STRATEGIC REVIEW
FOR SOUTHERN AFRICA
Vol 48 No. 1 2026
ISSN 1013-1108

Published by
ESI
LABS • PRESS • REACH

ISSN 1013-1108

Aims and Scope

The Strategic Review for Southern Africa is an accredited on-access journal listed in the IBSS index. It has since 1978 been a platform for strategic and political analyses of themes and socio-political developments that impact on or provide lessons for Southern Africa. As a multi-disciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary journal, the Strategic Review facilitates vigorous and enlightened debate among scholars, policy makers, practitioners, students and activists in order to contribute to the wider global discourse on changing strategic and political dynamics within and beyond nation states.

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Editorial

From the Political Economy of Corruption to Political Opportunity Analysis: Corruption, Capture, and the Democratic Project Defended

Firoz Khan

School of Public Leadership, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa

and

Ruth Kolevsohn

Executive Director, Governance Programmes, Good Governance Africa, South Africa

DOI: https://doi.org/10.35293/srsa.v48i1.7464

In an effort to diminish the pervasive nature of corruption and to lower its prevalence, South Africa has instituted a range of anti-corruption initiatives, strategies, and legislative frameworks within the nation. All these measures and frameworks exhibit a thorough and systematic approach. While it is essential to engage in a thorough examination of these measures and juxtapose various viewpoints regarding the efficacy of anti-corruption initiatives in South Africa, it remains unfeasible to encapsulate the multitude of opinions, perspectives, and arguments within a single study (Vyas-Doorgapersad 2024, 459) .

Introduction

Anti-corruption scholarship is highly effective at explaining 'what *not* to do' (Heeks and Mathisen 2012, 540, original emphasis). Political economy analysis has deepened the understanding of corruption, state capture, elite bargains and institutional failure, but often stops at diagnosis. As Zinnbauer (2025) argues, what is still missing is 'a political economy analysis of the possible' or, more precisely, a political opportunity analysis that identifies where systems are sufficiently malleable for reform to emerge.

This Special Issue commences from this premise. While examining the political economy of corruption in South Africa, it also turns attention to the individuals, institutions and practices that continue creating opportunities for reform in deeply adverse governance conditions. Rather than asking only why corruption persists, the contributions collectively explore how sound governance is created, defended and expanded under real-world political conditions.

The Special Issue assembles the opinions, perspectives, and arguments of development practitioners, officials, non-governmental organisations (Good Governance Africa, Democracy Development Programme), an investigative journalist and academics on the effectiveness of South Africa's anti-corruption initiatives, strategies and legislative frameworks in addressing and reducing the prevalence of corruption and maleficence. This Special Issue lays claim neither to being comprehensive nor to being representative of the expanse and spectrum of opinions, perspectives and arguments. It is, however, the first collection of its kind featuring contributions from officials, development practitioners, research and advocacy civil society organisations, the media and academics within a single study. These varied contributions and combinations in a single study are arguably worthy of reproduction in anti-corruption scholarship, more generally, and to close the gap, more urgently, between the conventions, training programmes and diagnostics of the anti-corruption industry and the everyday activities of those actively fighting corruption in the real-world contexts of the undue influence of money, syndicates, mafias, police corruption and assassinations.

South Africa is a signatory to the United Nations Convention against Corruption (2003) and the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption (2003), and its anti-corruption legislative framework aligns with international best practice (Labik Amanquandor 2024). Adherence to international laws, governance standards, and anti-corruption norms, critics charge, serves a legitimising function, allowing states to signal conformity with global best practice internationally, while substantive implementation is limited (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015; Persson, Rothstein and Teorell 2013).

The gap between the enactment and selective enforcement of laws in South Africa is plugged by a politics of appeasement—arresting the middleman in the corruption syndicate, the runner, but leaving the race intact. The public is 'made to feel that the state is at work, but the system producing the runner is untouched, well fed and elegantly dressed' (Mncube 2026). More damaging than the politics of appeasement is the normalisation of corruption's permeance. Every investigation from the Public Protector's State of Capture Report (2016) to the Zondo's State Capture Commission (2018–2022) and now the Madlanga Commission into alleged criminality, political interference and corruption in the criminal justice system have spotlighted the state's incapacity to translate findings into meaningful institutional reform: 'This paradox means South Africa simultaneously documents capture and reproduces it, exposing corruption while normalising its permanence' (Mantoshi, Gaborone and Ndimande 2025).

The persistence and pervasiveness of corruption and the limited purchase of voluminous and technically complex international best practice legislation (Labik Amanquandor 2024) is evidenced in the regular scandals, misappropriation of funds, wasteful and unauthorised expenditure and tender irregularities. The harassment, victimisation, intimidation, legal warfare waged against ethical officials, and assassinations reflects the disconnect between 'top-down' anti-corruption policies and 'ground-level' realities (Bautista-Beauchesne and Garzon 2019, 732).

The Special Issue connects (top-down) anti-corruption policies and ground-level reality by front-centring the struggles and stories of ethical officials who chose to and continue discharging their duties guided by policy, legislation and regulation. These individuals and institutions are identified as defenders of the democratic project who are divided, not without qualifications, into symbolic beacons (bearing testimony to the possibility and viability of reform despite current circumstances), positive outliers (achieving unexpectedly positive outcomes with the same resources despite prevailing constraints) and islands of integrity (sustaining effectiveness in adverse governance conditions). Further elaboration of this taxonomy, and qualifications follows shortly.

Using purposive sampling, interviewees were sourced through professional networks and established relationships with civil society partners active in governance and anti-corruption advocacy. These individuals shared experiences and insights, because they trusted the editors and were confident of the protection of their identity and integrity of narrative in accordance with the provisions of the University of Pretoria's Research Ethics Review Committee, which categorised this as a "high risk, high security" project. These provisions were detailed in the informed consent forms signed by all interviewees, including the right to withdraw at any stage of the project and anonymisation of identity. After interviews were edited, the transcriptions were sent to the interviewees for approval and sign-off to inform the commentary. The opinions contained in the commentaries (Khan and Scholtz, Kolevsohn, Khan and Kolevsohn) are solely and exclusively those of the authors, and not the interviewees, nor their present employers.

The interviewees were all former or are currently—with the exclusion of an anonymous official who has left the public service—senior officials located at the apex of state institutions (administrator, city manager, chief executive officers, accounting officer) and other participants occupying various high-level posts across the public service for close to thirty years (see Adam's 'Practitioner's Encounter of Corruption: A Passage from Apartheid to Post-Apartheid Corruption'). Save for the Administrator, Johann Mettler, all identities were anonymised, with one participant, a former chief executive officer of a state-owned entity, withdrawing from the project abruptly. This anonymised interview—titled 'The Minister has spoken. It's just like God has made a determination, and all we must do is follow, regardless'—plus commentary (Khan and Scholtz)—was sent to the anonymous official for perusal, feedback and approval. Thereafter, all communication ended. Repeated attempts to contact the official were unsuccessful. An informed consent form was signed by the official, but the editors considered it appropriate to exclude the interview and commentary from the Special Issue.

The decision to exclude the interview and commentary (Khan and Scholtz) further reduced, we acknowledge, the already slim study sample; however, there were not many officials who we identified through snowball sampling that were willing to go on record, even if anonymised. This is partly related to an underlying theme of the Special Issue about the intimidation, abuse and even illegal arrest of competent and ethical officials by politicians and their misuse of state agencies and legal processes. The relentless persecution and prosecution of ethical officials—accounting officers obliged to govern within the four corners of statute, regulation and bylaw—who refuse to bend to the illegal biddings and illegal enrichment schemes of politicians and political parties silences all competent and principled officials. The question raised by all officials and practitioners in the Special Issue is whether politicians and political parties, the guardians of the Constitution (RSA 1996) and the drafters of legislation, stand above and outside both constitution and legislation, scapegoating underlings, while punishing ethical officials, legally obliged to abide by both Constitution and laws, at the taxpayers expense.

The practitioners, interviewees, and commentaries in the Special Issue proceed beyond communicating and extending knowledge of corruption's pervasiveness and persistence. Money's undue influence, party rent-seeking, patronage, capture, mafia, organised crime and police corruption is the real-world context of local government—the 'worst managed and the least paid attention to' sphere of government (Madzivhandila, labour analyst cited in Mahlangu 2026). These contributors raise searching questions about holding power to account, guided by the South African Constitution, legislation and regulation in the real-world context. The shift in emphasis from explaining corruption to interpreting the conditions under which power is held to account and accountability is enforced, emerged as a crucial insight of the project deserving future scholarly research.

Mainstream anti-corruption approaches place disproportionate emphasis on formal institutions, legal compliance, and externally derived governance models, but reforms cannot be ends in themselves. Why do reformers steer clear of power, political economy, social norms, and lived realities (Johnston and Fritzen 2021; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015; Persson et al. 2013)? Why do reformers say so little about the contemporary erosion of democracy, waning institutional trust, and political disengagement of the poor caused by rising inequality, which in turn increases the ability of elites to capture institutions and warp outcomes towards further inequality? Why do reformers choose to bury their heads in the dirt while millions of GenZ protestors in South Asia, North and East Africa flood the streets, blaming dwindling economic opportunities, remote institutions and democratic marginalisation as 'all conditions connected by one thing: corruption' (Eyakuze 2025). Globally, the youth demand 'transparency, inclusion, dignity, and genuine public agency' (Eyakuze 2025). However, these youth, along with 'courageous local activists exposing brutal corruption in their home countries; individuals and groups who are harassed, jailed, and even murdered for exposing corruption' (Sampson 2010, 277), 'speak and act in a manner that is wholly foreign to the everyday activities of actors in the anti-corruption industry of conventions, training programmes and diagnostics' (Sampson 2010, 264). The disjunct between the industry and ground-level reality tragically bedevils South Africa too.

The Special Issue presents a political economy analysis of corruption, on the one hand, and a political opportunity analysis, on the other hand, because '…what is missing in everyday political economy analysis is the creative, yet grounded consideration of where change can come from and lead to—a political economy analysis of the possible—or better: a political opportunity analysis that considers the possibility and reality of altered and evolving interest matrices' (Zinnbauer 2025).

Moving beyond interrogating the dynamics of dysfunctional and captured systems, political opportunity analysis looks to shifting dynamics via 'encouraging different behaviours in the given landscape of power, incentives and institutions' (Hudson 2025b). Political opportunity analysis is about 'sensing where the system is malleable, where small shifts might propagate meaningful change'—rendering it a 'more action-oriented and more useful for the change agents and the transformation project' (Hudson 2025a). In summary, political opportunity analysis, in contrast with political economy, directs attention towards individuals, institutions, narratives and practices that create conditions and opportunities for accountability and reform within constrained governance environments.

To explore the possibilities for accountability and reform, the practitioner contributions and interviews were grouped into three heuristic categories: symbolic beacons; positive outliers and islands of integrity. Symbolic beacons illuminate alternative moral and political possibilities (Mettler, Anonymous Official, Robertson); positive outliers achieve unusually positive outcomes despite operating under the same constraints as their peers (Cullinan, Anonymous Official); and islands of integrity sustaining effectiveness, professionalism and ethical practice within otherwise compromised governance environments (Anonymous Senior Official at the Special Investigating Unit) (see Table 1 below). The proposed heuristic categories are not mutually exclusive, and several contributions could reasonably be located in more than one category.

Table 1: Political Opportunity Analysis

Symbolic Beacons	**Positive Outliers**	**Islands of Integrity**
Johann Mettler: *The hunter often becomes the hunted* Interview of administrator, presently city manager at Tshwane municipality (Gauteng) plus commentary (see Khan and Scholtz)	Matt Cullinan: *Small town, big shakes* Practitioner Essay, presently chief executive officer of Atlantis Special Economic Zone for Green Technologies (Western Cape)	Anon: *My focus is on tackling corruption decisively, investigating high-profile cases thoroughly, and ensuring that justice is served* Interview of senior official from the Special Investigating Unit (SIU) plus commentary (see Khan and Kolevsohn)
Anon: *The civil service has become a graveyard for competent and ethical officials* Interview of a senior official, previously served as accounting officer of a state-owned water entity, plus commentary (see Kolevsohn)	Anon: *The Minister has spoken. It's just like God has made a determination, and all we must do is follow, regardless.* Interview of senior official, previously chief executive officer of a state-owned water entity plus Commentary who abruptly withdrew from project.	
Heather Robertson: *The burden of bearing witness: South African journalism, corruption and the case for a protected fourth estate* (Online day editor of *Daily Maverick* and editor of the weekly newspaper *DM168*)		

ISSN 1013-1108

The division of the contributors into the three categories will undoubtedly be criticised, suffice to mention that literature on anti-corruption cases where performance has been better than expected in poor governance environments—labelled “islands of integrity”; “pockets of productivity”; “pockets of effectiveness”; “islands of excellence”; “positive deviants” and “positive outliers”—include well-performing public sector reforms; effective institutions or organisations; and impressive individual leaders fostering and implementing progressive policies. All interviewees were involved in and/or are implementing public sector reforms to enhance organisational performance, all interviewees strived to and/or pursue organisational effectiveness and all interviewees are ethical officials and notable leaders who succeeded in promoting and implementing progressive policies guided by the Constitution, legislation and regulations.

Given the expected disagreement over the categorisation, the editors have heeded the advice of a complexity thinker who reminds:

> *‘Not to make too much of a science out of the search for positive deviance’, retaining instead ‘its lightness, nimble ambition and non-mechanistic application to map a broader opportunity space, find new potential levers and assemblages that may or may not be useful for making change’ (Hudson 2025b).*

The interviews, commentary and practitioner contributions mapped and mined opportunity spaces, identified levers of change, and designed new assemblages to effect change. However, interventions to support and create conditions for the realisation of desired behaviours and social change will by definition be incomplete without laying bare the experience of ethical officials who failed in battling corruption; however, like those who triumphed, they risked family, career, social status, limb and life. The Special Issue covers two cases of whistleblowers—titled ‘The civil service has become a graveyard for competent and ethical officials’ (Anon under symbolic beacon above) and ‘The Minister has spoken. It’s just like God has made a determination, and all we must do is follow, regardless’ (Anon under positive outlier above)—both senior officials who confronted harassment, victimisation, false imprisonment and ‘malicious investigations’ (see Section Four below). The story of the former official is anonymised in the Special Issue. As mentioned above, the latter senior government official, a lawyer, ceased all communication weeks before the writing of this Editorial, and the story of the former official is anonymised in the Special Issue.

It is, however, foolhardy to separate the political economy and political opportunity analyses, because papers concerned with power and vested interests versus those of beacons, outliers and islands of integrity, respectively, repeatedly surface the same themes: power; political economy; human rights; social justice; legitimacy; institutional culture; leadership; social norms and public meaning. Collectively, these papers—peer-reviewed, practitioner insights and interviews—recalibrate the analytical compass towards the social, institutional and political conditions sustaining corruption and malfeasance. In this Special Issue, both political economy and political opportunity analyses are united in their commitment to sound governance and social justice as inseparable components of the democratic project undergirding effective anti-corruption reform.

Consequently, this Special Issue explores corruption as a governance challenge connected to power, legitimacy, democratic accountability, civic participation, institutional resilience and public meaning. By foregrounding stories of resistance, reform, and integrity alongside analyses of failure and state capture, the Special Issue seeks to enrich anti-corruption scholarship towards more context-sensitive understandings; that is, learning from those who resisted and continue resisting corruption at great personal, professional and financial cost and how best to ameliorate costs, reduce harm and nurture an enabling, responsive and protective environment for ethical officials and whistleblowers.

Taken together, the contributions move from the political economy of corruption to its construction in everyday social meaning, and towards identifying practical opportunities for institutional renewal. The collection culminates by reconnecting diagnosis with practice, aiming at expanding anti-corruption scholarship from the abstract to decoding how reform emerges, survives and expands under difficult political and governance conditions.

The contributions are organised around five interconnected themes. Section Two examines corruption through the lenses of political economy, social justice, human rights and developmental governance. Section Three explores corruption as a social and cultural phenomenon shaped by norms, narratives, and collective meanings. Section Four develops the political opportunity analysis through symbolic beacons, positive outliers and the island of integrity. Section Five reconnects the political economy and the political opportunity perspectives through practitioner accounts, nationally (Adam) and internationally (Moloi and Kolevsohn). Adam reflects on corruption, governance and accountability spanning apartheid and the present. Moloi and Kolevsohn interview Justice Richard Goldstone to trace the evolution of the initiative to establish the International Anti-Corruption Court for the global enforcement of anti-corruption. The Conclusion details the limitations of mainstream anti-corruption studies, the double standards, the ignorance of the conditions it attempts to remedy, and areas for further research distilled from the project and the varied contributions.

Section Two: Power, political economy and corruption

The failure of anti-corruption reforms resides in their inability to 'reallocate power' and 'discipline entrenched local actors' (Fukuyama and Recanatini 2018, 52). Levelling power imbalances is what reformers have been 'most reluctant to confront' (Johnston and Fritzen 2021, 21).

Khan and Patel, Mohamed, and Hermanus interrogate corruption and state capture through political economy, heterodox economics and regime reform lenses, respectively. South Africa is the 'most extreme example of an extractive economy in the modern world', dominated by 'one of the most concentrated oligarchies in the world' (Duigan 2026, 6, 4). Oligarchic rule, the politics of the defence of wealth, an underappreciated problem in South Africa's political economy, is everywhere, argue Khan and Patel, entrenching and deepening inequality. Rising inequality degrades democratic institutions, erodes trust in government, and hastens the political disengagement of the poor. This, in turn, is increasing the ability of the elite to dominate policymaking, warping policies, institutions, and governance towards greater inequality. Khan and Patel contend that inequality, democratic backsliding—undermining of checks and balances, the restriction of civil liberties, and the manipulation of elections—and state capture are inextricably linked. Front-centring social justice, the paper appeals for a re-orientation of the mainstream anti-corruption discourse towards engagement with the defence of wealth by disrupting the 'business as usual' approach of the 'most corrupt private sector in the world' (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2020) and limiting the undue influence of private money in politics.

Following from Khan and Patel's rights-based social justice framing of effective anti-corruption reform, Jwili and Kolevsohn turn to the direct, traceable consequences of corruption and financial mismanagement on citizens' constitutional rights to water, housing, equal treatment and participation (RSA 1996). Institutional design and political commitment are featured as primary drivers of differential rights outcomes. A robust local integrity system of participation, accountability, non-discrimination, empowerment and linkage to law constitutes, for Jwili and Kolevsohn, the human rights infrastructure to extend and strengthen constitutional rights. The framing of anti-corruption as a constitutional mandate is an invaluable analytical lens for scholars and practitioners to evaluate municipal governance.

Applying a heterodox developmental economics framework, Mohamed constructs a link between the rampant corruption of the apartheid era and its continuity through the post-apartheid era. Mohamed takes issue with the state-market dichotomy of mainstream economic approaches to corruption, focussing instead on its manifestation over long periods of time in an economy with unusually high levels of market and wealth concentration. The dominant hegemony of corruption as generally a problem stemming from within the state is contested by Mohamed, arguing instead to focus attention on the corruption of the elites and aspirant elites within business and government. The failure of the post-apartheid government to build a developmental state capable of disciplining corporate power, directing the allocation of capital, and reducing extremely high levels of market and wealth concentration underwrites both poor economic performance and persistent corruption.

Hermanus's case study of Eskom (South Africa's state-owned power utility) references state capture and corruption to broader objectives of developmental governance. Hermanus meticulously details the mobilisation of political authority, institutional arrangements and public expenditure in support of—or in tension with—developmental objectives. Anchored in the evolution of South Africa's electricity sector, the paper reintroduces normative questions into state capture debates by querying who benefits from governance arrangements. Unlike Khan and Patel's and Mohamed's historical political economy arc of corruption and state capture, Hermanus conceptualises state capture as a dynamic process of regime stabilisation and destabilisation unfolding across distinct political periods: the early democratic transition (1994–2008); the widely labelled "state capture" era (2009–2018) and the post-Zondo period (2019–2025). Hermanus's conception of regime sector change contests the dominant binary characterisation of state capture as the opposite of a neutral, uncaptured ideal. Moments of state capture, Hermanus demonstrates, may emerge, recede and reconfigure without necessarily conforming to dramatic episodes of grand corruption.

Section Three: 'Sensing and explaining where the system is malleable': Meanings, norms and storytelling

Moving away from the political economy, heterodox economics and regime reform dynamics, the papers in Section Three frame corruption, following present scholarship, as a social and cultural phenomenon. Corruption persists, these contributors insist not only because institutions fail, but because social environments often normalise corrupt behaviour, rewarding loyalty over accountability, privileging fidelity over professionalism, punishing ethical officials and silencing whistleblowers, while compensating and supporting transgression. Anti-corruption reforms are too wrapped up in enactment and obsessed with enforcement, neglecting culture, communication and

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collective sense-making. Social norms, narratives, identities and collective understandings determine the content and boundaries of acceptable and corrupt behaviour—in context. The contributions in this Section turn to how corruption is constructed, experienced and contested within everyday social life.

Kolevsohn and Martin, Chivandire and Saruchera, and Kariuki conceive of anti-corruption as fundamentally a process of social transformation. Societies interpret and decode complex phenomena through shared symbolic frameworks and common-sense understandings (Joffe 2003; Moscovici 1988). Anti-corruption, for Kolevsohn and Martin, is a social field of meaning. Accountability gains and losses in public legitimacy depend on narratives progressing beyond exposure towards visible consequences, institutional repair and democratic renewal. While the Zondo Commission created significant procedural and symbolic visibility, the absence of sustained prosecutions, visible sanctions and institutional consequences—narrative closure—risks weakening public trust further, stalling the reform momentum and relegating accountability to the appeasement and normalisation of corruption rather than achievement. Accountability, Kolevsohn and Martin demonstrate, is publicly constructed through recurring representations of collective responsibility, everyday oversight, whistleblowing, constitutional accountability, institutional impact, and imagined alternative futures. In short, narratives record accountability and also actively shape civic expectations, public trust, and participation.

Corruption in South Africa, Chivandire and Saruchera contend, is sustained by deeply embedded social norms surrounding loyalty, reciprocity and material success, overriding formal legal rules. Friendship, kinship and loyalty have their own social contract, governance principles and community institutions not registered in the mainstream anti-corruption discourse. The paper is a context-specific empirical contribution of vignette-based qualitative interviews probing citizens' interpretation of corruption in the everyday situations of police roadblocks, Home Affairs services, procurement processes, nepotism and sextortion. The paper prescribes direct engagement with the informal social expectations shaping behaviour in everyday governance interactions, encompassing norm-sensitive interventions beyond the purview of punitive approaches to anti-corruption reform.

There are various behavioural approaches—participatory, community and culture-centred and the entertainment-education strategy-to increase adoption of desired behaviours and facilitate social change. Storytelling is deemed critical to the 'effective SBCC [social behavioural change communication] interventions, constructing identity through narrative discourse', conveying a 'sense of belonging and willingness to participate' (White and Muturi 2023, 05) in anti-corruption reform. Like Chivandire and Saruchera, Kariuki shifts the focus of reforms away from enforcement to integrating cultural and normative change. Kariuki clarifies that corruption is socially constructed—normalised in everyday practices—summoning interventions to change public meanings, norms and identities, not only laws and sanctions. Storytelling renders corruption tangible, linking abstract governance failures to the 'lived harms of inequality and the denial of basic services'. By relaying lived experience, personal testimony and collective memory, storytelling holds the potential to amplify marginalised voices and foster civic engagement, thereby contextually anchoring anti-corruption, Kariuki advocates, in wider social justice agendas.

Section Four: 'Shifting dynamics and behaviours in the given landscape of power, incentives and institutions': A political opportunity analysis

In a letter to a young systems thinker, Jen Briselli, writes:

> *If you can learn to listen carefully, you find that systems speak. Not in words, but in patterns and anomalies...places that light up where an experiment or intervention can teach us more (2025).*

Symbolic Beacons

Mettler: *The Hunter [Administrator] Often Becomes the Hunted*

Khan and Scholtz interviewed Johann Mettler, 'easily one of South Africa's most qualified and technocratic city managers'. Mettler is an Administrator, with constitutionally entrenched powers, tasked with exercising executive functions and administrative management of dysfunctional local councils to rectify failures in governance and service delivery. Mettler's approach to fixing dysfunctional municipalities pivots on 1) identifying those who are corrupt, 2) targeting these people, 3) putting controls in place and 4) replacing the corrupt people.

> *The key is to surround yourself with a team of [good] people, in finance, legal, human resources to weed out phantom employees and assist in determining which pockets we must trust and strengthen in service delivery—including cancelling contracts, recovering funds, and initiating and completing prosecutions.*

Mettler's experience highlights a recurring theme across several contributions—effective reform rarely depends on individual competence alone. Administrators derive authority from the constitutional provisions and legislative obligations of national and provincial governments to intervene in dysfunctional municipalities. The ability of administrators to implement reforms is strengthened when political leaders at higher spheres of government support local recovery plans and projects (see practitioner essay by Cullinan below, whose success as a positive outlier was directly the result of the intervention of the Minister of Finance, the National Treasury, and the ANC's Luthuli House). Local government is the sphere most visibly affected by corruption and governance failure, yet it often receives the least sustained institutional and political support from provincial and national departments, focussed instead on other urgent priorities and battling their own limited capacities.

Interventions to fix municipalities, Mettler maintains, 'are not strong enough and the bad guys can sense it'. Investigations, criminal and civil actions, disciplinary actions and tightening governance measures, 'have limited effect as they fail to send strong messages that wrongful acts and behaviour is under scrutiny'. Weak investigative and oversight systems compound failure.

The whistleblower, Mettler insists, must be 'institutionally supported by the municipality and broader state because there is nothing that we can do without the whistleblower'.

> *Whistleblowers must know that they are safe and secure when they make their statements, and that their confidentiality will be protected. The implicated institution and its own whistleblowing system must be beyond reproach. Things must not leak... Whistleblowers need institutional support also from the criminal justice system because when they are exposed, they will be persecuted by those that are threatened. Our criminal justice system is a very important component of the support that ethical administrators would need, and they are not as responsive or effective as they should be. I now know here in this city where I am now [Tshwane], which police station I must just avoid in certain cases and so I must go directly to the provincial Hawks.*

Anon: *The civil service has become a graveyard for competent and ethical officials*.

Kolevsohn interviewed an accounting officer of a state-owned entity. Anon rejected an emergency procurement directive issued by the executive authority on the grounds that it was unprofessional and unethical. As accounting officer and lawyer, Anon's legal and governance obligations were to protect the state-owned entity and to ensure compliance with procurement legislation. Anon was suspended without charges, subjected to prolonged disciplinary processes, and forced into expensive legal battles over several years. Criminal and civil proceedings were also instituted but ultimately failed. Anon contends that disciplinary processes, forensic investigations, and legal proceedings are 'weaponised' against officials who obstruct politically connected interests.

Ethical resistance may successfully prevent corruption, but imposes legal, financial and personal costs on principled officials without corresponding consequences for those initiating and applying undue pressures. Anon insists on urgent scrutiny of 'malicious investigations', which are politically motivated and funded by taxpayers to undermine accountability and institutional legitimacy. Anon proposes 'stronger oversight mechanisms' to evaluate the costs, motivations and outcomes of malicious investigations initiated against ethical officials and sustained, in several cases, over many years, even after the official has left the employ of the state.

Corruption manifests not only through completed financial transactions, but also via attempted interference, coercive influence, retaliatory investigations and institutional intimidation directed at ethical officials resisting politically connected interests. Present anti-corruption systems, Anon emphasises, 'continue to place disproportionate accountability on administrators while failing to adequately address political interference and patronage'. Kolevsohn's commentary is apposite:

> *Unless governance systems nurture and protect ethical resistance as vigorously as they pursue corruption, the public sector will continue to destroy and lose many of its finest to the grave dug by corrupt officials, and corrupt politicians too.*

Robertson: *The Burden of Bearing Witness: South African Journalism, Corruption and the Case for a Protected Fourth Estat*e

'Accountability journalism', Robertson astutely remarks, 'does not merely report on consequences, it creates them'.

> *The media's role in combating corruption is not supplementary to anti-corruption policy—it is one of its essential preconditions. The Muldergate scandal that shifted the apartheid state toward reform was driven by journalism, not by parliamentary oversight. The Zondo Commission that documented the full scale of state capture was built on an evidentiary record assembled by journalists, not by prosecutors. The ministers, officials, and corporations that repaid public funds did so because journalism made the alternative, continued concealment, impossible. Transparency enforced by journalism is the mechanism through which accountability becomes real.*

But the ‘price paid by those who tell the truth about what the state does when no one is watching’ incurs grave costs. The two whistleblowers who leaked the Gupta files have fled the country and remain in exile. The toll on Greg Marinovich (photographer) and Professor Kate Alexander who worked on the Marikana massacre was severe. Alexander’s ‘office was broken into, electric fences were cut, laptops were stolen, and data was compromised’. Marinovich moved his family to the United States after securing a Harvard fellowship in 2013.

The state can assist investigative, watchdog and accountability journalism through feasible and practical financial and regulatory interventions. Firstly, ‘improved access to information must become enforceable, not aspirational’. Delayed enforcement and non-compliance have consistently undermined the Promotion of Access to Information Act (2000). Secondly, ‘whistleblowers and journalists must be legally and physically protected, not merely rhetorically’.

> *The Protected Disclosures Act (2000) has repeatedly failed those it was designed to protect. A revised framework must include judicial oversight of whistleblower identities, criminalisation of source exposure, and mandatory physical security assessments for journalists under threat.*

<u>Positive Outlier</u>

Cullinan: *Small Town, Big Shakes*

Matt Cullinan is a town planner and presently the chief executive officer of the Atlantis Special Economic Zone for Green Technologies in the Western Cape. Predating the democratic transition, Cullinan had an ardent desire to transform apartheid’s spatial and human geography towards equality and equity as a technocrat, not a politician. The first democratic election and post-1994 dispensation gave free rein to utopian thinking of the future, but in retrospect, Cullinan writes, at ‘some distance from the scale of need and desperation of the poor Black majority’.

The practitioner essay relates the story of a corrupt Mayor extorting money, a ‘donation’ for the ANC from a small progressive urban planning company consulting in a nationally funded urban development project and insisting that the consultancy work with other local companies. All the companies complained bitterly of being ‘forced’ to pay up or be excluded from projects. The ‘donation’ to the Mayor, some local companies reported, was a regular requirement, often ongoing, to win bids in the municipality. Cullinan reported the Mayor’s ‘donation’ request to the National Treasury, which found its way to the (former) Minister of Finance, Trevor Manuel. The ANC Mayor was summoned to Luthuli House and summarily fired. The executive, government department and political party were aligned in stomping out the corruption. The development project was completed in collaboration with local companies, meeting global standards for quality and professionalism.

Reflecting on current times, Cullinan lays the blame for the nationwide failure of municipalities squarely on the shoulders of politicians who are ‘demanding payment and misdirecting public funds—to finance their political parties and pay salaries to functionaries’. The ‘real, large-scale theft is driven by politicians’, bending procurement and contracting processes ‘to their ends’. Cullinan worries about organised crime operating in the ‘tender space’, demanding their 30 per cent for local content from contractors.

> *The 30 per cent [local content requirement] has evolved into a tool for extortion and rent seeking. Localisation through procurement has also been warped whereby the requirement for a local supplier is used to inflate tender prices with local politicians taking their cut.*

<u>Island of Integrity</u>

Anon: *My focus is on tackling corruption decisively, investigating high-profile cases thoroughly, and ensuring that justice is served*

Khan and Kolevsohn interviewed a senior official from the Special Investigating Unit (SIU), generally regarded as one of South Africa’s most effective anti-corruption agencies. The SIU is an ‘island of integrity’ in the context of systemic corruption due to its ‘impressive track record of recovering stolen state funds, pursuing civil litigation through a Special Tribunal, and preventing further financial losses’ (Bruce, Ashton and Frank 2025, 04).

In an interview and separate commentary section, Khan and Kolevsohn attribute the reputation of the SIU to ‘building our own timber’, its record of success, the employee value proposition, thinking out of the box, financial autonomy, contractual flexibility and the whole-of-society approach to address corruption. There is the ever-present danger, Khan and Kolevsohn alert, of islands of integrity being washed away, like with the disbandment of the Scorpions (Directorate of Special Operations in the National Prosecuting Authority) by legislation in January 2009, and the December 2024 disbandment of KwaZulu-Natal's Political Killings Task Team (PKKT). Specialised agencies 'can have some impact but are not the solution to corruption within a country' (Fukuyama and Recanatini 2018, 58), particularly in highly corrupt environments with strong incentives among vested elite to stall, delay, undo and reverse reform.

Contemporary pockets of effectiveness/islands of integrity (POEs and ISI) are criticised for reproducing the 'notion of an elite bureaucratic caste introduced under colonial rule as much as any commitment to building a rational-legal order' (Hickey and Pruce 2023, 19). Expatriates serving in the far-flung colonies of the Empire, anthropologists remind, 'expected an all-inclusive package with official residences, personnel, and foreign allowances' ((Bierschenk 2010, cited in Hickey and Pruce 2023, 19). 'Numerous studies emphasize that such agencies [POEs] thrive on an elitist sense of otherness in relation to the rest of the civil service, a status underwritten by higher rates of remuneration, better conditions of service, and parallel processes of hiring and promotion' (Hickey and Pruce 2023, 19).

Section Five: Political economy and political opportunity analyses meet, nationally and internationally

Adam: *A Practitioner's Encounter of Corruption: A Passage from Apartheid to Post-Apartheid Corruption*

Reflecting on close to thirty years of government employment, Adam, in his practitioner essay writes:

> *I have come to appreciate that corruption does not define the state. It is the predictable consequence of insulated administrative, coercive, and political power, particularly when inequality is normalised. Corruption emerges when these powers become concentrated, unaccountable, and permanent.*

Like several contributors in this Special Issue, Adam contends that compliance-driven anti-corruption reforms have failed to alter the underlying incentives and power relations sustaining corruption. While Khan and Scholtz register Mettler's alarming concern over the failure of tightened governance measures, disciplinary actions, and civil and criminal proceedings for not sending 'strong messages that wrongful acts and behaviour is under scrutiny', Adam argues:

> *This arsenal and regime are simply not working to stem the tide of corruption, as they are either ignored or loopholes are mined for legal corruption through opaque administrative actions and self-serving bureaucracies enabled by short-term enrichment, especially in the property sector.*

Adam writes that corruption arises from irregular appointments that are 'undermining social justice that democratised [post-apartheid] administrations are compelled to deliver in spatial and development plans'.

> *Consequently, public resources are squandered, and communities become victims of haphazard and chaotic spatial decisions of municipalities. This is a national problem and when combined with weak land use control, results in formal and informal settlements found on land prone to environmental disasters and residents fall prey to extra-judicial and violent rent-seekers.*

Adam's most scathing comments are reserved for officials in the building plans and land use application unit of municipalities.

> *Officials carry approval stamps and certificates of compliance in their private vehicles. Once a plan is registered on the system, these officials effectively bypass it, issuing their own approvals for fees for as low as R5000 to unknown numbers for larger-scale projects. In Tshwane, there are buildings with legal authorisations that do not comply with the zoning of the property or the building regulations, creating structural safety concerns for the occupants, liability considerations, and revenue loss for the municipality.*

In the absence of reforms to equalise power imbalances in spatial plans, development planning, and public policy, outcomes, Adams reminds, 'will continue to be subverted and corrupted at the behest, instruction, and financing by those with influence' and undue influence, formal and informal, legal and illegal, licit and illicit (see Khan and Scholtz).

Moloi and Kolevsohn: *From Proposal to Practice: The Evolution of the International Anti-Corruption Court Campaign*

Today's dominant pattern of statecraft primarily serves rich bankers, tax dodgers, foreign tycoons, and kleptocrats who live in a separate world from ordinary citizens with different rules and heavily twisted institutions. Kleptocrats treat public funds as personal property; embezzle, bribe and launder money at an unprecedented scale; capture the media, police and courts to maintain power and evade justice. Their grand corruption fuels poverty, conflict and human rights violations. The International Anti-Corruption Court (IACCourt) is a proposed new international tribunal designed specifically to tackle the impunity of kleptocrats. Although 186 countries have signed the United Nations Convention against Corruption (2003), local courts are often unable or unwilling to prosecute their own leaders. No international court currently has a mandate to prosecute high-level corruption. The International Criminal Court deals with crimes like

ISSN 1013-1108

genocide, not corruption. Kleptocrats and their enablers (lawyers, bankers) operate across borders, hiding stolen assets in international financial centres. A global court offers a politically neutral forum for prosecution and asset recovery.

In a practitioner essay, Moloi and Kolevsohn trace the evolution of the initiative to establish the IACCourt as a response to persistent gaps in the global enforcement of anti-corruption. Drawing on an interview with Justice Richard Goldstone, Chair Emeritus of the IACCourt Treaty Committee, together with analysis of the evolving treaty development process, the paper maps the evolution of the proposal through engagement with governments, legal experts and civil society. Successive iterations of the treaty for the proposed court have negotiated thorny matters pertaining to sovereignty, political legitimacy, complementarity, selective international justice and enforcement. Attention is devoted to the Court's expanding focus on asset recovery, professional enablers and African participation in the development of the treaty as mechanisms to strengthen legitimacy and enhance effectiveness. The significance of the IACCourt, argue Moloi and Kolevsohn, is its proposed jurisdiction fashioned through inclusive consultation and institutional learning. Sustainable international accountability depends, they claim, upon credible institutions, political legitimacy and broad civil society ownership.

Conclusion

Anti-corruption reforms fail due to their inability to reallocate power and discipline entrenched local actors. For Khan and Patel, a corrupt narrow elite defending wealth, opposed to redistribution, and bent on reproducing inequality has captured the state and derailed social justice. For Mohamed, corruption and state capture are symptoms of a broader extractive political and economic system rather the cause of economic decline. Hermanus contests the mainstream binary state capture scholarship (captured versus uncaptured state), alerting instead to its emergence, recession and reconfiguration whose identification is not reliant on a 'tome of legal evidence of grand corruption'.

The papers by Kolevsohn and Martin, Chivandire and Saruchera and Kariuki move away from the fixation of anti-corruption reform on enactment and enforcement to how corruption is constructed, experienced and contested within everyday social life, summoning interventions to shift public meanings, norms and identities, not just laws and sanctions. However, there are 'very few examples of rigorously tested social norms anti-corruption interventions happening in real-world settings and involving the expected beneficiaries' (Kubbe, Camargo and Scharbatke-Church 2024, 435); interventions and outcomes are not easily connected or connected at all (White and Muturi 2023); and the sustainability of interventions is a legitimate concern. Moreover, beyond describing the mechanisms and instances where local norms incentivise and fuel corruption, there is little evidence, as to what works in contexts, like South Africa, of entrenched forms of corruption where it is 'embedded in wider social and cultural practices and understandings' (Camargo 2022, 05). Over and above being a 'teleological trap' is the 'large simplification' (Torsello 2014, 13) in the social norms literature that pays no heed to the 'nature, characteristics, patterns and organisational structure' of corruption (Sissener 2001, 01).

Social behavioural change communication betrays a naïve, but strategic, ignorance of bureaucracies tied mainly to the myopic edict and verdict of official organograms and deviation from Weberian norms. Everywhere, the 'core component' of bureaucracies includes 'conflict, negotiations, alliances and power relations' (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2021, 01). In contrast to shallow and hollowed out bureaucracies marching to the drum beat of disembodied official norms, anthropologists remind of 'several ideal types of bureaucracy and not just one'; every 'concrete bureaucracy deviates from its ideal type'; official norms co-occur with different practical norms; each state profession has its own bureaucratic organisation; and that 'sedimentation of distinct bureaucratic procedures is the rule rather than exception' (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2021, 23). In sum, bureaucracies, 'at work', dialectically combine 'formal organisation and real practice, and official regulation and informal norms' (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2021, 01)—they are 'complex multi-regulatory landscapes' comprising 'a multiplicity of sources of norms'; systems of laws and regulations are 'layered'; legal terms that are not strictly defined; and rapidly changing legal contexts that must be negotiated (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2021, 09).

Anti-corruption reformers display 'serious ignorance of the situations that they claim to be reforming' (Blundo, Olivier de Sardan, Arifari and Alou 2006, 06). Disturbingly, and by no stretch of fact, the defining feature of mainstream approaches to combatting corruption is its colonial overreach and imperial impulses gravitating around 'forcing' (Smart and Zerilli 2014, 223) Western rational-bureaucratic organisation, cultural categories and jurisprudence on the 'Other' typified by 'deviation from an ideal or norm' (Anders and Nuitjen 2008, 07). Public office-, public interest- and market-centered definitions of corruption confront the same problem as legal or moral definitions of corruption—indifference to different social and moral norms (Sissener 2001)—and are therefore, 'not viable alternative' (Anders and Nuitjen 2007, 07).

This ignorance is coupled with hypocrisy. Although 'arm's-length relations between political parties, officials and business associations' is recommended for the Global South in conventional anti-corruption political economy models (Kelsall 2011, 77), witnessed in the North today is the rapid formation of 'new fusions' of state, state-owned and private corporations in artificial intelligence, national security agencies and defence contractors, tech tycoons and mining and energy conglomerates (Davies, Barry, Alami, Ashenden and McGoey 2026, 22). These segments of capital with close ties to state power have presided over the 'emergence of new class entanglements between oligarchic elites and the far right' offering opportunities for unprecedented enrichment and for 'fascistic elites to capture the commanding heights of the economy, with direct access to authoritarian powers of the state' (Davies et al. 2026). Anti-corruption reformers reliant on outdated models of political economy advocate arm's-length relations, 'but in reality, subsidies, kickbacks and preferential treatment for national firms' is evidence of a separation that never occurred in both the twentieth century and twenty-first century, including under western neoliberalism and President Trump's 'cronyism, exempting politically connected firms and allowing them to game the system' (Davies et al. 2026, 24).

In conclusion, whether viewed through the lenses of political economy, social norms, institutional design and practitioner insights, corruption reflects unequal power relations and unaccountable concentrations of political authority. Sound governance—governing within the four corners of statutes, regulations and bylaws—and social justice—reallocating power and disciplining vested interests—are inseparable dimensions of the democratic project. The contributions in this Special Issue look beyond corruption—betrayal of the democratic promise—to its defence and renewal by ethical officials, principled practitioners, civil society activism, the advocacy work of non-governmental organisations, a vigilant media and committed academics. Anti-corruption theory and practice could immeasurably benefit by nurturing dialogue and building bridges between officials, practitioners, activists, advocates, journalists and academics to close the gap between top-down anti-corruption policies and legislation with ground-level realities. This Special Issue is a modest first step in nurturing dialogue and building bridges to reconnect sound governance with social justice, both nationally and internationally.

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ISSN 1013-1108