

Can a 'humble pope' temper Kenya's political extravagance?

by [Ariel Zirulnick](#)

November 25, 2015

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Pope Francis, dubbed the “humble pontiff” for his focus on the poor and his own simple inclinations, arrives here Wednesday at a time of immense frustration with the lavish lifestyles of Kenyan leaders.

His visit to Kenya—and later Central African Republic and Uganda—coincides with the resignation of a cabinet minister this past weekend over a flurry of corruption accusations and millions of dollars in missing funds. Kenya ranks as one of the world’s most corrupt countries, and President Uhuru Kenyatta declared corruption a national security threat on Monday.

The pope has already earned applause from the everyman for declining a dinner invitation at the president’s residence in favor of a simple meal in Kangemi, a Nairobi slum, and prioritizing a speech to the masses at a stadium over addressing parliament. Indeed, Pope Francis’s rejection of much of the pomp and riches of his office offers a stark contrast to how Kenyan politicians use their offices to enrich themselves—and an unspoken challenge to them to do things differently.

“We expect from him advice on how to give services to citizens and not be selfish. Leaders are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer,” said Paul Maina, a laboratory technician from Kangemi. “The disease that we have is corruption, which is propagated by the leadership.”

Even as luxury malls spring up in Nairobi, 46 percent of the population of 44 million remain below the poverty line. Kenya’s economy, which leads the region, is regularly lauded as dynamic, diversified, and resilient, but little of the wealth trickles down to slums like Kangemi.

And the Pope's visit offers a clear reminder of that.

“He is not going to allow any of the wealth or advantages that come his way because of his status really to reach him,” said Stephen Okello, a lecturer of

philosophy at the Catholic University and the coordinator for the papal visit.

As the first pope of the Jesuit order, whose followers are known for being progressives and rabble-rousers within the Catholic Church, there is great hope among lower-class Kenyans that the pope will make pointed remarks about their spendthrift leaders.

In June, he made a call for the defense of the poor in a landmark encyclical. During a subsequent trip to Latin America he met with the elderly poor in Ecuador, visited Bolivia's notorious Palmasola prison, and toured Paraguay's flood-prone Banado Norte shantytown.

"He doesn't even have to say a lot—but the way he comes, he's taking a hit at [the economic disparities] even before words," said Gabriel Dolan, an Irish priest and newspaper columnist who has lived and worked in some of the most impoverished pockets of Kenya for more than 30 years.

"I expect he's going to be very provocative to the government: What are you doing to alleviate people's misery?"

Pope Francis' local counterparts have already taken up this cause, spurred by the seemingly endless slew of corruption allegations in the last several months. Speaking Sunday from the pulpit at St. Joseph's the Worker Catholic Church, where Pope Francis is due to speak, Bishop Rodrigo Mejia gave a warning shot.

"The money goes you know where—into the pockets of our city council," he said. "We have to make our elected officials be honest and serve everyone."

The whereabouts, for example, of much of a \$2 billion Eurobond Kenya received in 2014 are unknown. Documents show the planning ministry purchased wheelbarrows at \$1,000 each and ballpoint pens for \$85 each. Explanations from the government have been flimsy.

Kenyan faith in religious institutions' integrity has been rattled by a rise in extravagant evangelical megachurches. Church leaders have been embroiled in scandals in the last year, most notably Victor Kanyari, an evangelical preacher who raked in cash from followers who believed he was a "miracle healer."

Not all Kenyan leaders are seen as wasteful. In July, newly appointed Central Bank Governor Patrick Njoroge awed Kenyans when he declined many of the perks of the

job—including a home in an upscale suburb of Nairobi, three cars, including a Mercedes-Benz, and security detail—in favor of remaining in communal housing for members of Opus Dei.

His decision generated a flurry of news coverage and calls for other leaders to take note. That same month, President Barack Obama issued stern words on corruption during his visit. But little appears to have changed.

For some, Pope Francis is the last hope.

“When a person is warned by a pope, a man of God, there is a lot of impact, more than a politician,” said Titus Kairani Gichamba, a landscaper who also serves as treasurer for the new church Christ the King, an outpost of St. Joseph’s that opened its doors this Sunday. Politicians “will shake hearing from the humble man who doesn’t want any riches. I know for sure they will shake and they will change.”