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Editorial Note

This is a brief introduction to a timely and intellectually relevant conversation in this AYIKA publication. It centres on ten articles that cover unique aspects of development challenges in Africa, with particular attention to South Africa and Nigeria. These contributions, taken together, not only identify persistent challenges in environmental protection and economic growth but also advance policy recommendations in response to Africa's changing circumstances across various fronts. To be clear, the needs of Africa are multifaceted and interconnected in several ways; the challenges are similar across the board, although the manifestations may differ geographically. These articles address the connections in the needs and choices of Africa while projecting a better future. Motswaledi's article illuminates this in this volume, concluding that equitable and inclusive energy provision should be prioritised as a fundamental social justice intervention to redress historical inequalities, promote human dignity, and advance socio-economic transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. Such insight applies to all of Africa.

Collectively, these contributions demonstrate that Africa's development challenges cannot be understood in isolated compartments. Governance affects environmental management; energy affects social justice; infrastructure affects economic growth, etc. The major strength of this collection is therefore its interdisciplinary character. It brings together governance, economics, environmental studies, development studies, public policy, agriculture and social justice. More importantly, the articles consistently return to a central question: how can African societies build institutions and development pathways that improve human welfare without undermining the environmental and social foundations of the future? This collection does not claim to offer simple answers. Instead, it provides evidence, cases and critical perspectives that can help scholars, policymakers and practitioners ask better questions. New and better research questions are a right way in the right direction.

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POLITICAL CORRUPTION AND ITS IMPACT ON PUBLIC GOVERNANCE IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

Corruption remains one of the most significant governance challenges globally, and sub-Saharan Africa is the lowest-performing region on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, with an average score of 33 out of 100 for 2024 and

90% of countries in the region scoring below 50 (Corruption Watch, 2025). Political corruption is a persistent challenge in South Africa's public governance. This is evident in numerous corruption scandals involving political elites, public officials, and private businesses that do business with the state. This paper examines various forms of political corruption in post-apartheid South Africa and their impact on government performance, service delivery, economic development, democratic governance, public trust, and the legitimacy of public institutions. This exploration is grounded in principal-agent theory and the agency problem, which illustrate the dynamic relationship between principals' and agents' interests in the public sector. The paper adopts a qualitative approach to synthesize current information on political corruption in South Africa. The results indicate that although political corruption is not a new phenomenon in South Africa, the government struggles to curb it, particularly in public procurement and service delivery. Studying this challenge and understanding its impact on various government functions is crucial. Future research should assess the effectiveness of existing measures to curb political corruption. The paper is significant because it demonstrates the direct effects of political corruption on public services, economic development, and the government's capacity to address citizens' needs.

Keywords: COVID-19 PPE scandals, governance, political corruption, public procurement, South Africa, state capture,

Introduction

Political corruption refers to the abuse of power by government officials and public institutions for private gain (Ceva & Ferretti, 2017:1; Lodge, 1998:157). Corruption of this kind remains one of the most significant governance challenges on the African continent: sub-Saharan Africa is the lowest-performing region on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, with an average score of 33 out of 100 for 2024 and 90% of countries in the region scoring below 50 (Corruption Watch, 2025). Corrupt behaviour among political figures, public officials and private organisations involved in public affairs remains

significant in this context because it hinders economic growth, national development and the government's efforts to provide adequate, high-quality public services, particularly to vulnerable individuals and marginalised communities (Sylvester & Kugara, 2025:219; Abioro, 2021:261; Gray, 2021:371). In South Africa, political corruption is particularly dire because it weakens the post-apartheid government's capacity to address the needs of communities that were sidelined by previous racial policies and separate development (Geldenhuys, 2021:30; Gray, 2021:371). In the post-apartheid era, political corruption has been used to illicitly amass public resources to satisfy the private needs

of political elites and public officials. Despite several interventions aimed at eradicating political corruption, it has not been eradicated because the government's redress and redistributive policies have created opportunities for collaborators to extract state resources.

Although the prevalence of corruption in South Africa is well documented, less attention has been paid to why political corruption, the calculated abuse of public office by politically connected individuals and networks, persists despite an elaborate legal and institutional anti-corruption architecture (Klaaren, Belvedere, Brunette & Gray, 2022b:4; Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2024:454). This is the central research problem this paper addresses: not simply that corruption exists in South Africa, but that state capture, procurement corruption and COVID-19 tender fraud continue to recur despite oversight bodies such as the Auditor-General, the Special Investigating Unit and the Zondo Commission (Mkhize, Kayembe & Thusi, 2025:44). Understanding the mechanisms that these three forms of corruption share is therefore necessary to explain why formal safeguards have not translated into reduced corruption (Mkhize & Nel-Sanders, 2025b:3).

The literature indicates that the term 'political corruption' is broad, as it encompasses any illicit behaviour that involves the use of public resources for personal gain (Ceva & Ferretti, 2017:1;

Philp, 2015:17; Lodge, 1998:157; Heywood, 1997:417). This type of corruption is distinct in that it involves a complex network of actors who employ various ploys to extract resources from the state (Della-Porta & Vannucci, 2012:137; Ikejiaku, 2009:457). Based on this definition, the paper explores the impact of state capture, public procurement corruption, and COVID-19 tender scandals, as these are dominant forms of political corruption in the South African public sector. Although previous studies have explored these themes, there is a lack of research highlighting the impact of these forms of corruption on public governance in South Africa. Therefore, this paper offers fresh insights by examining how political corruption affects the government's capacity to address citizens' needs. The paper is significant because political corruption weakens public governance. Highlighting its impact is crucial because it contributes to public discourse on developing effective strategies to curb corruption in South Africa.

State capture, public procurement corruption, and COVID-19 tender fraud were selected because together they represent three distinct scales and moments of political corruption in South Africa. State capture illustrates corruption at the apex of the state, involving the presidency, cabinet and state-owned enterprises over a sustained period between 2009 and

2018 (Bester & Dobovsek, 2021, p. 73; Mkhize, Kayembe & Thusi, 2025:45). Public procurement corruption illustrates a chronic, decentralised form of corruption embedded in routine government supply chain processes across national, provincial and municipal government (Munzhedzi, 2016, p. 5; Klaaren et al., 2022b:4). COVID-19 tender fraud illustrates opportunistic corruption that emerges when oversight mechanisms are relaxed during a crisis (Geldenhuys, 2021, p. 30; Maxwell, 2022:2). Examining these three forms together therefore provides a more complete picture of how political corruption operates across different levels of government and under different conditions than a single case study would allow. Other forms of political corruption, such as petty bribery, political party funding, and municipal cadre deployment, fall outside the scope of this paper and are noted below as avenues for future research.

Literature Review

Conceptualising Political Corruption

Political corruption refers to the abuse of power by government officials and public institutions. This is a broad definition because it suggests that any corrupt acts involving public institutions, such as courts, statutory bodies, commissions, state-owned companies, the legislature, and public officials, constitute political corruption (Ceva & Ferretti, 2017:1; Lodge, 1998,

p. 157). Philp (2015:17) states that political corruption occurs when the self-interests of public officials diverge from the common good. From an economic perspective, the principal-agent theory is used to understand political corruption. Political corruption is understood as agents' pursuit of their own interests at the expense of the principal's interests. This divergence, which can be addressed by aligning incentives, leads agents to pursue their own interests unethically (Philp, 2015, p. 17). Della-Porta and Vannucci (2012:137) indicate that political corruption is unique from other forms of corruption because it involves a complex network of actors, institutions and interests that ultimately create a distinct set of rules and structures through which to extract public resources for private gains. This implies that different actors and institutions involved in political corruption have distinct roles to fulfill and sustain unethical conduct.

Philp (1997:438) suggests that political corruption refers to a culture within political circles, particularly among those in positions of authority, whereby positions are used to leverage government resources for personal gain. This type of corruption includes kickbacks in the awarding of government tenders and non-procedural recruitment processes for friends and relatives. Philp (1997:440) further states that political corruption is understood to mean behaviour which is

inconsistent with a public official's formal duties and enables an individual to use the influence of their occupation to their benefit while subverting the common good. Benefits include bribes, nepotism and the misappropriation of public resources. Heywood's (1997:417) view defines political corruption as acts involving individuals who occupy or vie for political office. This definition is broader because it classifies irregularities in political funding, improper campaign strategies, the undermining of judicial independence, and vote-buying as political corruption (Heywood, 1997:417). Therefore, institutions, political office-bearers, public resources and influence are central to our understanding of political corruption (Philip & David-Barrett, 2015:389).

Warren (2006:803) and Sung (2002:137) regard political corruption as the use of public authority for financial and social gain, as well as for political privileges and advantages. This type of corruption is unique because it involves elected officials and appointees in the public sphere and reflects how state-market relationships can be illegally leveraged. As a result, Sung (2002:137) states that political corruption can be sporadic, intermittent, or involve systematic, pervasive acts of unethical misconduct that permeate several government institutions. Furthermore, it can be petty and involve lower-level officials,

or grand and involve government elites and large sums of money (Lodge, 1998:158). Political corruption is often underpinned by sophisticated networks of actors and institutions inside and outside of the government (Della-Porta and Vannucci, 1997:534).

Political corruption has been endemic in South African public administration before and after the transition from apartheid to democratic governance. Lodge (1998:64) suggests that by the 1980s, political corruption of a nature described in this paper was present in the apartheid public administration system. Before that, it was largely strategic, serving to safeguard Afrikaner nationalism by favouring the employment of certain individuals in the civil service. The benefits from these acts did not result in personal gain. Unethical acts in the public sector did not end during the transitional and post-transition eras, because ample evidence shows that they persisted. For example, in the arms deal in the late 1990s, public and private officials are alleged to have fraudulently benefited from the Strategic Defence Procurement Package, valued at USD 5 billion (Munyai & Ashukem, 2023:339; Ikejiaku, 2009:457).

Theoretical Framework

Political corruption is described as the desire of public servants, or those who engage in entrepreneurial activities that facilitate the provision of public services, to make personal gains at the

expense of the common good. This framing is described by the principal-agent theory and the agency problem. The principal-agent theory is typically used in the economic sciences to illustrate that agents (employees, public officials, politicians and contractors) safeguard the interests of principals (supervisors, shareholders, chief executive officers, parliament and the public) (Khaile, Davids & Khaile, 2021:172). The theory is based on four assumptions. Firstly, principals and agents make decisions or engage in activities that maximise their benefits. Secondly, there are conflicts of interest between principals and agents. Thirdly, principals' and agents' decision-making is limited by cognitive capacity, time, and information; and lastly, the principals and agents do not possess equal knowledge (information asymmetries) and capabilities (Bernhold & Wiesweg, 2021:117). Information asymmetries are vital to understanding the relationship between principals and agents because they allow each actor to pursue actions that maximise their benefits.

This indicates that the interests of principals and agents are not always aligned, which creates an agency problem, a situation in which agents pursue self-interests that are detrimental to the principal's interests (Bernhold & Wiesweg, 2021:117). This aspect of the theory explains why some agents become corrupt or undermine the principal's interests. To

overcome this, principals introduce incentives or safeguards, such as oversight and monitoring, to control agents' behaviour. The principal-agent theory is applicable because it describes how corruption occurs when agents pursue their own interests at the expense of their principals (Khaile et al., 2021:172).

Assessing the principal-agent lens

The principal-agent theory explains why individual public officials become corrupt, but it has clear limits when applied to South Africa's experience of state capture and procurement corruption. The theory assumes that principals, that is, supervisors, the executive and the public, are themselves honest and capable of sanctioning corrupt agents. This assumption breaks down when political leaders are complicit in the corruption they are meant to prevent during state capture, it was often principals, cabinet ministers and the boards of state-owned enterprises, who colluded with private networks rather than monitored them (Mkhize & Nel-Sanders, 2025a:5). The theory also tends to treat corruption as the misconduct of individual agents, which understates the networked, organisational character of state capture and procurement corruption described in the Findings section below (Della-Porta & Vannucci, 2012:137). Collective action theory offers a complementary lens: it treats corruption as a social equilibrium in

which individuals expect others to behave corruptly and therefore see little benefit in acting honestly themselves, meaning that oversight and sanctions alone cannot break the pattern unless collective expectations also change (Mkhize & Nel-Sanders, 2025a:5-6). Reading the three forms of corruption examined in this paper through both lenses, rather than through principal-agent theory alone, helps explain why formal safeguards such as the Auditor-General and the Special Investigating Unit have not, on their own, been sufficient to curb political corruption in South Africa.

Methods

This paper adopted a qualitative, desktop research design and used a systematic literature search and thematic content analysis to examine secondary data. The paper chose this design because its objective is to synthesise and compare patterns of political corruption across published sources to understand the phenomenon.

Search strategy and databases

The paper conducted a structured search using Google Scholar, SABINET African Journals (Journals.co.za), ScienceDirect, JSTOR and Taylor & Francis Online, together with government and oversight body sources, including National Treasury, Auditor-General South Africa, the Office of the Public Protector and the published findings of the Zondo Commission. The search combined Boolean strings built from the terms 'political corruption', 'state capture', 'public procurement corruption', 'COVID-19 tender fraud', 'PPE corruption', 'South Africa' and 'public governance'. The paper limited the search to sources published between 2009, the year in which the state capture period began under President Zuma, and June 2026, to capture both the historical development of these three forms of corruption and the most recent scholarship and oversight findings on them. Table 1 summarises the number of sources the search retrieved and used per database, following a similar reporting format to recent state capture scholarship (Mkhize, Kayembe & Thusi, 2025:48).

Database or source	Sources retrieved	Sources used in the paper
Google Scholar	58	22
SABINET / Journals.co.za	18	7

Database or source	Sources retrieved	Sources used in the paper
Government and oversight body reports	10	5
Taylor & Francis / Routledge / Frontiers	16	6
Total	102	40

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The paper included sources if they were peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, government or Auditor-General reports, or Commission of Inquiry findings, published in English that directly addressed state capture, public procurement corruption or COVID-19 tender fraud in the South African public sector. It excluded sources that addressed corruption in other countries without direct reference to South Africa, that offered opinion without an evidentiary basis, or that the author could not access in full text. The authors screened titles and abstracts first, then conducted a full-text review of the remaining sources before adding them to the reference list.

Analytical framework

The paper applied thematic content analysis to the reviewed sources, following the approach outline (Mkhize & Nel-Sanders, 2025b:4).

The study evaluated the sources to identify recurring patterns, then grouped these patterns into three descriptive themes that correspond to the three forms of corruption the paper examines (state capture, procurement corruption and COVID-19 tender fraud), and two analytical themes that cut across all three (weakened oversight and eroded principal-agent accountability, and socio-economic impact). The Findings section below presents the descriptive themes, while the Discussion section separately presents the analytical themes, that is, the mechanisms and consequences that state capture, procurement corruption and COVID-19 tender fraud share. This structure separates the descriptive review of each form of corruption from the paper's own cross-cutting synthesis.

Limitations

As a qualitative desktop study, the paper relies only on publicly available secondary sources and does not

include primary data, such as interviews with public officials or affected citizens. Publicly reported cases may under-represent the true scale of political corruption, since the literature reviewed, by definition, excludes undetected or unreported cases. The paper's reliance on cases that attracted significant media, judicial or Auditor-General attention may also bias the analysis toward the most visible instances of corruption rather than routine, low-level practices. These limitations do not undermine the paper's central contribution, which is to synthesise and compare patterns across three well-documented forms of political corruption, but readers should treat the findings as illustrative rather than exhaustive.

Findings: Forms of Political Corruption in South Africa

This section presents the descriptive findings of the review, organised by the three forms of political corruption identified in the literature search: state capture, public procurement corruption and COVID-19 tender fraud. Each subsection synthesises the evidence on how each form operates. The Discussion section that follows identifies the patterns that cut across all three.

State capture in South Africa

At the centre of state capture are the Gupta brothers, who used their proximity to the former president,

Jacob Zuma, to capture state-owned companies and engage in illicit business activities under the pretext of black economic empowerment and radical economic transformation (Madonsela, 2019:117). Much of the debate and the allegations of state capture were validated by the Public Protector's 2016 report. The Public Protector at the time, Thuli Madonsela, outlined how informal relationships between the former president and his cronies influenced government decisions and the distribution of public resources. The main objective of these relationships was to protect illegitimate business interests and benefit private individuals and state bureaucrats connected to the president (de Klerk & Solomon, 2019:65; Madonsela, 2019:114). The resulting state capture, which spanned from 2009 to 2018 under Jacob Zuma's presidency, involved grand corruption, bribery and rent-seeking behaviour among highly ranked bureaucrats within government institutions and political elites, aimed at defrauding the state or illicitly extracting and plundering public resources (Vartavarian, 2024:1344; Bester & Dobovsek, 2021:73).

The key players in this capture included the president and his cronies, the Gupta brothers, private businesses, bureaucrats occupying influential positions in government institutions and public agencies, and

professionals on boards or in executive positions in state-owned companies (Heckel & Ensign, 2026:120; Vartavarian, 2024:1345; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019:68; Madonsela, 2019:113). These actors and players used flawed procurement and tendering processes to siphon billions of Rands from key state-owned companies, such as Denel, Eskom and Transnet (Heckel & Ensign, 2026:125). The three Gupta brothers were central to state capture. Having migrated to South Africa in 1994 and subsequently established businesses in mining, computers, broadcasting media, and real estate, they leveraged a close relationship with the former president, Jacob Zuma, and ANC cadres in the early 2000s to secure government tenders and other business opportunities (Heckel & Ensign, 2026:124).

Apart from the former president, his cronies and the Gupta brothers, state capture also involved reputable international accounting and consultancy firms that facilitated illicit transactions or enabled collaborators to move large sums of illicit funds out of the country. These businesses include KPMG, McKinsey & Company and Bain & Company (Madonsela, 2019:123). For example, Bain & Company's employees colluded and held secret meetings with the former president and Moyane, before he was officially appointed as the head of the South

African Revenue Service (SARS), and plotted how to restructure SARS by marginalising individuals who were believed to be against the state capture agenda, and also weaken units that could pose threats through investigations and preventing the abuse of public resources (Heckel & Ensign, 2026:125). State capture also involved procuring the services of auditing companies to audit the accounts of state-owned companies. Since these private actors were part of the state capture network, involving them in government audits ensured favourable outcomes. The restructuring and weakening of public institutions went beyond SARS because other key state institutions, such as the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) and the Hawks, were manipulated to allow corrupt individuals and officials to engage in fraudulent activities without any meaningful scrutiny and restraint from oversight and investigative institutions that ordinarily enforce the law or institute judicial processes (Bester & Dobovsek, 2021:73; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019:72).

The South African version of state capture demonstrates that state institutions can be hijacked for individuals' benefit when a clique of public and private collaborators is willing to engage in illegal activities that undermine the values of public service, good governance and ethical leadership (Heckel & Ensign,

2026:123). According to de Klerk and Solomon (2019:65), state capture was tantamount to a "silent coup" because it undermined national development and allowed political interests to illegitimately influence government decisions. It was a patronage system in which political and business interests, shaped by nepotism, made decisions and implemented policies that enabled key players to plunder state resources, favour certain business players, or benefit individuals by defrauding the state or undermining national interests (de Klerk & Solomon, 2019:68). This pattern is consistent with the finding that South African state capture entrenched itself partly through the deliberate establishment of a parallel, unaccountable structure within the ruling party, which further shielded collaborators from detection (Mkhize, Kayembe & Thusi, 2025:46).

Public procurement corruption

Although public sector procurement is an effective tool for involving citizens in a country's economic activities, the apartheid government's racial and discriminatory policies ensured that it was preserved for the white minority (Munzhedzi, 2016:1). To redress this, the post-apartheid government leveraged public procurement to create employment, deliver public services, strengthen the manufacturing sector and support emerging sectors, such as green energy (Klaaren, Belvedere, Brunette

& Gray, 2022a:457; Ambe, 2016:277). Socially, public procurement helps distribute wealth and economic opportunities to individuals previously excluded from participation in the country's economic activities. During the transitional era, the ANC government saw public procurement as a vehicle for creating a "black capitalist class" through black economic empowerment (Klaaren et al., 2022a:458). By the 2010s, data began to show that this policy was being weakened by corruption. However, the government's responses to corruption were weak (Gray, 2021:369). As a result, corruption remains a challenge in public procurement (Munzhedzi, 2016:1; Ambe, 2016:277).

Globally, government procurement accounts for a significant portion of governments' expenditure. Hence, it attracts many state and non-state actors and is exposed to corruption (Ambe, 2016:279). Cases of political corruption in South Africa affirm this. Mantzaris (2014:75) states that in 2012, the Auditor General discovered corruption, tender fraud and unfair procurement practices in government institutions. For instance, in awards worth approximately R400 million involving 46 auditees, there were conflicts of interest, including tenders awarded to employees or their relatives without full disclosure. These discoveries were made across

national and provincial government departments, public entities, and state-owned companies (Mantzaris, 2014:75). According to Munzhedzi (2016:5), recent cases of irregularities in government supply chain management demonstrate the challenges of public procurement in South Africa. For example, the Public Protector unearthed unethical conduct by Mrs Tina Joematt-Pettersson, a former Minister of Agriculture. The minister was accused of collusive tendering and rigging bids in a tender valued at R800 million. Munzhedzi (2016:6) also reports that a former mayor of eThekweni's family allegedly manipulated the bidding process of a tender worth R3 billion.

According to Mazibuko and Fourie (2017:109), government data indicates that unethical practices in public procurement are rife. They mainly involve unfair and non-competitive tendering processes, conflicts of interest, poor contract management and missing records about tender awards. These assertions are supported by the Auditor General's findings from 2013-2016. For example, there were 222, 226, and 247 cases of unfair and non-competitive tendering processes in the 2014, 2015, and 2016 financial years, respectively. This implies unethical behaviour, such as rigging bids, nepotism, or closing bidding processes to competitive bidders, which undermines transparency and cost-effectiveness.

Mazibuko and Fourie (2017:109) further state that, during the same period, several awards were made to employees and their family members. For example, in the 2013/14 financial year, awards worth approximately R120 million were made to employees of organisations being audited, and, in the 2014/15 financial year, 47 cases valued at approximately R1 billion were made to family members of employees being audited (Mazibuko & Fourie, 2017:111). This is significant because procurement corruption is often linked to cases where a public official can gain private benefits by interfering with bidding processes or making biased decisions that favour themselves or their relatives. For example, in Limpopo, tenders valued at approximately R1 billion were irregularly awarded to enterprises, including those owned by government officials (Mazibuko & Fourie, 2017:111). These patterns confirm that public procurement corruption in South Africa is chronic and decentralised rather than confined to a single sector, since it recurs across national, provincial and municipal government (Klaaren et al., 2022b:4).

COVID-19 tender scandals

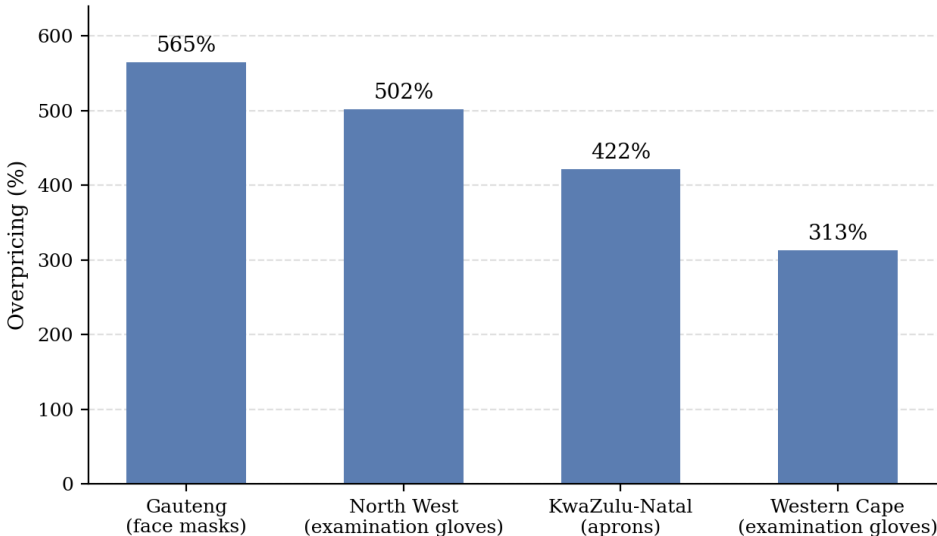
The cases described above demonstrate some of the challenges associated with public procurement unique to South Africa. These challenges were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, as the

government was forced to disburse large sums of money quickly to address a health emergency and to relax procurement regulations and oversight mechanisms under the pressures of the crisis. This created an ideal environment for corruption and unethical behaviour to fester (Geldenhuys, 2021:30). Mokoena (2020:526) states that the government's response to the pandemic was weakened by widespread corruption in the procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE). This mainly involved overpricing, unfair bidding processes, fraud and flouting supply chain regulations. During the pandemic, the National Treasury set prices for the acquisition of specific items used in the health sector. As a result, the budget for these expenses was based on the National Treasury's

projected prices. Based on these metrics, the Auditor General identified instances of gross overpricing among bidders awarded tenders by provincial governments.

The Auditor General's findings indicated that in all provinces, except Limpopo and the Free State, PPE was overpriced (Mokoena, 2020:530). For example, in Gauteng, an order of 400 000 medical face masks was overpriced by 565%. In KwaZulu-Natal, an order of 3000 aprons was overpriced by 422%. In the North-West province, an order of 300 000 examination gloves was overpriced by 502%, and in the Western Cape Province, an order of 328 000 examination gloves was overpriced by 313% (Mokoena, 2020:532). Figure 1 illustrates the scale of this overpricing across the four provinces.

Figure 1: Overpricing of selected PPE items during COVID-19 procurement, by province



Source: Compiled by the author from Mokoena (2020:532)

This demonstrates how overpricing created inefficiencies in the value chain of responding to the pandemic. Although the Code of Conduct for government employees prohibits them or their companies from doing business with public institutions, during the pandemic, it was revealed that government employees, ministers and members of the executive council disregarded this regulation (Geldenhuys, 2021:31). Similar revelations were made in Gauteng and the Free State (Geldenhuys, 2021:32). At the local government level, a R20-billion package was allocated to municipalities for emergency relief to communities. This intervention was met by a surge in corruption, fraud, and the flouting of supply chain regulations (Mantzaris & Ngcamu, 2020:462). For example, municipal officials in collusion with bidders manipulated procurement and overpriced goods and services. In addition, some tenders were awarded to unapproved businesses, and municipal councillors stole food parcels intended for the poor and distributed them to their political allies (Mantzaris & Ngcamu, 2020:462).

These examples demonstrate how COVID-19 scandals significantly

weakened the government's response to the pandemic. By collectively defrauding the state of billions of rands, corrupt collaborators delayed or stopped the delivery of PPE. In some cases, sub-standard equipment unfit for purpose was delivered to health institutions, forcing the government to incur additional costs by reordering or replacing it (Mokoena, 2020:526; Geldenhuys, 2021:30). At the local government level, these scandals misappropriated resources meant for vulnerable people, causing needless suffering among the most vulnerable members of society (Mantzaris & Ngcamu, 2020:477). The pandemic therefore illustrates opportunistic political corruption, in which the temporary relaxation of standard supply chain rules under a national state of disaster created conditions for fraud that were absent under normal procurement rules (Maxwell, 2022:2; Klaaren et al., 2022b:8).

Table 2 draws together the descriptive evidence presented above, comparing the three forms of political corruption across the level of government involved, the key actors, the primary mechanism, and illustrative evidence already cited in this section.

Table 2: Comparison of the three forms of political corruption examined in this paper

Form of corruption	Level and period	Key actors	Primary mechanism	Illustrative evidence
State capture	National apex; 2009-2018	Former President Zuma and associates, the Gupta brothers, state-owned enterprise executives, consultancy firms	Capture of appointments, procurement and oversight institutions through patronage networks	Restructuring of SARS; Gupta-linked contracts at Eskom, Transnet and Denel (Heckmann & Ensign, 2026)
Public procurement corruption	National, provincial and municipal government; ongoing	Public officials, bid committee members, connected businesses and family members	Manipulation of tender and bidding processes; conflicts of interest	R800 million tender irregularity; R3 billion municipal tender; R1 billion in irregular Limpopo tenders (Munzhedzi, 2016; Mazibuko & Fourie, 2017)
COVID-19 tender fraud	National and municipal government; 2020-2021	Public officials, ministers, municipal councillors, PPE suppliers	Relaxation of standard procurement rules under a national state of disaster	PPE overpriced by up to 565%; R20 billion municipal relief package affected by fraud (Mokoena, 2020;

Form of corruption	Level and period	Key actors	Primary mechanism	Illustrative evidence
				Mantzaris & Ngcamu, 2020)

Discussion: Common Threads Across the Three Forms of Corruption

Collectively, the three forms of political corruption examined above share three common mechanisms. First, each involved the deliberate weakening of oversight and accountability institutions, whether through the sidelining of SARS and the Hawks during state capture (Bester & Dobovsek, 2021:73), through incomplete or manipulated procurement records (Mazibuko & Fourie, 2017:109), or through the relaxation of standard supply chain rules during the COVID-19 national state of disaster (Geldenhuys, 2021:30; Klaaren et al., 2022b:8). Second, in each case, agents entrusted with public authority, whether cabinet ministers, provincial officials or municipal councillors, pursued private interests that diverged from the interests of the principal, which is consistent with the principal-agent theory and the agency problem outlined earlier in this paper (Khaile et al., 2021:172; Bernhold & Wiesweg, 2021:117). Third, each form of corruption relied on networks of

collaboration between public officials and private actors, from the Gupta-linked businesses in state capture (Madonsela, 2019:113) to bidders colluding with municipal officials during the pandemic (Mantzaris & Ngcamu, 2020:462), which supports Della Porta and Vannucci's (2012:137) argument that political corruption is distinct from individual bribery because it depends on organised networks rather than isolated actors.

These shared mechanisms indicate that political corruption in South Africa is not confined to a single sector or period, but recurs whenever oversight is weak and discretionary power is concentrated in a small number of connected individuals (Mkhize & Nel-Sanders, 2025b:6). Some scholars extend this argument further, contending that episodes such as state capture should be understood not simply as an aberration from otherwise sound governance, but as part of a longer structural pattern of elite accumulation within South Africa's political economy (Bond, 2024). Whether corruption is treated as a series of discrete scandals or as a

structural feature of governance has implications for the kind of reforms that are likely to succeed.

Anti-corruption measures and their effectiveness

South Africa has established several institutions specifically to investigate and prosecute the forms of corruption examined in this paper, with mixed results. The Special Investigating Unit (SIU), working with the Special Tribunal established in 2019 to fast-track the civil recovery of stolen funds, had investigated R14.8 billion of COVID-19 related expenditure by September 2021, about 10.6% of the R138.8 billion the government spent responding to the pandemic between April 2020 and June 2021 (Klaaren et al., 2022b:8). Of this amount, the SIU referred R1.4 billion in contracts to the Special Tribunal for recovery, referred 148 individuals and entities to the National Prosecuting Authority for possible criminal action, referred 127 government officials for disciplinary action, and referred three political office-bearers for executive action (Klaaren et al., 2022b:9). These figures show that the SIU can move allegations through investigation to litigation, but Klaaren et al. (2022b:9) note that it has no power to ensure that the officials it refers are actually disciplined or that the National Prosecuting Authority prosecutes the cases it receives, which limits its effectiveness as a deterrent.

Sector-specific forums show a similar pattern of partial success. The Health Sector Anti-Corruption Forum, launched in 2019, dealt with 20 allegations of serious maladministration, fraud and corruption in 2020 alone, of which 13 became full investigations and four led to proclamation motivations submitted for presidential approval (Klaaren et al., 2022b:10). The National Anti-Corruption Strategy 2020-2030, which Cabinet adopted in November 2020, sets out six pillars to coordinate this work, including one dedicated to improving the integrity of public procurement, but implementation has so far proceeded through an interim advisory council rather than the independent, statutory anti-corruption body the strategy originally proposed (Klaaren et al., 2022b:11).

Mkhize and Nel-Sanders (2025a:8-11) identify four systemic barriers that account for why these measures, despite their partial successes, have not produced a sustained reduction in political corruption. First, political resistance and entrenched elite interests routinely limit anti-corruption agencies through inadequate budgets, delayed reforms and reluctance to act against politically connected individuals (Mkhize & Nel-Sanders, 2025a:8). Second, institutional capacity is fragmented across bodies such as the SIU, the National Prosecuting

Authority and the Hawks, which suffer from understaffing, leadership turnover and weak coordination (Mkhize & Nel-Sanders, 2025a:9). Third, data and transparency weaknesses mean that oversight bodies often detect corruption only after the damage is done, as the COVID-19 procurement scandals illustrated (Mkhize & Nel-Sanders, 2025a:10). Fourth, weak whistle-blower protection discourages the reporting of corruption from within institutions; the 2021 murder of Babita Deokaran, a Gauteng health department official who had flagged irregular PPE payments, illustrates the risk that whistle-blowers face in South Africa (Mkhize & Nel-Sanders, 2025a:9). Together, these barriers indicate that strengthening individual institutions such as the SIU or the Auditor-General is necessary but not sufficient on its own, and that political will and whistle-blower protection matter as much as formal institutional design.

Building on this evidence, three measures constitute priorities for closing the gap between formal anti-corruption architecture and actual outcomes. First, the government should strengthen the independence and resourcing of oversight bodies such as the Special Investigating Unit and the Auditor-General, since under-resourcing and leadership instability have repeatedly limited their effectiveness. Second, the

government should improve transparency in public procurement through open contracting and the publication of real-time procurement data, building on existing but under-used tools such as the e-tender portal. Third, the government should strengthen legal protection for whistle-blowers, whose exposure to retaliation has discouraged the reporting of corruption from within government institutions. The Conclusion below summarises these priorities.

The impact of political corruption

Building on the shared mechanisms identified above, this section examines the specific consequences of political corruption for public governance, poverty and inequality, democratic trust, wealth distribution, service delivery and economic development.

Bad governance and weak state institutions

Public corruption distorts and manipulates the government's decision and policy-making processes by inviting illegitimate actors to participate in governance processes or by encouraging decision-makers to make decisions that cater to the private interests of certain groups and individuals (Nandeesh, 2024:1953). The case of Bain Capital's interference in SARS decision-making processes is evidence of this. According to Heckel and Ensign (2026:125), Bain

Capital employees connived with the former president, Jacob Zuma, and his cronies to restructure SARS, weaken its internal oversight systems, and sideline individuals who were not compliant with state capture. This severely weakened SARS and contributed to the state capture. Sylvester and Kugara (2025:228) indicate that the state capture severely weakened the government by discouraging state institutions, such as SARS and the NPA, from executing their duties. As a result, cases that should have been investigated or prosecuted were not. This undermined and eroded values of good governance and the integrity of state institutions (Gray, 2021:371).

Poverty, inequality and underdevelopment

Political corruption, particularly in public procurement, has an immense impact on the government's efforts to eradicate poverty, inequality and underdevelopment. Abioro (2021:261) indicates that because public procurement accounts for a large share of government expenditure, corruption in this sector significantly affects government performance. For example, fraudulent bids, overpricing, and embezzlement in procurement increase the costs of providing public services and infrastructure, and of executing development projects. It also results in poor services, slow economic development, and an unfavourable

business environment (Abioro, 2021:261; Gray, 2021:371). These factors stem from the fact that government expenditure is a key component of the national economy and efforts to reduce inequalities. Poor management of public finances and public works affects the national economy and business confidence. When public officials steal goods intended for vulnerable communities, it deepens their poverty and limits their access to basic goods and services. For example, Mantzaris and Ngcamu (2020:461) reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic, although the government provided relief goods for vulnerable citizens, local politicians stole them and used them to pursue their political interests. This left communities stranded and without food at a time when there was no work and movements were restricted. Such examples show how political corruption and greed can worsen the living conditions of vulnerable people.

Erosion of democratic values and trust in public institutions

Political corruption erodes democratic governance and citizens' trust in public institutions, bureaucrats, and politicians. Concentrating decision-making authority in the hands of cronies with vested private interests limits the influence of citizen participation on public policies and government performance. This gradually undermines government

oversight and erodes transparency and accountability (Sylvester & Kugara, 2025:226). When scandals involving the theft of public funds, nepotism, abuse of authority, and other forms of corruption are revealed, citizens lose confidence in politicians, public managers, and institutions meant to oversee the management of public resources (Munyai & Ashukem, 2023:339; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019:69). This has severe effects on democratic governance because once citizens feel that the social contract is broken and there is no rule of law, they lose faith in democratic values and the impartiality of public institutions (Geldenhuys, 2021:30).

Wealth and income inequality

Corruption deepens wealth inequality as a small group of elites and cronies become extremely wealthy while the general public is being impoverished (Gray, 2021:371). This type of wealth accumulation does not create value for society in terms of job creation, infrastructure development, and skills development because it is consumptive and generated through illicit means rather than through production and strategic investment. According to Krugel and Benjamin (2026), when corruption benefits cronies and a few connected businesses, it further marginalises poor communities and hinders their access to social services and equitable economic opportunities to improve their livelihoods. This widens the gap

between the poor and the wealthy, and it closes any meaningful avenues for the marginalised poor to prosper economically (Sylvester & Kugara, 2025:219).

Poor service delivery

Political corruption diverts finite public resources meant to meet citizens' needs, such as healthcare, sanitation, and public road infrastructure, and weakens the government's capacity to deliver services, reduce poverty, and address citizens' needs (Nandeesh, 2024:1953). This was evident during the pandemic, when corruption involving PPE and social relief programmes led to inflated procurement costs, substandard medical equipment, and theft of goods intended for vulnerable citizens (Mantzaris & Ngcamu, 2020:477; Geldenhuys, 2021:32). Corruption diverts resources intended for developing public infrastructure or investing in local economic development, resulting in poor infrastructure or unfinished public projects (Sylvester & Kugara, 2025:219; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019:67). The COVID-19 pandemic, which had a devastating socio-economic and health impact on many communities in South Africa, provides evidence for this argument. For example, the theft of relief materials and the fraud, overpricing, and corruption involving PPE tenders had severe effects on people who

contracted COVID-19 and on vulnerable communities whose ability to fend for themselves was impacted by the pandemic. Mantzaris and Ngcamu (2020:462) indicate that corruption surrounding PPE hijacked "state emergency measures" designed to provide relief and financial support to affected citizens. This shows that public corruption has real-world effects on governance and on citizens, particularly those who rely on government support.

Reduced investment inflows, slow growth and economic underdevelopment

Krugel and Benjamin (2026) regard corruption as an "economic crime" because its effects go beyond public administration and service delivery. By promoting the private interests of cronies at the expense of the public good, public corruption discourages investment inflows into an economy, increases the costs of business transactions, and makes markets inefficient (de Klerk & Solomon, 2019:67; Nandeesh, 2024:1953). Investments are encouraged by trust in the country's stability, the rule of law and its public institutions (Kaakeh & Parker, 2025:1). Since public corruption erodes this trust, it discourages investors from participating in the economy and bankers from lending capital. This slows economic growth and makes the economy vulnerable because capital is scarce, or it attracts high lending rates,

and expertise and new technologies are discouraged from entering the markets.

Conclusion

The paper explores the impact of political corruption on public governance in post-apartheid South Africa. The literature reviewed in the paper underscored numerous definitions of 'political corruption'. A common feature of these definitions is that they indicate that political corruption involves using public authority to extract resources from the government for private gains. Political corruption has been endemic in South Africa since the days of apartheid governance. Contemporary corruption hijacks government redistributive policies to illicitly enrich connected individuals. State capture corruption and COVID-19 tender scandals are evidence of this. State capture, which occurred under Jacob Zuma's presidency, involved a network of cronies, public officials, politicians and business organisations that manipulated processes, procurement regulations and public institutions to illegitimately extract public resources and enrich themselves at the expense of government performance. Similarly, in the COVID-19 tender scandals, public officials and politicians colluded with businesses to overprice PPE and defraud the government, subverting procurement regulations in awarding medical equipment tenders during the pandemic. The paper highlights the impact of these corrupt tendencies on public governance. The paper shows that when political corruption festers, the government struggles to execute its mandate because public resources intended for various

government programmes are diverted to the private gain of collaborators. This negatively affects the quality of public services, infrastructure and the government's response to citizens' needs. The corruption surrounding COVID-19 relief demonstrated this because while politicians looted relief materials, vulnerable people were left hungry, despondent and homeless.

Addressing the shared mechanisms identified above requires more than legal reform alone. Three measures constitute priorities. First, the government should strengthen the independence and resourcing of oversight bodies such as the Special Investigating Unit and the

Auditor-General, since under-resourcing and leadership instability have repeatedly limited their effectiveness. Second, the government should improve transparency in public procurement through open contracting and the publication of real-time procurement data, building on existing but under-used tools such as the e-tender portal. Third, the government should strengthen legal protection for whistle-blowers, whose exposure to retaliation has discouraged the reporting of corruption from within government institutions. Future research should assess the effectiveness of these measures, including the National Anti-Corruption Strategy 2020-2030, in curbing political corruption in South Africa.

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