

'The Civil Service has become a Graveyard for Competent and Ethical Officials': Interview plus commentary¹

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1. Introduction

Anti-corruption discourse in South Africa has frequently focused on institutional reform, procurement regulation, forensic investigations and the prosecution of wrongdoing. Yet considerably less attention has been given to the lived experiences of public officials who resist political pressure within governance systems shaped by patronage, factionalism and asymmetrical accountability (Labik Amanquandor 2024).

A senior public official, who asked to remain anonymous, resisted political pressure during a major emergency procurement process and argues that anti-corruption systems in South Africa continue to place disproportionate accountability on administrators, while failing to adequately address political interference and patronage. Reflecting on the events that led to suspension, prolonged litigation, reputational damage and severe financial strain, the interviewee maintains that procurement systems become especially vulnerable during periods of crisis and emergency intervention.

The official served as accounting officer of a state-owned infrastructure entity during an environmental crisis in one of South Africa's provinces. While acknowledging the urgency of the crisis, the interviewee became increasingly concerned about pressure from political actors to direct substantial emergency funding toward a predetermined technological solution that, according to the official, had not undergone sufficient testing or lawful procurement processes.

The interview revealed how corruption may manifest not only through completed financial transactions, but through attempted interference, coercive influence, retaliatory investigations and institutional intimidation directed at officials who resist politically connected interests.

2. The environmental crisis and the politics of procurement

The events described in the interview unfolded during a period of environmental crisis in one of South Africa's provinces, when public pressure for rapid intervention created an environment of urgency within the responsible public institution. Emergency contexts frequently require accelerated procurement processes and extraordinary state responses. However, these conditions can also create opportunities for political interference, weakened oversight, and irregular decision-making (Kuwali 2024).

The interviewee explained that the relevant department sought to direct emergency funding toward the political authority's preferred solution. While acknowledging the seriousness of the crisis and the need for intervention, the official became concerned that the proposed response was narrowly focussed on a single technological approach, rather than a broader range of interventions. According to the interviewee:

Emergency intervention requires multiple options, including infrastructure upgrades and demand management, but none of these were seriously considered.

The official also argued that the technology being promoted had not been adequately tested within the South African context, yet pressure mounted to ensure that the institution allocated a significant proportion of the available funding toward that specific intervention. The interviewee described receiving quotations from a service provider that had not been formally briefed through the institution's procurement processes. More concerning, the quotations were allegedly addressed to the executive authority's office first before being copied to the entity itself. This raised immediate concerns regarding procurement interference and the blurring of lines between political

¹ To protect the interviewee's anonymity, certain identifying contextual details have been generalised or omitted without altering the substance of the events described. The accompanying commentary reflects the views of the author solely and should not be interpreted as representing those of the interviewee or the interviewee's current or former employer.

oversight and administrative implementation.

The official interpreted this as evidence that the procurement outcome was effectively predetermined. Rather than allowing technical evaluations and lawful procurement systems to guide decision-making, the process appeared to be driven externally through political influence. Public procurement systems are designed to ensure transparency, fairness and value for money. However, the interview demonstrates how emergency procurement may become vulnerable when political pressure overrides institutional process and oversight mechanisms weaken (Ambe and Badenhorst-Weiss 2012).

3. Resisting political pressure

The interviewee described the decision to resist the proposed procurement arrangement as both professional and ethical. As accounting officer, the official believed there was a legal and governance obligation to protect the institution and ensure compliance with procurement legislation. Therefore, the official instructed the administration to pursue an open tender process that would consider multiple solutions rather than privileging a single provider or technology.

For the interviewee, this became the turning point in the conflict. The interview reveals how governance resistance frequently occurs within systems characterised by informal pressure rather than explicit written instruction. The official recalled conversations with political intermediaries and advisors who allegedly indicated that cooperation would reduce political pressure, while resistance would lead to institutional consequences.

According to the interviewee:

I was explicitly told that if I simply allocated the funds as instructed, the executive authority would “be off my back”.

Recognising that the situation was escalating, the official began preserving documentary evidence, including SMS messages and audio recordings of conversations with senior intermediaries. These recordings were not initially intended for public release but were collected as a form of self-protection.

The interview highlights how ethical resistance within politically contested institutions often depends on individual officials willing to enforce governance boundaries, despite significant personal and professional risk.

4. Retaliation, suspension and malicious investigations

The institutional reprisals experienced by the official following resistance to political pressure constitute one of the most striking dimensions of the narrative. The interviewee described being suspended without charges, subjected to prolonged disciplinary processes and forced into expensive legal battles over several years. Criminal and civil proceedings were reportedly initiated but ultimately failed.

The official recalled:

I won through the labour dispute mechanisms and the courts, but only after years of financial and emotional strain.

The interviewee estimated personal legal costs at more than R2 million and described nearly three years without stable income. The consequences extended beyond finances. The official reported severe reputational damage, loss of residential property (home) and the emotional toll of rebuilding a professional identity and brand-new home after years of institutional conflict.

Beyond the legal and professional consequences, the interview also reveals the emotional exhaustion associated with prolonged institutional conflict. Years of litigation, uncertainty, financial instability and reputational attack fundamentally altered the official's personal and professional life. These experiences reflect broader patterns identified in South African whistleblowing research, where individuals who expose corruption frequently experience institutional retaliation, professional isolation, reputational harm, financial hardship and inadequate legal and institutional protection (Calitz 2023; Radulović 2023).

The interview also referred to ‘malicious investigations’. According to the official, disciplinary processes, forensic investigations and legal proceedings become weaponised against ethical officials who obstruct politically connected interests.

The official argued:

We urgently need scrutiny of malicious investigations. These are often used to remove ethical officials and waste public resources.

Investigations remain essential accountability tools within democratic systems, however, the interview demonstrates how politically motivated or strategically weaponised ‘malicious investigations’ undermine accountability and institutional legitimacy. The interviewee proposed stronger oversight mechanisms to evaluate the costs, motivations and outcomes of prolonged investigations—‘malicious investigations’, in particular—initiated against public officials.

5. Procurement governance and institutional boundaries

A central theme emerging from the interview concerns the contested relationship between political authority and administrative autonomy. While executive authorities are expected to provide political oversight and policy direction, accounting officers remain responsible for implementation, financial management and procurement compliance. The interviewee, however, points out that these distinctions are frequently undermined in practice, reflecting broader governance tensions identified during state capture, wherein informal political networks weakened institutional autonomy and procurement integrity (Chipkin and Swilling 2018).

The official describes service providers communicating directly with political principals instead of following institutional procurement channels, while the principal’s advisor openly discussed patronage and political fundraising. The institution’s governing authority was drawn into procurement discussions. According to the interviewee:

The governing authority was not supposed to be discussing a procurement strategy. That’s purely an administrative matter.

The interviewee maintained that all institutional processes remained legally compliant and attracted no adverse audit findings. However, the official also argued that legal compliance alone offered insufficient protection once political interference became entrenched.

6. The collapse of the proposed transaction

The contested transaction never ultimately proceeded, reports the interviewee. According to the interviewee, institutional resistance, media scrutiny and evidence submitted to law-enforcement authorities prevented the implementation of the executive authority’s preferred technology.

The official explained:

The specific technology promoted by the executive authority was never implemented, largely because the matter became public, and I had referred the matter to law enforcement authorities.

Governance systems often focus primarily on completed corruption and financial loss. Yet the interview demonstrates that attempted interference, procurement manipulation and coercive political influence may still cause severe institutional harm even where unlawful transactions are ultimately prevented.

This case illustrates the limitations of anti-corruption frameworks that rely primarily on completed transactions as the basis for accountability. Ethical resistance may successfully prevent corruption yet still expose officials to significant retaliation without generating corresponding legal consequences for those who initiated the pressure.

7. Asymmetrical accountability and political patronage

Reflecting on the broader implications of the case, the interviewee repeatedly returned to the uneven distribution of accountability within South Africa’s governance system. While administrators frequently bear the legal, financial and reputational consequences of governance failures, political actors often remain insulated from equivalent scrutiny or consequence management.

According to the interviewee,

There must be consequences for politicians.

The official argued that existing legislation effectively presumes that corruption ‘starts and ends’ with accounting officers and administrators, despite the central role political actors frequently and regularly play in procurement pressure, appointments and institutional interference.

The interviewee argued that political appointments based on loyalty, rather than competence create reciprocal obligations between politicians and administrators. Individuals appointed through patronage are indebted to political principals, while those who resist political influence are disciplined, suspended and dismissed.

8. Transferable lessons for anti-corruption practice

The interview provides several practical insights into institutional resistance and anti-corruption governance. The official emphasised the importance of procedural compliance, documented communication, written instructions and open tender processes as safeguards against irregular influence. ‘*You must decide early that your reputation is not for sale*’ accords centrality to personal ethical clarity.

Not all administrators possess the financial resources, emotional resilience or institutional support required to survive prolonged retaliation. Without stronger institutional safeguards, ethical resistance is reputationally, professionally, financially, socially and personally destructive—all of which takes many years to repair and restore.

9. Conclusion

This narrative fundamentally challenges simplistic assumptions that corruption is primarily an administrative problem, underscoring instead the systemic relationship between political patronage, institutional interference and asymmetrical accountability. Governance failures, the interviewee demonstrates, are often embedded within informal networks of influence, reciprocal obligation and political protection, rather than isolated acts of individual misconduct. Anti-corruption systems may unintentionally discourage ethical resistance when officials who refuse unlawful instructions face severe professional, financial and personal consequences, while political actors remain comparatively insulated from accountability. Procurement reform cannot be decoupled from structural accountability mechanisms that apply equally to executive authority and administrators and extend protections to lawful and ethical officials who resist improper pressure, rather than punishing them, at the expense of the taxpayer—and not the executive authority—over a prolonged period, harshly and maliciously.

The official laments that ‘*the civil service is the graveyard for competent and ethical officials*’. 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, who with endless public money undermine accountability and institutional legitimacy.

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