

On May 18, Yale University awarded an honorary doctorate to outgoing Nigerian Finance Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala. The president of Brazil, Dilma Rousseff, will get red carpet treatment on a state visit to Washington on June 30. In both cases, the distinction is startling. What these women share, apart from their public stature, is years spent at the sulfurous edges of massive corruption scandals. Their celebration by U.S. institutions indicates how dangerously confused we Americans remain about the true costs of corruption -- and about our own values and standards.

Neither official has (yet) been convicted or even formally investigated for criminal wrongdoing. However, anyone familiar with how corruption functions in states as kleptocratic as Brazil and Nigeria knows the system is structured to guarantee impunity. Even so, it is impossible to ignore the women's likely implication in, or at least connivance with, the malpractices.

Let's start with Rousseff. Along with Traffic Sports, one of the targets of the recent FIFA arrests for "rampant and systemic" corruption, Brazil is home to a state oil company, Petrobras. In March, an estimated million people joined protests over a nearly decade-long bribery and kickback scheme that cost the company -- and thus the public -- some \$2.1b..

[<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/23/business/international/corruption-scandal-leads-to-a-big-loss-for-petrobras.html?ref=topics&r=0/>

<http://www.businessinsider.com/afp-brazils-scandal-hit-petrobras-announces-2014-losses-of-7.2-bn-2015-4>;

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2014/12/14/petrobras-worth-less-now-than-it-was-during-huge-oil-discoveries>]. That was just the latest in a string of scandals that has pushed Brazilians into the streets on and off for years.

Remarkably, criminal investigations have been opened against the speakers of both houses of congress and dozens of company executives. The demonstrators are calling for Rousseff's resignation. Though she denies all knowledge of the Petrobras doings, she chaired its board from 2007-2010.

[<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/25/us-brazil-politics-petrobras-idUSBREA2O1XL20140325>

In this context, in the context of similar anti-corruption protests from Latin America to Moldova [<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/13/world/americas/corruption-scandals-driving-protests-in-guatemala-and-honduras.html?smprod=nytcore-iphone&smid=nytcore-iphone-share&r=0>]

[<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/05/world/europe/moldova-bank-theft.html>] -- not to mention the FIFA case -- it seems unbelievable that the U.S. government would decide now is the time to pay homage to Rousseff.

For, that's what's at stake. This isn't about doing necessary business with a foreign leader, it's about paying court to her, begging her for months to come to Washington.

[<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/3e3476f4-929f-11e4-9e68-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3d4FnhppQ>]

If Brazilian people and prosecutors feel betrayed, it's hard to blame them.

Nigeria's Okonjo-Iweala is also a magnet for adulation. According to Yale's doctoral citation, she "made social and economic reform [her] mission...tackled corruption, created a vision and path to long-term economic stability, and worked to build a culture of transparency."

It is hard to imagine a more mistaken description.

Far from "tackling corruption," Okonjo-Iweala has steadfastly defended an administration that took the scourge to historic levels -- in a country that has become sadly famous for it. It wasn't Okonjo-Iweala but her colleague Lamido Sanusi, then governor of the central bank, who raised the alarm over an estimated \$20b. shortfall in oil revenues over a 19-month period between 2012 and 2013.

As finance minister of a government that gets some 70% of its revenues from oil sales, such a sinkhole should have made Okonjo-Iweala cry murder. Instead she stood by as Sanusi was sacked, and tried to keep a (partial) audit into the missing billions under wraps, only releasing misleading snippets. When the full audit was finally made public, more than six months late, it largely corroborated Sanusi's findings.

[<http://www.wsj.com/articles/nigerian-oil-revenue-audit-report-published-1430164157>]

[http://cloudflare.qurium.info/premiumtimesng.com/docs_download/Full%20report--20billion%20dollars%20missing%20oil%20money.pdf?cf=1]

So much for anti-corruption. Okonjo-Iweala's mismanagement of the Nigerian economy was equally lamentable. Failing to salt away foreign reserves when oil prices were high, or plan adequately for their inevitable fall, she has bequeathed to her successor empty government coffers, unpaid civil servants, a currency that has lost a third of its value since October, and a poverty rate that rose steadily throughout her tenure -- even during the years of soaring oil prices.

[<http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/01/buhari-vs-jonathan-beyond-election-charles-soludo/>]

Who would reward such a record? Not Nigerians. They handed Okonjo-Iweala's administration an historic defeat in March elections.

The language of Yale's degree citation doesn't merely embarrass the university. Using words with such disregard for their meaning -- making them praise what should be condemned -- undermines the ideals that structure us as a society.

For, a society selects for the practices it honors. And withholding honors can be a crucial way of deterring foul behavior. University and Olympic boycotts of South Africa, for example, were instrumental in bringing apartheid to an end. No one would have considered granting an honorary degree to a member of Slobodon Milosevic's cabinet -- whether there was evidence tying him to mass killings or not.

And yet, corruption on the scale witnessed in Brazil and Nigeria brutalizes whole populations. No less than gross violations of human rights. Honoring those implicated is a form of complicity: For, to them, laundering their image is as critical as laundering their money. We should be ashamed for helping them do that.

