

**Not quite so squeaky clean.  
Economist Vol. 361 Issue 8244  
10/20/2001**

WITH their placards proclaiming "Down with political thuggery" and "We want transparency", the people of Lower-Vaalbank, high in the Drakensberg mountains, had stood for hours last weekend to tell the president how awful their local politicians were. Stepping down from his helicopter, Thabo Mbeki promised that local corruption would somehow be ended before he came back. "And I promise I will return soon," he said.

Elsewhere on Mr Mbeki's tour of the Eastern Cape, South Africa's poorest province, people in villages and towns recited similar lists of complaints: too few jobs and tarred roads; no electric grid or running water in remote villages; hospitals with no staff. The councillors and local politicians who should deliver these services are, they claimed, untrustworthy, distant and corrupt. Money meant for local development vanishes. Promised projects do not materialise. Once in office, local leaders ignore the voters.

In Motherwell, a crime-ridden, ramshackle corner of Port Elizabeth, it was easy enough for Mr Mbeki to win ululations for declaring that the councillors, who squirmed before him on stage, were "too far from the people". But many members of his own establishment are accused of similar faults and shady dealing. And sorting them out is a much harder task.

Allegations that some of the officials behind a 1999 arms deal worth about \$5 billion accepted bribes and other benefits from bidding companies have gripped South African headlines all year. At the beginning of this month, the chief whip of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), Tony Yengeni, was charged with corruption, fraud and perjury after investigations by a police unit known as the Scorpions. Last week Michael Woerfel, a senior employee of European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company (EADS), a multinational that bid for contracts, appeared in court in Pretoria charged with corruption.

The company conceded earlier this year that it had "helped" 30 South Africans with hefty discounts on luxury cars. Mr Yengeni, who resigned his whip's job, was the most prominent of them. This week, the trade ministry agreed to discipline Vannan Pillay, a senior official who supervised the defence-procurement deal and received a 55,000 rand (\$6,000) discount from EADS for a flashy car. Others, including a former defence minister, Joe Modise, are under press scrutiny for jobs or shares taken in companies that won bids.

Mr Mbeki has given warning that anyone caught up in wrongdoing must expect to face political isolation, and the full process of the law. On October 18th, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, head of the ANC's women's section and former wife of Nelson Mandela, was due in court in Pretoria on dozens of counts of defrauding a bank. The opposition, too, is in trouble because of corruption. This week, the Democratic Alliance looked on the verge of splitting into its two component parties, over the question of expelling an allegedly corrupt mayor. Until it sorts this out, it will have problems criticising the ruling coalition.

But the country can ill afford a corrupt reputation. It has to shake off the legacy of apartheid, when nepotism and sanctions-busting bred a shady culture, and avoid linkage with dishonest African governments. South Africa is ranked well above most

African countries by corruption monitors: Transparency International this year marked the country 38th out of 91, better than Greece or Poland, for instance. How can Mr Mbeki preserve, or improve, his country's reputation? First, by keeping his promise to the people of Lower-Vaalbank, and ensuring that low-ranking corruption is not tolerated in the ANC or in local councils. And, second, by doing nothing to impede the coming investigation of high-ranking politicians.