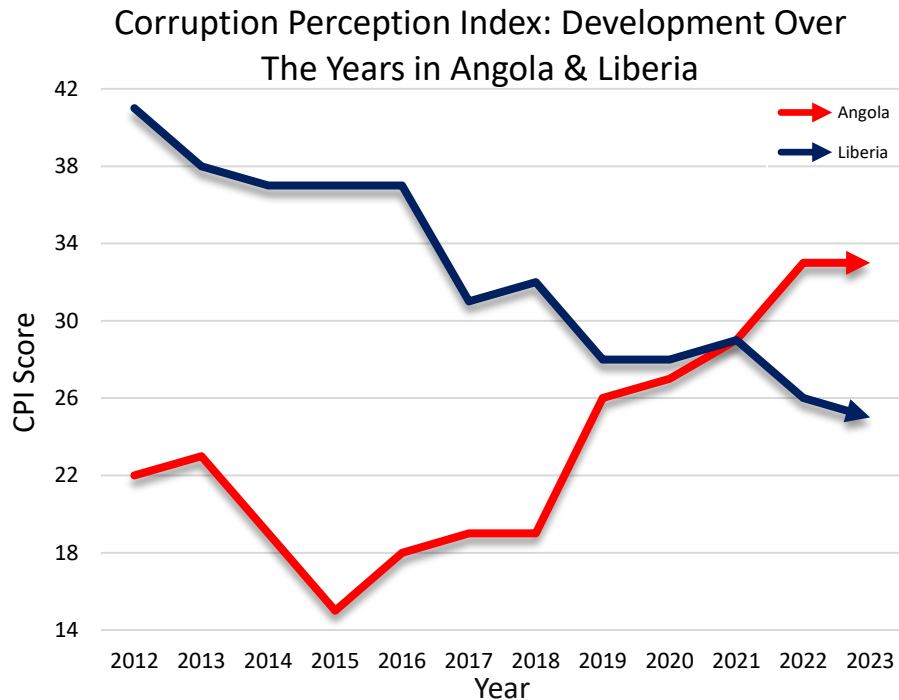
15 See Tom Wilson, *Trafigura’s Former Chief Operating Officer Sentenced to 32 Months in Jail*, FIN. TIMES (Jan. 31, 2025), <https://www.ft.com/content/968564ef-7ca8-4a24-9a57-306826941365> [https://perma.cc/U2TV-C7AJ].

16 See *Boston Consulting Group Reaches Resolution with US Department of Justice*, BCG (Aug. 28, 2024), <https://www.bcg.com/press/28august2024-bcg-resolution> [https://perma.cc/4HVF-SWG5].

17 Cecilie Wathne & Matthew C. Stephenson, *The Credibility of Corruption Statistics: A Critical Review of Ten Global Estimates*, CHR. MICHELSON INST.: U4 ANTI-CORRUPTION RES. CTR.(2021), <https://www.u4.no/publications/the-credibility-of-corruption-statistics.pdf> [https://perma.cc/B3CC-4694].

18 *Id.* at 1, 32–33.

19 See Mbaku, *supra* note 2, at 742 (collecting sources).



*Figure 1: Comparative Study of Angola & Liberia*²⁰

This Note follows a comparative method that Walter J. Kamba defined, with descriptive, identification, and explanatory phases.²¹ Part I provides background information, describing Angola and Liberia. Part II compares the two, identifying similarities and differences relevant to corruption perceptions. Part III discusses the findings from Part II, explaining differences between the two countries and finding broader implications. In Part IV, I develop my own framework for beginning to control public corruption and apply it to Liberia and Angola. The last part concludes.

I. BACKGROUND

This Part briefly describes Angola's and Liberia's social and political history, economic conditions, and trends in anti-corruption enforcement. By focusing on the background that is most important to corruption, this Part does not fully explore these countries' rich cultures and history.

²⁰ Data from Corruption Perceptions Index 2023, TRANSPARENCY INT'L, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023> [https://perma.cc/9BK4-DENT] (select the tab "CPI Timeseries 2012 - 2023").

²¹ See W. J. Kamba, *Comparative Law: A Theoretical Framework*, 23 INT'L & COMPAR. L.Q. 485, 511-12 (1974).

A. Angola

1. A Rocky Start to a New Nation

Angola became independent from Portugal in 1975.²² At this time, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), backed by the Soviet Union, took control of the capital and installed the first president, Agostinho Neto.²³ A civil war with the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) broke out, which was backed by the United States, and the MPLA prevailed.²⁴ In 1979, José Eduardo dos Santos succeeded Neto as president.²⁵ His four decades in power shaped Angola's corruption problems. Isabel dos Santos, his daughter, features prominently in the 2020 Luanda Leaks, which revealed large-scale corruption.²⁶ With lucrative jobs and hidden shares in state-owned enterprises, she grew rich from the government's control of natural resources, such as oil and diamonds, and of other sectors, such as telecommunications and energy.²⁷ She is now worth billions of U.S. dollars.²⁸

Other Angolans are not so lucky. Two-thirds of the population earns less than \$2 a day.²⁹ The country is rich in oil; the Economist estimated that the government's revenues between 2002 and 2018 were \$640 billion, but that sovereign wealth has not benefited the public.³⁰ Instead, the dos Santos clan oversaw large sums of money being diverted to offshore accounts.³¹ So large was the theft that outsiders question "how the government squandered so much of the hundreds of billions of dollars it earned from oil and diamonds over the past few decades."³²

22 Antonio Cucho Gamboa, *From Colonization to Kleptocracy: A History of Angola*, INT'L CONSORTIUM OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISTS (Jan. 16, 2020), <https://www.icij.org/investigations/luanda-leaks/from-colonization-to-kleptocracy-a-history-of-angola/> [<https://perma.cc/B6KL-B437>].

23 *See id.*

24 *See id.*

25 *See id.*

26 *See* Sydney P. Freedberg et al., *How Africa's Richest Woman Exploited Family Ties, Shell Companies and Inside Deals to Build an Empire*, INT'L CONSORTIUM OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISTS (Jan. 19, 2020), <https://www.icij.org/investigations/luanda-leaks/how-africas-richest-woman-exploited-family-ties-shell-companies-and-inside-deals-to-build-an-empire/> [<https://perma.cc/4U7Q-TEDD>].

27 *See id.*

28 *See id.*

29 *Angola's New President, João Lourenço, Has Made an Encouraging Start*, THE ECONOMIST (May 3, 2018), <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/05/03/angolas-new-president-joao-lourenco-has-made-an-encouraging-start> [<https://perma.cc/SZ9E-MHMN>].

30 *See Is Angola's New President Serious About Reform?*, THE ECONOMIST (May 5, 2018), <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2018/05/05/is-angolas-new-president-serious-about-reform> [<https://perma.cc/6BZJ-2UT5>].

31 *See* Gamboa, *supra* note 22.

32 *See Angola's New President, João Lourenço, Has Made an Encouraging Start*, *supra* note 29.

2. Regime Change with Reform

But there is reason for hope. In 2017, President João Manuel Gonçalves Lourenço succeeded dos Santos and changed course.³³ He adopted IMF recommendations, privatizing state-owned enterprises³⁴ and removing barriers to foreign investors.³⁵ He also borrowed from the IMF, pivoting away from years of dependence on loans from China.³⁶ In the early 2000s, Angola's GDP had already grown by 10 percent a year—under the corrupt regime.³⁷ The new plans could unlock even greater potential.

President Lourenço's anti-corruption efforts raised hopes of unlocking that potential. The government prosecuted the dos Santos clan, with the former president's son convicted of fraud and his daughter having some of her assets frozen.³⁸ Going after them made sense. When President Lourenço fired Isabel dos Santos as head of Sonangol, the state-owned conglomerate, she moved \$38 million abroad on her way out.³⁹ And that asset freezing was just the beginning. The government has since clawed back billions of dollars from other high-ranking officials.⁴⁰

The president may be losing steam, however. His focus on the dos Santos clan seems selective and politically motivated.⁴¹ And with high inflation and anti-corruption progress stalling, Angolans are growing impatient.⁴² In a recent survey, respondents indicated that they saw more corruption, paid more bribes to get public services, and feared retaliation for reporting it.⁴³ That resentment showed in the summer of 2025, when Angolans took to the streets to protest reductions in fuel subsidies that

³³ See *id.*

³⁴ See *President João Lourenço Sees Himself as an Angolan Deng Xiaoping*, THE ECONOMIST (Dec. 1, 2018), <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/12/01/president-joao-lourenco-sees-himself-as-an-angolan-deng-xiaoping> [<https://perma.cc/NV2G-9DQ6>].

³⁵ See *Is Angola's New President Serious About Reform?*, *supra* note 30.

³⁶ See *João Lourenço's Reforms in Angola Are Pleasing the IMF*, THE ECONOMIST (Feb. 20, 2021), <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/02/20/joao-lourenco-reforms-in-angola-are-pleasing-the-imf> [<https://perma.cc/SVD8-4PTL>].

³⁷ See *President João Lourenço Sees Himself as an Angolan Deng Xiaoping*, *supra* note 34.

³⁸ See *João Lourenço's Reforms in Angola Are Pleasing the IMF*, *supra* note 36.

³⁹ See Gamboa, *supra* note 22.

⁴⁰ See Paul Banoba et al., *CPI 2023 for Sub-Saharan Africa: Impunity for Corrupt Officials, Restricted Civic Space & Limited Access to Justice*, TRANSPARENCY INT'L (Jan. 30, 2024), <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/cpi-2023-sub-saharan-africa-corruption-impunity-civic-space-access-justice> [<https://perma.cc/Z7G3-2N8B>].

⁴¹ See *CPI 2022 for Sub-Saharan Africa: Corruption Compounding Multiple Crises*, TRANSPARENCY INT'L (Jan. 31, 2023), <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/cpi-2022-sub-saharan-africa-corruption-compounding-multiple-crises>.

⁴² See *João Lourenço's Reforms in Angola Are Pleasing the IMF*, *supra* note 36.

⁴³ See *Angolans Say Corruption Has Increased and Citizens Risk Retaliation If They Report It, New Afrobarometer Study Shows*, AFROBAROMETER (Oct. 18, 2024), <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/News-release-Angolans-say-corruption-has-increased-Afrobarometer-18Oct24.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/VH6P-F2L2>].

threatened to make economic hardships worse.⁴⁴ At the same time, Angola's GDP has recovered from a tough decade. Its growth tumbled in 2009, and the economy even shrank for a couple of years, but it resumed growing in 2021.⁴⁵

3. Current Anti-Corruption Laws

The Angolan Constitution of 2010 allows a court to remove the president for corruption and legislators for crimes with maximum sentences of more than two years.⁴⁶ The legislature and the court of auditors oversee the national budget, although the President has otherwise broad power over it and appoints the court of auditors.⁴⁷ And the Constitution raises corruption risks. Because all natural resources are “property of the state,”⁴⁸ public officials control a treasure of oil and diamonds. That control is bolstered by the national planning system that the Constitution places in their hands.⁴⁹ And the powerful president overseeing that system is not chosen by the people, but by the biggest party.⁵⁰ He or she has a big hand in appointing judges, including those who oversee his or her corruption trials.⁵¹ On the other hand, a president can only serve two terms of five years,⁵² which avoids long-running corruption, as under the dos Santos regime.

Angola updated its criminal code under President Lourenço, increasing the penalties for bribery of public officials.⁵³ A public official who seeks a bribe, or a person who offers it, can now get up to two years in prison.⁵⁴ But that means legislators cannot be suspended or removed for taking bribes because the Constitution only permits suspension for crimes with a maximum penalty of *more than* two years.⁵⁵ For bribes to judges, though,

44 See Gershwin Wanneburg, *In Oil-Rich Angola, Poverty, Hunger and Deadly Unrest over Fuel Price Hikes*, AL JAZEERA (Aug. 5, 2025), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/5/in-oil-rich-angola-poverty-hunger-and-deadly-unrest-over-fuel-price-hikes> [https://perma.cc/9YS2-9TCN].

45 Data from Real GDP Growth, INT'L MONETARY FUND, https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/AGO (last visited Dec. 31, 2024) [https://perma.cc/ST65-MSA5] (selection: Angola, 2024).

46 See REPUBLIC OF ANGOLA [ANGL][CONSTITUTION] 2010, art. 129(1)(b) & (3), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Angola_2010 [https://perma.cc/K6Z2-8VN9].

47 See *id.* art. 104(3), (4), 161(e), 183(2).

48 *Id.* art. 16; see also art. 95(1)(b), (d).

49 *Id.* art. 91.

50 See *id.* art. 106, 109; see also art. 120(c) (requiring the President to propose a budget to the legislature).

51 See *id.* art. 119(f)–(h), 129(3).

52 See *id.* art. 113.

53 See Samantha Barrett Badlam et al., *A Promising Future: Angola's Recent Efforts to Combat Corruption*, ROPES & GRAY LLP (Oct. 6, 2021), <https://www.ropesgray.com/en/insights/alerts/2021/10/a-promising-future-angolas-recent-efforts-to-combat-corruption> [https://perma.cc/NGY2-DZ2W].

54 See Angolan Penal Code, 2020 (Law No. 38/20 of 11 November 2020), art. 358(1), 359(1).

55 See *supra* note 46, art. 151(1)(d), 153(1)(c), 179(4).

the maximum is five years,⁵⁶ just like for the generic “influence trafficking” provision.⁵⁷ Finally, the new code added corporate criminal liability and created procedures for seizing criminal proceeds,⁵⁸ which helps recovering assets.

B. Liberia

1. An Old Republic Marred by Conflict

The United States founded Liberia in 1822 to return freed slaves to Africa, and it became independent in 1847,⁵⁹ with its constitution based on the American one.⁶⁰ The freed slaves and their descendants—Americo-Liberians—were vastly outnumbered by indigenous African Liberians, but still topped the socioeconomic ladder.⁶¹ Inequality, mixed with unpopular economic policies, led to a violent coup in 1980 and the overthrow of Americo-Liberian rule.⁶² After another coup failed, and the government began oppressing specific ethnic groups, civil war broke out in 1989.⁶³

In 1990, peace seemed nearby. One rebel group had killed the incumbent, and a regional African peacekeeping force mediated and set up an interim government.⁶⁴ But the fighting continued, and by 1995 there were at least seven factions at war.⁶⁵ Another peace accord that year failed to stop the fighting at first, but then led to new elections.⁶⁶ The new leader, Charles Taylor, incited a second civil war in 1999 with even more atrocities.⁶⁷ Only in 2003 did the violence finally stop.⁶⁸

2. Regime Changes Without Reform

In 2005, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became Liberia’s first peacetime president.⁶⁹ Several parliamentary seats went to warlords—many of whom

56 *See id.* art. 360(1), 361(1).

57 *See id.* art. 366(1).

58 *See* Badlam et al., *supra* note 53.

59 *See* Peter Dennis, *A Brief History of Liberia*, INT’L CTR. FOR TRANSITIONAL JUST. (May 2006), <https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Liberia-Brief-History-2006-English.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/4A85-RY89>].

60 *See Liberia Country Profile*, BBC (Feb. 13, 2024), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13729504> [<https://perma.cc/YJB9-XY25>].

61 *See* Dennis, *supra* note 59.

62 *See id.*

63 *See id.*

64 *See id.*

65 *See id.*

66 *See id.*

67 *See id.*; *Liberia Country Profile*, *supra* note 60.

68 *See* Dennis, *supra* note 59; *Liberia Country Profile*, *supra* note 60.

69 *See* Dennis, *supra* note 59.

had committed atrocities⁷⁰—reflecting the compromises and reconciliation between the different factions.⁷¹ Johnson-Sirleaf sought to fight corruption in her own government, but it was already too endemic, and she concluded the judiciary was “too weak” to hold public officials to account⁷²—including her own circle.⁷³ Petty corruption became the dominant form of graft, with most people having to pay bribes to access basic public services, such as police assistance and medical care.⁷⁴ Public officials receive low salaries, so they try to find other sources of income.⁷⁵ Many Liberians live in poverty, especially in rural areas, where the share of people living below the poverty line climbed to 81 percent during the 2010s.⁷⁶

Widespread corruption in national and local government has robbed Liberia’s economy of valuable resources. Corrupt tax officials allow some to pay bribes for a lower tax bill; others underreport their income and get away with it.⁷⁷ Politicians and officials steer minerals and forest lands to preferred companies—in spite of bans on extraction—by passing laws or selling resources for below-market prices.⁷⁸ As a result, many Liberians think most politicians are corrupt,⁷⁹ and they have a point. In October 2024, one representative exposed a conspiracy to oust the speaker of the House of Representatives, showing the \$15,000 cash bribe he received for his vote.⁸⁰

Former soccer star George Weah ran a campaign to fight such corruption, and he became president in 2017.⁸¹ In his inaugural speech, he said that “the most effective way to directly impact the poor . . . is to ensure

⁷⁰ See *Victims of Liberia’s Civil War Are Still Waiting for Justice*, THE ECONOMIST (Nov. 13, 2021), <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/11/13/victims-of-liberias-civil-war-are-still-waiting-for-justice> [https://perma.cc/BU4D-4RP5].

⁷¹ See *id.*

⁷² See Krista Lee-Jones, *Liberia: Overview of Corruption and Anti-Corruption*, CHR. MICHELSEN INST.: U4 ANTI-CORRUPTION HELPDESK (Sep. 7, 2019), <https://www.u4.no/publications/liberia-overview-of-corruption-and-anti-corruption.pdf> [https://perma.cc/3USE-3GXG].

⁷³ See *id.* at 2–4.

⁷⁴ See *id.* at 4–5.

⁷⁵ See *id.* at 4.

⁷⁶ See *New Report to Address Poverty in Liberia Launched*, WORLD BANK GRP. (Mar. 26, 2024), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/03/26/afw-new-report-to-address-poverty-in-liberia-launched> [https://perma.cc/G79X-ULYA].

⁷⁷ See Lee-Jones, *supra* note 72, at 8.

⁷⁸ See *id.* at 8–10.

⁷⁹ See *Summary of Results: Afrobarometer Round 9 Survey in Liberia, 2022*, AFROBAROMETER 44 (July 5, 2023), <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Summary-of-results-Liberia-Afrobarometer-R9-5july23.pdf> [https://perma.cc/6SCS-DB8H].

⁸⁰ See J.H. Webster Clayeh, *Liberia: Cllr. Gongloe Calls for Immediate Investigation into Alleged Bribery at House of Representatives*, FRONT PAGE AFR. ONLINE (Oct. 19, 2024), <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/front-slider/liberia-cllr-gongloe-calls-for-immediate-investigation-into-alleged-bribery-at-house-of-representatives/> [https://perma.cc/JNK2-QWH2].

⁸¹ See James Harding Giahue, *End of an Era: How Corruption in Liberia Cost George Weah the Presidency*, AL JAZEERA (Nov. 23, 2023), <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/11/23/end-of-an-era-how-corruption-in-liberia-cost-george-weah-the-presidency> [https://perma.cc/BS8K-VP5H].

that public resources do not end up in the pockets of government officials.”⁸² Johnson-Sirleaf admitted that she had failed and that corruption was too entrenched.⁸³

Weah got off to a bad start. He refused to report his personal assets, and that improper tone at the top trickled down when the officials in his government refused to report their assets too.⁸⁴ Officials also diverted some of Weah’s economic stimulus funds, and central bank officials illegally printed banknotes amounting to 5 percent of Liberia’s GDP, stealing some of it.⁸⁵ Five years went by, and Weah’s bad start led to a bad end. He failed to secure a second term in 2023’s election,⁸⁶ in part because of his failure to tackle corruption as he had promised.⁸⁷

3. Current Anti-Corruption Laws

The Liberian Constitution of 1986 allows for removal of the president and Supreme Court Justices for bribery and of legislators for “offenses.”⁸⁸ The legislature has the spending power and oversees the president’s budget, along with an independent general auditing commission.⁸⁹ Unlike in Angola, the president of Liberia is chosen directly by the people; but like in Angola, the president can only serve two terms of six years.⁹⁰ The constitution raises few red flags. The president can exercise emergency powers and suspend constitutional provisions, after consulting with the leaders of the Senate and the House of Representatives.⁹¹ Those powers are fairly broad, limited only by a prohibition on dissolving the other branches of government.⁹² And an emergency merely requires “civil unrest affecting the existence, security or well-being of the Republic amounting to a clear and present danger.”⁹³ Such civil unrest seems ubiquitous in Liberia, as Section II.A below argues.

The Liberian Penal Law of 1976 prohibits corruption. A public official who seeks a bribe, or a person who offers it, commits a second-degree

82 *Id.*

83 See Associated Press, *Liberia Leader Acknowledges Failure in Anti-Corruption Fight*, FOX NEWS (Jan. 24, 2017), <https://www.foxnews.com/world/liberia-leader-acknowledges-failure-in-anti-corruption-fight> [<https://perma.cc/9XJ6-UJTQ>].

84 See Giahvue, *supra* note 81.

85 *See id.*

86 *See id.*

87 See Monika Pronczuk, *Liberia’s President Concedes Election Defeat in a Knife-Edge Vote*, N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 17, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/17/world/africa/liberia-election-results.html> [<https://perma.cc/Q8S8-EWLE>].

88 See CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA 1986, art. 43, 62, 71.

89 *See id.* art. 34(c), 34(d)(ii), 89.

90 *See id.* art. 50.

91 *See id.* art. 86(a).

92 *See id.* art. 87(a).

93 *Id.* art. 86(b).

felony, which carries a maximum sentence of five years.⁹⁴ Other sections cover gratuities, procuring “assistance in government matters,” and bribery to get someone appointed or endorsed for public office.⁹⁵ Those crimes are only first-degree misdemeanors, though, which carry a maximum sentence of just one year.⁹⁶

Liberia bolstered its anti-corruption authority in 2022, while Weah was president. The legislature gave the anti-corruption commission (LACC), which Johnson-Sirleaf had created in 2008, more powers to investigate and prosecute corrupt actors.⁹⁷ That was a much-needed upgrade because until then, the LACC could only refer corruption cases to the Ministry of Justice for prosecution; there were just two such prosecutions between 2008 and 2017.⁹⁸ Since the reform, the LACC has been active in its investigations, and the current president, Joseph Boakai, has suspended hundreds of public officials because they failed to declare their assets to the LACC.⁹⁹

II. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

This Part compares Angola and Liberia, drawing on the background facts from Part I and supplementing with additional facts where necessary. Specifically, it will discuss political barriers to fighting corruption (A), the barrier that impunity poses to fighting corruption (B), and how the differing types of corruption prevalent in the two countries pose varied challenges to restoring justice (C).

A. Political Barriers to Corruption Fighting

Angola has long been ruled by the MPLA, which won the civil war with Soviet support. Liberia is a longtime US ally and was founded on American constitutional principles. The countries were thus on opposite sides of the Cold War: like Russia, Angola has practically been a one-party state, whereas Liberia has multiple parties competing for power, as in the US. And yet, their different political systems give rise to similar problems with fighting corruption.

Liberian authorities are less likely to pursue corrupt actors vigorously because that could shatter the fragile peace from the civil war. For one thing,

⁹⁴ See Penal Law of 1976, LIBER. CODE REV. tit. 26, §§ 12.50(1), 50.5(1)(b), 50.5(2)(b).

⁹⁵ See *id.* §§ 12.51–53.

⁹⁶ See *id.* § 50.7(a).

⁹⁷ See U.S. DEP’T OF STATE, *Liberia 2022 Human Rights Report* 13 (Mar. 2023), https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/415610_LIBERIA-2022-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf [<https://perma.cc/B43F-DF9N>].

⁹⁸ See Lee-Jones, *supra* note 72, at 13.

⁹⁹ See Chi Wai Hu, *Liberia President Suspends Hundreds of Officials over Failure to Declare Assets*, JURISTNEWS (Feb. 14, 2025), <https://www.jurist.org/news/2025/02/liberia-president-suspends-hundreds-of-officials-over-failure-to-declare-assets/> [<https://perma.cc/NZ9G-9H3B>].

the government has refused to establish tribunals for civil-war atrocities because that could “renew conflict.”¹⁰⁰ And there were fears that a close result in the recent presidential elections would result in violence.¹⁰¹ That ever-present potential for violence deters corruption fighting too. One Liberian analyst believes that the lack of accountability for atrocities in the civil war has created a culture of impunity for corruption.¹⁰² The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project also noted that “corruption was tolerated as a way to appease the various warring factions” and has become too entrenched to eradicate without renewing conflict.¹⁰³

Angolan authorities are equally unlikely to hunt down corrupt actors. President Lourenço does not have to tread carefully around other factions, however, but around his own. To become and stay president, he required the support of the MPLA,¹⁰⁴ which the Economist has described as “a paranoid party dominated by securocrats.”¹⁰⁵ Lourenço’s reforms suggest that he would like to eradicate corruption, but he seems limited to targeting the opposition and his predecessors, as he has consistently done.¹⁰⁶ The “securocrats” in his party may be the source of that limitation.

One area where Angola leads is engaging with other countries. Despite its ties to Russia, it started a relationship with the US, which President Lourenço visited in 2023.¹⁰⁷ Since then, the US and Switzerland have prosecuted bribery in Angola, which has a deterrent effect.¹⁰⁸ Portugal also searched the Lisbon offices of Isabel dos Santos and her professional enablers, on Angola’s request.¹⁰⁹ And Angola has cooperated with the

100 See *Victims of Liberia’s Civil War Are Still Waiting for Justice*, *supra* note 70.

101 See *How Liberia and Sierra Leone Ended Their Cycles of Violence*, ECONOMIST (Oct. 19, 2023), <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/10/19/how-liberia-and-sierra-leone-ended-their-cycles-of-violence> [https://perma.cc/PGL7-F8XR].

102 See Darlington Porkpa, *Liberia’s Corruption Culture Linked to Failure to Pursue War Criminals*, RFI (Aug. 31, 2022), <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20220831-liberia-s-corruption-culture-linked-to-failure-to-pursue-war-criminals> [https://perma.cc/2Z9X-BUQJ].

103 See Josef Skrdlik, *Liberia on the Verge of Becoming an Organized Crime Hotspot Again*, OCCRP (July 11, 2022), <https://www.occrp.org/en/news/liberia-on-the-verge-of-becoming-an-organized-crime-hotspot-again> [https://perma.cc/FX4V-LX23].

104 See CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF ANGOLA, Jan. 21, 2010, art. 106, 109, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Angola_2010 [https://perma.cc/DA34-QYDV].

105 *A Dictator’s Ghost Haunts Angola’s Upcoming Elections*, ECONOMIST (Aug. 18, 2022), <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/08/18/a-dictators-ghost-haunts-angolas-upcoming-elections> [https://perma.cc/S6Q8-GFA4].

106 See *CPI 2022 for Sub-Saharan Africa: Corruption Compounding Multiple Crises*, *supra* note 41.

107 See Stephen Foley & David Pilling, *BCG Admits It Paid Bribes to Win Consulting Business in Angola*, FIN. TIMES (Aug. 28, 2024), <https://www.ft.com/content/4fa338cf-bad7-4d12-8e46-3a0e5e1a321f> [https://perma.cc/WY75-W72Q].

108 See *supra* Introduction.

109 See Will Fitzgibbon, *Police Search PwC, Boston Consulting Group Offices in Angolan Corruption Probe Against Isabel dos Santos*, ICIJ (Jan. 24, 2023), <https://www.icij.org/investigations/luanda-leaks/police-search-pwc-boston-consulting-group-offices-in-angolan-corruption-probe-against-isabel-dos-santos/> [https://perma.cc/T8AT-JDHH].

UK.¹¹⁰ The billions of dollars in stolen assets that Angola has recovered from overseas suggest that those international relationships bear fruit.¹¹¹

Liberia, on the other hand, has failed to rely on its longtime ally. In 2022, the US Department of the Treasury sanctioned three Liberian government officials for corruption.¹¹² The Department's press release described the corrupt acts in detail and suggested the existence of strong evidence.¹¹³ For example, the Treasury Department stated that the Liberian chief prosecutor took bribes from suspects to drop their cases.¹¹⁴ President Weah suspended the officials, but his government neither investigated nor prosecuted them.¹¹⁵

B. Anti-Corruption Enforcement Faces an Impunity Barrier

What Liberia and Angola share is a culture of impunity against corruption prosecutions. Both countries have trouble systematically catching those paying or taking bribes. Sentences are also fairly short, and successful prosecutions are rare. Take the Liberian central bank officials who illegally printed money—they were charged and detained, but the government released them and dropped the charges without explanation.¹¹⁶ Liberians see the pattern: 76 percent of those surveyed by Afrobarometer believe public officials get away with committing crimes.¹¹⁷ Angolans feel the same way.¹¹⁸ A low risk of spending time in prison emboldens corrupt actors, and they know it.

What could explain why Angolan and Liberian reformers are not going further is the threat of violence. That threat often protects corrupt networks by discouraging others from exposing them. For example, in *How to Steal a City*, Crispian Olver describes how corruption in Nelson Mandela Bay, South Africa, persisted for years because innocent bureaucrats were coerced

¹¹⁰ See UK FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH & DEV. OFF., OVERSEAS BUSINESS RISK: ANGOLA (July 26, 2023), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/overseas-business-risk-angola/overseas-business-risk-angola—2> [<https://perma.cc/7K8Y-8UYZ>].

¹¹¹ See Banoba et al., *supra* note 40; *A Radiography of the Fight Against Corruption*, CEDESA (May 13, 2021), <https://www.cedesa.pt/2021/05/13/a-radiography-of-the-fight-against-corruption/> [<https://perma.cc/4D2B-2NYW>].

¹¹² See U.S. DEP'T OF THE TREASURY, TREASURY SANCTIONS SENIOR LIBERIAN GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS FOR PUBLIC CORRUPTION (Aug. 15, 2022), <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0921> [<https://perma.cc/4TMZ-P9PG>].

¹¹³ See *id.*

¹¹⁴ See *id.*

¹¹⁵ See Banoba et al., *supra* note 40.

¹¹⁶ See Giahvue, *supra* note 81.

¹¹⁷ See *Summary of Results: Afrobarometer Round 9 Survey in Liberia, 2022*, *supra* note 79, at 37.

¹¹⁸ See Carlos Pacatolo et al., *Angolans Perceive Rising Corruption and Say Citizens Risk Retaliation If They Report It*, AFROBAROMETER 7 (Nov. 22, 2024), <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/AD906-Angolans-see-worsening-corruption-Afrobarometer-21nov24.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/X9S6-TDL6>].

to participate in the scheme and keep quiet, or face violence.¹¹⁹ His account of an anti-corruption campaign is riddled with threats and actual violence by those seeking to protect corrupt interests.¹²⁰

The same may apply in Liberia and Angola. In 2020, four Liberian national auditors—who are on a constitutionally prescribed commission¹²¹—died within one week, all in ways that suggested murder.¹²² In Angola, journalists who report on corruption are also often attacked.¹²³ More threats and incidents may be hidden under the surface. If Liberia and Angola are anything like South Africa, those threats can keep a lid on corruption for an extended period.

Although both countries struggle to prosecute individuals, Angola has been going after companies to recover corruptly obtained assets.¹²⁴ It is also possible Angola played a role in the Swiss and American investigations into Trafigura and BCG. Because multinational companies are “important foreign suppliers of corruption,”¹²⁵ Angola is on the right track here.

C. Common Economic Conditions, Different Forms of Corruption

One reason Liberia has not pursued companies is that it faces a different form of corruption than Angola. Liberia has widespread *petty* corruption, which forces people to pay off officials and doctors.¹²⁶ Angola has widespread *grand* corruption, which involves public officials and companies siphoning public resources abroad.¹²⁷ Both forms increase poverty—petty corruption empties people’s pockets, and grand corruption prevents the government from filling them. But fighting grand corruption by pursuing companies can deliver quicker results, as Angola has shown by clawing back billions. Petty corruption is harder for Liberia to trace because it is so diffused.

Take recent health emergencies. In 2013, Ebola broke out in the region, ultimately killing thousands of Liberians.¹²⁸ Petty corruption fueled the fire: millions in foreign aid disappeared,¹²⁹ and half of Liberians reported having

119 See CRISPAN OLVER, *HOW TO STEAL A CITY: THE BATTLE FOR NELSON MANDELA BAY* 105, 114–15 (2017).

120 See generally *id.*

121 See CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA 1986, art. 89.

122 See Giahvue, *supra* note 81.

123 See U.S. DEP’T OF STATE, *ANGOLA 2023 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT* 12 (Feb. 2024), https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/528267_ANGOLA-2023-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf [<https://perma.cc/K3DU-A6CA>].

124 See, e.g., Fitzgibbon, *supra* note 109.

125 Mbaku, *supra* note 2, at 743.

126 See Lee-Jones, *supra* note 72, at 4–5.

127 *Angola’s New President, João Lourenço, Has Made an Encouraging Start*, *supra* note 29.

128 See *Liberia Country Profile*, *supra* note 60.

129 See Tonny Onyulo & Sheila Passewe, *Ebola Survivors Want Prosecutions for Fraud, Corruption*, THE WASH. TIMES (Dec. 17, 2017),

to pay bribes to get medical help.¹³⁰ The problem was so severe that Transparency International issued a special alert.¹³¹ But the government failed to learn from that disaster. It was better prepared for COVID-19, but still allocated relief unfairly and lost “significant resources” to corruption, according to locals.¹³² And even outside of those epidemics, a majority still reports they lack access to medicines and have to pay bribes to get medical help.¹³³

Liberia’s difficulty eradicating petty corruption adds to its status as a laggard, whereas Angola’s victories in recovering from grand corruption supports its status as a leader.

III. DISCUSSION

This Part draws lessons from Angola and Liberia and turns them into general conclusions. Specifically, it discusses how the form of government affects what people expect from their leaders (A), how symbolic progress can reduce perceptions of corruption (B), how petty corruption shapes how people perceive corruption (C), and the role that “developed” countries can play in anti-corruption going forward (D).

A. A More Democratic Society Raises the Bar

In a more democratic society, people expect more from their government.¹³⁴ And when the government fails to meet those expectations, the people raise their objections more vociferously. That explains why more democratic countries can have a worse CPI than less democratic ones. As applied here, Liberia appears to have stronger institutions than Angola, and Liberians benefit from better access to information about behavior by public officials. Those factors may contribute to a lower CPI in Liberia.

The sometimes-inverse relationship between democratic institutions and corruption perceptions finds support in this study. Liberia has stronger

<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/dec/17/ebola-survivors-want-prosecutions-fraud-corruption/> [<https://perma.cc/MK4F-3234>].

¹³⁰ See Daniel Armah-Attoh & Mina Okuru, *Liberians on Ebola: Foreign Aid Most Effective, but Government Performed Well, Is Now Better Prepared*, AFROBAROMETER (Sept. 19, 2016), https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ab_r6_dispatchno116_liberia_perceptions_on_ebola.pdf [<https://perma.cc/MND6-ZXEZ>].

¹³¹ See *Ebola: Corruption and Aid*, TRANSPARENCY INT’L (Feb. 27, 2015), <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/ebola-corruption-and-aid> [<https://perma.cc/PG5W-MNJU>].

¹³² See Maame Akua Amoah Twum & Francisca Sarpong Owusu, *AD870: Liberians See Unfair Relief Distribution and Corruption as Marring Government’s Competent Response to COVID-19*, AFROBAROMETER (Oct. 1, 2024), <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad870-liberians-see-unfair-relief-distribution-and-corruption-as-marring-governments-competent-response-to-covid-19/> [<https://perma.cc/3BR2-88TK>].

¹³³ See *Summary of Results: Afrobarometer Round 9 Survey in Liberia, 2022*, *supra* note 79, at 51–52.

¹³⁴ See Stephenson, *supra* note 12, at 107–108.

democratic institutions than Angola, and yet Angola outperforms Liberia in corruption perceptions. Strong institutions include an independent judiciary, a free and active press, and a functioning civil society.¹³⁵ Liberia has those, to some extent. Its judiciary is independent, but also underfunded and corrupt.¹³⁶ Its free press keeps growing but is also under attack.¹³⁷ Better is its “active and vibrant” civil society, with an “extraordinarily large number” of NGOs whom the government respects and consults.¹³⁸

Angola’s institutions are weaker. Its press is less free: journalists are routinely charged with “insulting” public officials,¹³⁹ or “abusing ‘press freedom’” after reporting on corruption.¹⁴⁰ NGOs are arbitrarily restricted or shut down, and while the judiciary is independent, it also gets interfered with.¹⁴¹ Finally, Angola does not have an independent anti-corruption agency, unlike Liberia. And yet, Angola’s weaker institutions have not stopped it from improving its CPI.

One reason for that disparity is the availability of information. Scarce information makes it harder for voters to hold corrupt officials accountable, whereas abundant information makes it easier.¹⁴² When citizens set standards for their representatives, who fail to meet them, citizens respond by replacing the representatives with less corrupt ones. On the other hand, Stephenson notes, studies have found that awareness of corruption has a “demoralization effect” on voters.¹⁴³

In Liberia, both aspects are worsening corruption perceptions. First, Liberian voters receive enough information to learn about public corruption. The representative who went public with the bribe he received is just one example.¹⁴⁴ Another is a journalist who wrote critically about a judge, who summoned and allegedly asked him for a bribe.¹⁴⁵ Liberians were thus fully informed about continuing corruption problems, and they replaced Weah for his failure to tackle them.

Enter the demoralization effect. The new president, Boakai, is already failing to live up to his promises, and voters have become disillusioned with

135 See Mbaku, *supra* note 2, at 667.

136 See Lee-Jones, *supra* note 72, at 7–8.

137 See *id.* at 17.

138 See *id.* at 15.

139 *Is Angola’s New President Serious About Reform?*, *supra* note 30.

140 See *Harassment and Persecution of Journalist and Human Rights Defender Coque Mukuta*, FRONT LINE DEF., <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/harassment-and-persecution-journalist-and-human-rights-defender-coque-mukuta> [<https://perma.cc/6TPN-59AJ>].

141 See *Angola 2023 Human Rights Report*, *supra* note 123, at 7, 16–17.

142 See Stephenson, *supra* note 12, at 95.

143 *Id.* at 95–96.

144 See Clayeh, *supra* note 80.

145 See Gijs de Bra, *CPJ Calls on Liberia Authorities to Investigate Assault and Arrest of Journalist*, JURISTNEWS (Mar. 31, 2024), <https://www.jurist.org/news/2024/03/cpj-calls-on-liberia-authorities-to-investigate-assault-and-arrest-of-journalist/> [<https://perma.cc/TC2R-T7HW>].

corruption as a result.¹⁴⁶ That trend is a continent-wide one; corruption has not led to greater voter participation in most countries.¹⁴⁷ One cause of the demoralization is that governments sometimes respond to corruption scandals by becoming more authoritarian. For example, exposure of the corruptly issued debts in Mozambique prompted the government to become less transparent so as to cover up other hidden illegal debts.¹⁴⁸

B. The Appearance of Progress Dominates Perception

A country can appear to be getting more corrupt, even if it is untrue. More information and debate about corruption can worsen corruption perceptions, independent of actual levels of corruption.¹⁴⁹ Liberians may perceive more corruption now than in 2012, regardless of whether it has in fact proliferated, simply because their access to information has improved.¹⁵⁰ On the other hand, a country can appear to become less corrupt, even if it is not seriously tackling the problem. Angolans may thus perceive *less* corruption after the regime change because the information that they receive suggests that the government is fighting corruption rather than sustaining it.

Countries can create the appearance of progress by recovering assets from abroad. By 2022, Angola claimed it had recovered \$20 billion.¹⁵¹ That is its main triumph to date, with few others.¹⁵² Angola's recovery efforts should not be discounted, though, merely because it rarely prosecutes the responsible individuals. \$20 billion is over half of Angola's budget,¹⁵³ and it can spend that money on development—a key reason to fight corruption.¹⁵⁴ At the same time, Angolan governance seems to be ridding

¹⁴⁶ See Sheriff Bojang Jnr., *Liberia: Boakai's Three Big Promises That May Come Back to Haunt Him*, AFR. REP. (Feb. 16, 2024), <https://www.theafricareport.com/337268/liberia-boakais-three-big-promises-that-may-come-back-to-haunt-him/> [<https://perma.cc/4YBM-WZC2>].

¹⁴⁷ See Mbaku, *supra* note 2, at 673.

¹⁴⁸ See AL JAZEERA ENGLISH, *Will Mozambique Recover from Its \$2 Billion Corruption Scandal?*, at 11:08–12:38 (YouTube, Nov. 30, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iS7f3oECcqw>; see also *Economist Intelligence Unit Says Mozambique Is an "Authoritarian Regime"*, CLUB MOZAM. (Feb. 14, 2019), <https://clubofmozambique.com/news/economist-intelligence-unit-says-mozambique-is-an-authoritarian-regime/> [<https://perma.cc/2J9L-GBBD>].

¹⁴⁹ See STEPHENSON, *supra* note 12, at 108.

¹⁵⁰ See Lee-Jones, *supra* note 72, at 16.

¹⁵¹ See NICOLAS COOK, CONG. RSCH. SERV., R48208, ANGOLA AND U.S. RELATIONS (2024).

¹⁵² See José Eduardo dos Santos, *Who Plundered Angola, Has Died*, ECONOMIST (July 14, 2022), <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/07/14/jose-eduardo-dos-santos-who-plundered-angola-has-died> [<https://perma.cc/7T8P-7DKC>].

¹⁵³ See UNITA *Criticizes 2025 State Budget: "There Is a Lot of Money Circulating Outside the State Budget"*, NEGÓCIOS DE ANGOLA (Dec. 13, 2024), <https://www.negociosdeangola.com/en/unita-criticizes-2025-state-budget-there-is-a-lot-of-money-circulating-outside-the-state-budget/> [<https://perma.cc/V6J9-6XME>].

¹⁵⁴ See NGOZI OKONJO-IWEALA, FIGHTING CORRUPTION IS DANGEROUS: THE STORY BEHIND THE HEADLINES 123 (2018).

itself of corruption only gradually, and the recoveries are just a fraction of the estimated \$100 billion in stolen public funds.¹⁵⁵

But with Angola's regime change and IMF-guided reforms, the country could become more democratic in the long run. And studies find that perceived corruption levels decrease significantly in countries that have been democratic for twenty to forty years.¹⁵⁶ Anti-corruption efforts also take time to deliver consistent results, as Stephenson has pointed out.¹⁵⁷ Angola should therefore get the benefit of the doubt, even if its anti-corruption efforts have hit a bump in the road.

Another way countries try to create the appearance of progress is by appointing credible corruption fighters. For example, in *It's Our Turn to Eat*, Michaela Wrong describes how Kenyan President Kibaki, elected in 2002, sought to appoint the founder of the domestic Transparency International chapter, John Githongo, to a government position to combat corruption.¹⁵⁸ Such appointments can be sincere efforts to address the problem, but Wrong suspected otherwise, noting that "the incoming administration would be neatly appropriating a high-profile symbol of credibility, proof personified that it deserved . . . trust."¹⁵⁹ The rest of her book confirms that suspicion: within months, Githongo was "on the run" from domestic forces resisting his anti-corruption efforts.¹⁶⁰

That same tactic may be in use in Angola and Liberia. The MPLA put forward President Lourenço as the face of change in Angola, which invited investment from the US¹⁶¹ and loans from the IMF.¹⁶² But with ongoing corruption and impunity, he may be just that—a face of change, to lend credibility to an MPLA that "spout[s] revolutionary rhetoric while gorging on the fruits of crony capitalism."¹⁶³ Similarly, Liberian President Boakai came into office with an anti-corruption campaign, but his decades of political experience suggest close ties to entrenched interests.¹⁶⁴

155 See *Angola*, CIV. F. FOR ASSET RECOVERY, <https://cifar.eu/where-we-work-home/angola/> [<https://perma.cc/B9X3-BS22>].

156 See Stephenson, *supra* note 12, at 107.

157 See Matthew Stephenson, *A Reminder: Year-to-Year CPI Comparisons for Individual Countries Are Meaningless, Misleading, and Should Be Avoided*, THE GLOB. ANTICORRUPTION BLOG (Jan. 29, 2019), <https://globalanticorruptionblog.com/2019/01/29/a-reminder-year-to-year-cpi-comparisons-for-individual-countries-are-meaningless-misleading-and-should-be-avoided/> [<https://perma.cc/8N2R-79RN>].

158 See MICHAELA WRONG, *IT'S OUR TURN TO EAT: THE STORY OF A KENYAN WHISTLE-BLOWER* 31–33 (2009).

159 *Id.* at 33.

160 See *id.* at 41, 50.

161 See COOK, *supra* note 151, at 11.

162 See *João Lourenço's Reforms in Angola Are Pleasing the IMF*, *supra* note 36.

163 *A Dictator's Ghost Haunts Angola's Upcoming Elections*, *supra* note 105.

164 See Bojang Jnr., *supra* note 146.

C. *Petty Corruption and the Role of Lived Experience*

Based on the lessons learned from Liberia and Angola, it appears that more people perceive corruption when it affects their daily lives than when public officials secretly become rich by siphoning public funds abroad. Bribes to police officers and doctors are daily reminders of the grim reality of graft; a single news report on grand-scale corruption is not.

One reason Liberia has such a poor corruption score is that petty corruption has an outsized impact on public perceptions of corruption.¹⁶⁵ Their daily experiences matter—scholars have long argued that for reforms to succeed, they must be designed around the lived experience of the people whose hardships they seek to alleviate.¹⁶⁶ So even if Liberia manages to reduce petty corruption, it must also help Liberians overcome the related trauma. But that is a tall order because the wounds of petty corruption can be deep—especially when it comes at the wrong time, such as when Liberians had to pay bribes to get medical help during the Ebola and COVID-19 epidemics.¹⁶⁷

While Angolans face petty corruption,¹⁶⁸ grand corruption is the bigger problem. And when the Luanda Leaks came out, President Lourenço was already effectuating damage control. News of large-scale diversion was quickly followed by news of large-scale recoveries, which made the experience of seeing grand corruption less likely to stick.

D. *A Role and Responsibility for Developed Countries*

For countries seeking to combat corruption, collaboration with other countries is crucial. Corrupt officials often move their illicit proceeds to another country, and recouping those funds is much easier when the receiving country helps.¹⁶⁹ To illustrate, many of Isabel dos Santos's assets were frozen and returned from Portugal and the Netherlands, where she had moved funds that belonged to Angola.¹⁷⁰ Mbaku therefore argues that “African countries can benefit significantly from the assistance of many foreign institutions.”¹⁷¹ For example, Angola and Liberia are both parties to the UN Convention against Corruption,¹⁷² which has provisions for

165 See *Summary of Results: Afrobarometer Round 9 Survey in Liberia, 2022*, *supra* note 79.

166 See, e.g., Lani Guinier & Gerald Torres, *Changing the Wind: Notes Toward a Demosprudence of Law and Social Movements*, 123 *YALE L.J.* 2740, 2759 (2014).

167 See Armah-Attah & Okuru, *supra* note 130.

168 See *See Angolans Say Corruption Has Increased and Citizens Risk Retaliation If They Report It, New Afrobarometer Study Shows*, *supra* note 43.

169 See Mbaku, *supra* note 2, at 698, 723.

170 See Gamboa, *supra* note 22.

171 Mbaku, *supra* note 2, at 744.

172 United Nations Convention Against Corruption, 31 Oct. 2003, 2349 U.N.T.S. 145, 164–173 [<https://perma.cc/94W4-NF6T>]; see also *Status of Treaties: 14. United Nations Convention Against Corruption*, UN TREATY COLLECTION,

international cooperation¹⁷³ that they could rely on to extradite corrupt actors who flee abroad.¹⁷⁴

Cooperation must be based on local values, however. International organizations like the IMF often impose rule-based reforms based on government accountability and transparency.¹⁷⁵ But not all people around the world trust their government the same way.¹⁷⁶ To gain local support and make anti-corruption reforms last, the international community should center them around local values. That did not happen in Liberia, as Fallah and Benmamoun found in a study.¹⁷⁷ Fallah scoured Liberia to talk with local professionals, officials, and community leaders about corruption and reform, and found that the reforms proposed by the U.S. often clashed with local values.¹⁷⁸ The US suggested reining in the executive; Liberian tradition prefers strong chiefs.¹⁷⁹ The US wanted to strengthen public institutions; Liberian culture is based on personal relationships and an “almost unbreakable loyalty to family and tribe.”¹⁸⁰ Liberian traditions are also reflected in its legal system: a dual system of common and customary law.¹⁸¹ Cooperation and reforms that are wholly disconnected from local values and traditions are thus unlikely to turn a laggard into a leader.

In addition, developed countries have a responsibility to ensure that cooperation benefits the country whose people fell victim to the corruption. Too often, developed countries levy fines on companies for bribing African governments,¹⁸² without compensating the victim country that suffers the harms of corruption. BCG, for example, extracted profits from Angola, but had to hand them over to the US.¹⁸³ The victim country can share in the fine, though, if it cooperates with the investigation. In December 2024, McKinsey agreed to pay a \$122 million fine for paying bribes to win consulting contracts from the South African government.¹⁸⁴ That amount

https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtmsg_no=XVIII-14&chapter=18&clang=_en [<https://perma.cc/9FYH-BWYA>]

¹⁷³ 2349 U.N.T.S. at 164–173, art. 43–49.

¹⁷⁴ See Mbaku, *supra* note 2, at 752.

¹⁷⁵ See John E. Fallah & Mamoun Benmamoun, *Toward a Cultural Understanding of Corruption: Social Construction of Corruption in Liberia*, 55 J. DEVELOPING AREAS 465, 466 (2021).

¹⁷⁶ See *id.*

¹⁷⁷ See *id.* at 471–72.

¹⁷⁸ See *id.* at 467–68.

¹⁷⁹ See *id.* at 470.

¹⁸⁰ *Id.*

¹⁸¹ See Hanatu Kabbah, *Liberian Legal System and Legal Research*, N.Y.U. GLOBALEX § 7 (Dec. 2023), <https://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/Liberia1.html#sources-of-law-in-liberia> [<https://perma.cc/7K5V-KKT6>].

¹⁸² See Mbaku, *supra* note 2, at 746–47.

¹⁸³ See *Boston Consulting Group Reaches Resolution with US Department of Justice*, *supra* note 16.

¹⁸⁴ See Stephen Foley, *McKinsey Pays \$122mn to Resolve Probes into South Africa Bribes*, FIN. TIMES (Dec. 5, 2024), <https://www.ft.com/content/98dbb5af-1ca0-4507-abd3-11f1e69d0c62> [<https://perma.cc/CJV8-QWSP>].

was set by the US Department of Justice, based on US sentencing guidelines.¹⁸⁵ But because South Africa helped with the investigation, it received half of the penalty.¹⁸⁶ If spent well, such funds can help remedy the harms of the people who suffered from the corruption in the first place.

IV. FRAMEWORK FOR CONTROLLING PUBLIC CORRUPTION

A. Developing the Framework

This section develops a framework for controlling public corruption. Frameworks often identify different kinds of corruption, such as grand, bureaucratic, and petty,¹⁸⁷ and provide tools to curb them, such as transparency in government, anti-money laundering legislation, asset recovery, fortifying the financial sector, and bolstering civil society.¹⁸⁸ Such models, while comprehensive, can be complicated and do not draw from different disciplines. And, as noted in the previous section, they can intrude too much on local values, so a narrowly tailored approach may be better.

My framework fills the gap with a simple model drawn from accounting principles and lessons in other African countries, such as Nigeria and South Africa. Because public corruption mainly involves diversion of public funds, my framework focuses on the flow of money. The key question is whether the government is “in control” of corruption in public finance, that is, whether it is reasonably certain that there are no material leaks from public funds due to corruption.¹⁸⁹ That assurance comes from control measures that respond to the specific kind of corruption risks.

The framework is not complete, nor need it be. A country struggling with corruption should address the biggest leaks from public funds first, so that it can regain control and stewardship over public finances and start providing for the basic needs that people are missing or overpaying for.

¹⁸⁵ See *McKinsey & Company Africa to Pay Over \$122M in Connection with Bribery of South African Government Officials*, U.S. DEP'T OF JUST. (Dec. 5, 2024), <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/mckinsey-company-africa-pay-over-122m-connection-bribery-south-african-government-officials> [<https://perma.cc/4KFN-D997>].

¹⁸⁶ See *id.*; Foley, *supra* note 184.

¹⁸⁷ See Anne-Marie Lynda Boisvert et al., *Definitions of Corruption*, PUB. SAFETY CANADA (2014), <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsres/pblctns/rgnzd-crm-brf-48/rgnzd-crm-brf-48-en.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/S8SC-5YC3>].

¹⁸⁸ See Jodi Vittori, *Committing to Combat Kleptocracy: A Guide for OGP Members*, NDI 1 (Jan. 2024), https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Vittori_OGP_NDI%20kleptocracy.pdf [<https://perma.cc/7V28-QXPD>].

¹⁸⁹ Cf. *International Standard on Auditing 330: The Auditor's Responses to Assessed Risks*, IFAC 4(b), 8, https://www.ifac.org/_flysystem/azure-private/publications/files/A019%202013%20IAASB%20Handbook%20ISA%20330.pdf [<https://perma.cc/SL3B-NFNF>] (describing control testing as audit procedures that verify whether controls are effective at preventing or detecting and correcting material misstatements in financial statements).

Nigeria did so in the early 2010s, and it released at least \$9 billion to spend each year.¹⁹⁰

Factors that help governments control corruption in budgeting are endless, but a few are key: budget control, internal audits, and budget size.

First, who controls the budget matters. A centralized government exercises more budget control than a decentralized one. When control is dispersed, it is harder to hold officials accountable for how they spend public funds. Take Nigeria. In *Fighting Corruption Is Dangerous*, former Minister of Finance Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala describes her personal experience tackling corruption in the country.¹⁹¹ Thorns in her side were the thirty-six state governors who fully controlled 48 percent of the government's revenues.¹⁹² That "deep fiscal decentralization" gives state and local officials room to divert public funds for private gain, especially when local checks and balances are weak.¹⁹³ Indeed, Okonjo-Iweala writes that many such officials were caught diverting funds.¹⁹⁴ So too in South Africa, where control over local budgets means "control of lucrative contracts and tenders."¹⁹⁵ More centralized control over the national budget, then, facilitates more oversight and accountability over how officials collect and spend public funds.

Second, internal auditors form an important check on the executive. They audit specific projects, and by identifying irregular payments and unusual interferences by public officials, they provide important clues about corrupt practices.¹⁹⁶ The downside of *internal* audits is that the reports go to insiders, who must act upon the findings and will not do so when it harms their interests.¹⁹⁷ But when control over the budget is decentralized, such that state and city governments have decision-making authority over a larger share of public funds, national government can send auditors with national authority to oversee local spending¹⁹⁸ and maintain their independence from local decision makers. That is how South Africa keeps effective oversight.¹⁹⁹

Third, the budget size matters. When a government spends more money, it also creates more opportunities for corruption, with more tenders and contracts. Stephenson also notes that "extensive systems of government redistribution" are "particularly susceptible to corruption, for the simple

190 See OKONJO-IWEALA, *supra* note 154, at 123.

191 See *id.* at ix.

192 See *id.* at 55.

193 See *id.*

194 See *id.*

195 See OLVER, *supra* note 119, at 23.

196 See *id.* at 44, 90–91.

197 See *id.* at 44.

198 See *id.* at 100.

199 See *id.* at 44.

reason that they involve giving government agents (including lower-level administrators subject to imperfect supervision) control over substantial resources.”²⁰⁰

Still, other key factors remain. As Mbaku notes, the proceeds of corruption often flow out of the country.²⁰¹ By understanding the source of those outflows, countries can identify patterns of corruption and trace them. For now, I will leave such other factors for another day.

B. Application of the Framework to Angola and Liberia

Two recommendations for Angola follow from the framework. One is to leverage its centralized government. The Angolan Constitution gives the government a national planning system and ownership of all natural resources.²⁰² President Lourenço can thus oversee all revenue collection from oil, for example, and micromanage the economy. That puts him in a much better place than Okonjo-Iweala in Nigeria, who had little oversight over half of the budget.²⁰³ Angola may have delegated too much of its control, though, to state-owned conglomerates like Sonangol, where many corruption problems occurred.²⁰⁴ Lourenço would do well to take that control back.

A second recommendation is to revisit large expenditures. Angola’s budget comprises tens of billions of dollars,²⁰⁵ and its history of grand corruption suggests that part of the budget may flow into the wrong pockets, such as MPLA members.²⁰⁶ Internal audits can identify those leaks.

Liberia has a much smaller budget,²⁰⁷ and it does not have a national planning system.²⁰⁸ But it can use internal audits, instituted at the national level, to audit local governments, as South Africa has done.²⁰⁹ Those audits can identify areas and public services where petty corruption is particularly

200 See Stephenson, *supra* note 12, at 98.

201 See Mbaku, *supra* note 2, at 697–98.

202 See *Constitution of the Republic of Angola*, CONSTITUTE, Jan. 21, 2010, art. 16, 91, 95(1)(b), (d) https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Angola_2010 [<https://perma.cc/DA34-QYDV>].

203 See OKONJO-IWEALA, *supra* note 154, at 55.

204 See Scilla Alecci, *Isabel dos Santos Charged with 12 Crimes in Angola over Her Dealings As Sonangol Chair*, ICIJ (Jan. 19, 2024), <https://www.icij.org/investigations/luanda-leaks/isabel-dos-santos-charged-with-12-crimes-in-angola-over-her-dealings-as-sonangol-chair/> [<https://perma.cc/J2ZU-HFHM>].

205 See NEGÓCIOS DE ANGOLA, *supra* note 153.

206 See Banoba et al., *supra* note 40; *A Dictator’s Ghost Haunts Angola’s Upcoming Elections*, *supra* note 105.

207 The budget for 2026 is \$1.3 billion. Emmanuel Weedee-Conway & Gerald C. Koinyeneh, *Liberia: MDFP Publishes ‘Approved’ 2026 Budget Without E-Mansion Announcement, Raising Questions Over Boakai’s Signature*, FRONT PAGE AFR. ONLINE (Feb. 9, 2026), <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-mfdp-publishes-approved-2026-budget-without-e-mansion-announcement-raising-questions-over-boakais-signature/> [<https://perma.cc/3JNS-B27T>].

208 See CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA 1986, art. 34(c), 34(d)(ii), 89.

209 See OLVER, *supra* note 119, at 44.

rife, so that President Boakai's government can start taking small steps toward quelling it.

CONCLUSION

This Note sought to compare Angolan and Liberian corruption problems, starting with the premise that both countries have unique stories. The Angolan story is one of renewed hope. The Liberian story is one of renewed despair. What unites these countries is their troubled past. What divides them is how their people experience corruption. Angolans have been deprived of public services for decades, unaware of the fortunes hidden from them, and are only now beginning to see the potential for their country. Liberians have been very much aware of corruption, helped by journalists and NGOs, and carry the trauma of being extorted every day.

Angola can keep leading, if it leverages its control over the budget, and if the MPLA's hold over the country weakens. The government has brought justice by recovering billions from those who smuggled them out of the country, but it must also bring justice by putting the corrupt actors on trial. Liberia can only stop lagging if it takes more control of government revenues, so that it can pay public officials better salaries. It must also seek help from other countries, as Angola has done. Only then can it begin to alleviate the traumas of the civil war and the ensuing corruption.