

EDITORIALS

Corruption is a state of mind

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

460 words

8 July 2006

The Washington Times

A11

English

© 2006 Washington Times Library. Provided by ProQuest Information and Learning. All rights reserved.

Here's an unexpectedly telling window into poor governance in the Third World: the Egyptian or Chadian diplomat who racks up hundreds of parking tickets. As the Web site danieldrezner.com reports, two American economists recently discovered in New York City ticket records from 1997 to 2002 demonstrating that diplomats from the world's most corrupt governments also tend to be the likeliest to scoff at New York's parking rules. If ever there were social- scientific evidence that bad behavior in government may be a state of mind, not just a set of bad incentives or institutions, this is it.

As Washingtonians and New Yorkers know, diplomatic immunity shields foreign officials from things like costly parking tickets for blocking fire hydrants or traffic lanes. Diplomats are free to disregard the rules as they see fit: They face no real repercussions for breaking them. To economists Ray Fisman of Columbia University and Edward Miguel of the University of California this was a golden opportunity. Ticket records, they posited, are a good laboratory to watch world diplomats' behavior in a single environment. With no incentive to follow the rules, the numbers should reveal a thing or two about the behavior the "culture," if you will of a government.

Diplomats from African and Middle Eastern countries dominate the list of repeat offenders. Of the 20 worst scofflaw missions, 17 represented countries in those regions. Kuwaitis were by far the worst, with an average of 246 tickets per diplomat over five years. Egyptians and Chadians were second- and third-worst with 140 and 124, respectively. Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Sudan were also top-20 offenders (The three countries outside the regions were No. 5 Bulgaria, No. 7 Albania and No. 20 Serbia and Montenegro). With a few exceptions, these countries occupy the lower ranks of Transparency International's 2005 International Corruption Perceptions Index, a leading world benchmark for disreputable government.

Interestingly, the most rule-observant diplomats tended to hail from democratic countries in other parts of the world. Twenty-two countries, including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Colombia, Israel, Japan and Sweden, did not incur a single recorded ticket in New York during the period of study. Italy, Spain and France were notable exceptions. Their respective totals of 15, 13 and six tickets per diplomat place them in the middle with countries like Libya, the Philippines and Rwanda.

It's a good bet that cavalier attitudes in New York City bear some relation to political disarray at home when it's the same officials or their friends pulling the levers. At the very least, disregard for the law by the powerful is an attitude one which manifests itself even in places like parking records.

Document WATI000020060710e2780000h

© 2006 Dow Jones Reuters Business Interactive LLC (trading as Factiva). All rights reserved.