

'My Focus is on Tackling Corruption Decisively, Investigating High Profile Cases Thoroughly, and Ensuring that Justice is Served': Interview plus commentary¹

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.v48i1.7477>

1. Introduction

The Special Investigating Unit (SIU) is 'reputed to be one of the more effective anti-corruption agencies in South Africa – an 'island of integrity' in the context of systemic corruption' (Bruce, Ashton and Frank 2025, 04). Islands of integrity supposedly 'reduce corruption despite being surrounded by endemic corruption' (Zúñiga 2018).

Established in 1997, by President Nelson Mandela, under the SIU and the Special Tribunals Act, Act No. 74 of 1996 (SIU Act), the SIU's primary mandate

...is to investigate serious allegations of corruption, malpractice and maladministration in the administration of State institutions, State assets and public money as well as any conduct which may seriously harm the interests of the public, and to recover any financial losses suffered by State institutions through civil litigation (SIU 2026).

A Senior Official at the SIU—whose identity is withheld—reminds that the 'SIU was initially constituted as a Commission that moved to be permanent', however, with its 'own salary scales and grading systems because we are not part of the public service'. So, when moving from Commission to 'permanent',

...some of the acts and or legislation was never changed throughout. So, we continue with the legacy of having it being started as a Commission.

2. Reasons for the success of the SIU

There are many reasons accounting for the success of the SIU—documented in the literature by Bruce et al. (2025)—and confirmed by the Senior Official. SIU's success is attributed to:

- Building our own timber:

Most of our employees stay and develop with us because we invest in them. One of our key approaches is building our own timber. We enrol new recruits into training programmes lasting six months and after this training, we assign them to experienced investigators for mentorship, which enables them to develop and progress. Consequently, our staff often remain with us longer than those we hire who already possess extensive knowledge...We've taken individuals from the streets, giving them opportunities they never imagined—many had no prior experience in investigations. Yet, because they were willing to learn, they succeeded. In contrast, hiring more experienced professionals at higher levels often results in higher turnover, as they tend to chase after money rather than commit long-term.

- Record of success:

Our success is rooted in our ability to conduct investigations within a defined timeframe and to deliver outcomes. People are drawn to our success, our model and the way we operate. It's no longer solely about the money. In fact, our salary structures have remained consistent over the years. Many individuals have chosen to join us and even forego higher salaries, because they genuinely want to be part of the SIU. People recognise the SIU as a thriving organisation doing meaningful work. That's when we saw more individuals saying: "This is where I want to be".

¹ The commentary in this paper is solely those of the authors (Khan and Kolevsohn) and not that of the SIU official nor the SIU.

- The employee value proposition:

In terms of our employee value proposition, we prioritise taking care of all our members. We ensure that our systems and processes are effective, transparent and well-defined. This way anyone who joins knows what is expected of them, and we foster a supportive environment that encourages growth and excellence.

- Thinking out of the box:

We always remind them to think out of the box. We empower our members to innovate to conduct investigations we hired them to do and perform their duties effectively. We provide them with the most necessary tools and make sure that they are able to deliver.

- Financial autonomy and contractual flexibility

We are not part of government but get 40 per cent of our budget from government and the rest through recovery projects through project financing. The current design gives us significant leverage. This model allows us to contract and expand flexibly, unlike if you were given 100 staff, maybe for example, 10 000, and told this is your budget and you are stuck with it. And you appoint people, and do not even have a room to manoeuvre. Currently, we get the budget and as a result, when we get more work, we are able to invoice and able to get to appoint more people, because if we have got more work, we are able to get in people and those people, we align them to our needs, and we align them with the period of the work that we want them to do. If we want them for six months, then we are able to if the project is for six months. We are able to appoint them for six months, then after six months we let them go. During the six months, they are able to claim the costs from the Department. So, for me, I think the model works. But the only challenge is where the person that you are investigating is the one who is supposed to pay you.

- Whole-of-Society Approach:

Most individuals involved in corruption are known to us—they are not hidden. We have established forums that bring together civil society, law enforcement, labour and other stakeholders to collaborate on combatting corruption. By fostering closer collaboration and engagement, we increase our chances of solving cases and preventing corruption.

The interviewee repeatedly returned to the importance of credibility, institutional trust and consistency in anti-corruption work. For the official, investigations alone are not sufficient—institutions must be perceived as ethical, professional and operationally independent. Public confidence in anti-corruption institutions depends not only on arrests or proclamations, but on whether ordinary citizens believe cases are pursued consistently and without fear or favour.

The interviewee acknowledges the practical realities confronting investigators operating in politically contested environments. High-profile investigations often generate institutional resistance, political pressure, reputational attacks and attempts to undermine investigators themselves. However, the interviewee insists, anti-corruption institutions cannot become paralysed by these pressures:

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

This emphasis on institutional credibility and operational resilience partly explains why the SIU continues to be regarded by many observers as one of the few anti-corruption institutions in South Africa that has retained meaningful public trust, despite broader governance deterioration.

The interviewee's reflections on institutional culture, operational flexibility and organisational independence reopen longstanding debates—dating back to 1999—about whether South Africa should consolidate anti-corruption efforts within a single agency or strengthen a network of partially independent institutions with overlapping mandates (discussed below).

3. Anti-corruption agency (ACA)

The SIU, it is argued, 'fills a strategic gap in South Africa's anti-corruption institutional architecture' (Ashton 2025). The United Nations Convention against Corruption (2003) provides that South Africa should have a dedicated anti-corruption prevention agency. The SIU's reputation for effectiveness could explain why the President's National Anti-Corruption Advisory Council (NACAC) recommended the SIU to become South Africa's new dedicated anti-corruption agency (ACA). At the National Anti-Corruption Dialogue in December 2024, NACAC proposed a new independent Chapter 9 ACA with preventative and investigative powers. The functions of the SIU are to be absorbed into the Office of Public Integrity (OPI), 'enabling the new agency to start immediately' (Ashton 2025).

The interviewee welcomed the establishment of the OPI, which '*is still in the conceptual stage*'.

We believe that once implementation begins, we will be able to develop and clarify its functions further. As a Chapter 9 institution, the OPI must operate independently, similar to the Public Protector. This means it should conduct its investigations autonomously and issue reports without political interference. The reports should be submitted directly to the public and relevant authorities, not through any political channels. In terms of the proposal, it appears to suggest a dual model: the OPI could still apply for a Proclamation through the President, who retains the authority to issue it, or the head of the OPI could have the power to declare a Proclamation and operate independently. This flexibility aims to balance the need for independence with the existing legal framework, ensuring the OPI can function effectively and without undue influence.

Debates about whether South Africa should have a single ACA go back to 1999 (Camerer 1999). In 2011, the National Planning Commission concluded that establishing a single central ACA was not a ‘viable option’ given South Africa’s institutional context. Instead, it warned that political interference, executive overreach, fragmented mandates and weak coordination between investigative and prosecutorial agencies undermined the country’s ability to combat corruption effectively (National Planning Commission 2012, 431–434). As opposed to a single ACA, the National Planning Commission favoured building ‘systemic resilience against interference’ through a multiplicity of agencies operating within a framework of institutional checks and balances (National Planning Commission 2012, 448). In 2024, the Institute for Security Studies ‘found no evidence globally that a single agency model outperforms a multi-agency approach’ (Ashton 2024).

According to Doig and Norris (2012), an ACA signals that government takes anti-corruption efforts seriously. The ACA can be insulated against undue influences via a high(er) degree of specialisation, autonomy from other agencies and departments to undertake investigation with skilled expertise. A completely new institution will enjoy a “fresh start”, free from corruption and other problems that may be present in existing institutions. In addition, it has greater public credibility, and it can be extended enhanced security protection. With greater political, legal and public accountability, there is likely to be improved clarity in the assessment of its progress, successes and failures. Task-specific resources will be used, and officials will not be subject to the competing priorities of general law enforcement, audit and similar agencies. Finally, it incorporates an additional safeguard against corruption in that it will be in a position to monitor the conventional law enforcement agencies.

4. No standardised ACA model

There is ‘no standardised model of what an ACA should look like’ (De Sousa 2010, 12).

Few have been created from scratch with a statutory act. Many are formed from ombudsman offices, special units in the police forces or the prosecution offices...In practice, however, many of these bodies were conceived without a strategy or policy to justify their existence. Format preceded function instead of the other way around (De Sousa 2010, 12–13).

Moreover, there is little ‘acknowledgement of the challenges of their long-term development or of the frequent failure of ACAs elsewhere’ (Johnston 2025, 556) in tackling crime effectively, investigating high-profile cases thoroughly and ensuring that justice is served. Police corruption, money laundering and financial crime today pose significant challenges to ACAs that focus exclusively on public sector corruption (Quah 2024).

5. Limited effectiveness of ACAs

The preponderance of literature on an international scale point to the ‘limited effectiveness’ of ACAs in marked contrast to their adoption (De Vrieze and Glušac 2025, 32). Specialised agencies ‘can have some impact but are not the solution to corruption within a country’ (Fukuyama and Recanatini 2018, 58).

Successful ACAs require solid political backing at all levels, major resources, genuine independence, the power to prosecute criminal cases (or at least the expectation that prosecutors will routinely move ahead with cases assembled by the ACA), and deep-rooted social credibility. Should events and evidence demand it, an ACA must be able to investigate and prosecute the same political figures who brought it into being and resist elite demands that it pursues regime critics. These are difficult standards to meet, particularly where power is personalized, resources are scarce, non-corrupt paths of advancement are few, and institutions are weak (which is to say, in most societies where corruption is a pressing concern). Even ACAs that are not manipulated from above routinely engage in “reform theatre” rather than taking meaningful action.

6. Washing away islands of integrity

Many ACAs have a ‘difficult life and are vulnerable to repeated attacks from politicians seeking to assert their influence’ (Quah 2024, 5). South Africa has a history of creating islands of integrity that were ‘washed away’ (Passas 2010, 02), with little reference to the ‘assessment of concrete performance indicators’ (De Sousa 2010, 20). South Africa’s Directorate of Special Operations (Scorpions) was dissolved through legislation—National Prosecuting Authority Amendment Act (Act 56 of 2008) and South African Police Service Amendment Act (Act 57 of 2008)—with disbandment taking effect in early 2009. Before its closure, the Scorpions ‘built an international reputation as a trailblazing criminal investigations and prosecutions unit that effectively used the latest techniques to tackle the most complex crimes’ (National Prosecuting Authority 2022 as cited in Dolley 2025).

The Scorpions were controversial among politicians and government officials. Echoing the African National Congress’s (ANC) complaints about the tactics of the Scorpions, the South African Communist Party (2007) expressed its ‘principled’ concern about the ‘conduct of the Scorpions’ generally and their ‘Hollywood style of operation’. The political controversy eventually led to the ANC’s 2007 Polokwane Conference decision to disband the Scorpions related to leading investigations against high-profile ANC figures like former Deputy President Jacob Zuma, and the prosecution of Jackie Selebi (former National Commissioner of the South African Police Service) and Tony Yengeni (former ANC Member of Parliament). At the Conference, the ANC Secretary General stated: ‘We created a monster, and we must undo it’ (cited in LegalBrief Forensic 2026). In April 2005, President Mbeki appointed Judge Sisi Khampepe to head a commission of inquiry to review the mandate and location of the Scorpions. The Commission’s report was released in May 2008.

While the Khampepe Commission was hearing evidence on the future of the Scorpions, prominent members across the ANC and government were calling for the Scorpions to be absorbed into the police with whom they shared a tense relationship (Mashele 2006). In his essay “Scorpions’ Birth Was Poisoned,” Steinberg (2007) argues that although conceived as an elite anti-corruption and organised crime agency, it was established in an intensely contested political environment, was without sustained political protection, and struggled to secure the institutional space necessary to independently investigate powerful interests. Its demise reflected institutional vulnerabilities present from its inception, more than political hostility at the point of disbandment. These structural weaknesses left the organisation vulnerable to later political intervention, despite its operational successes.

Addressing Members of Parliament recently, Firoz Cachalia, the now Acting Minister of Police, dubbed the 2009 disbandment of the Scorpions a ‘mistake’, because ‘it had a lot of success’ and because it exposed South Africa to criminality: ‘[W]e can see that clearly... given where we are now and the problems, we’re facing now’ (cited in Dolley 2025). Not unlike the disbandment of the Scorpions in 2009, the Acting Minister condemned the December 2024 disbandment of KwaZulu-Natal’s highly effective Political Killings Task Team (PKTT) by the Minister of Police, Senzo Mchunu—the now ‘semi-retired Minister of Police, facing charges of complicity in a nationwide criminal death squad’ (Duigan 2026, 69)—as not being done ‘the right way’ and was ‘unwise’ (cited in Dolley 2025). Parliament’s Ad Hoc Committee’s draft report (2026) investigated Mchunu’s conduct in the PKTT’s disbandment:

...concluded that ‘the evidentiary record discloses a serious and multilayered institutional crisis’ and that the directive disbanding the PKTT was issued without consultation with the National Commissioner, the President, the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), the State Security Agency (SSA) or the Civilian Secretariat (cited in Pillay 2026).

7. Conclusion

The disbandment of the Scorpions (2009) and the PKTT (2024)—the former deemed a “mistake” and latter “unwise” by Acting Minister of Police, Firoz Cachalia—raises serious questions about the operation and viability of ACAs in highly corrupt environments with strong incentives to stall, delay and upend anti-corruption reform, because resources are scarce and non-corrupt paths of advancement are few. Police corruption—“blue capture”—money laundering and financial crime pose significant challenges to ACAs. The future ACA architecture must ensure that function precedes institutional format, however, with no standardised models. The challenge is, therefore, not simply creating new agencies—a case of format potentially preceding function in current debates—but ensuring that existing islands of integrity are protected, not compromised by the political and institutional tides they were and are designed to withstand.

Regardless of where political or institutional pressure originates, ACAs must retain operational autonomy, organisational flexibility, financial independence and public legitimacy necessary to investigate corruption consistently and with material consequence. Accountability gains and losses in public legitimacy depend on investigation, exposure, visible consequences, institutional repair and democratic renewal. These are not impossible standards as there is ample convincing precedent in South Africa, before islands of integrity were washed away, and is vindicated by the present effectiveness and success of the SIU.

References

- Ashton, C. 2025. SA's Special Investigating Unit shows how corruption can be beaten. *Polity*. 15 July 2025. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.polity.org.za/article/sas-special-investigating-unit-shows-how-corruption-can-be-beaten-2025-07-15> [Accessed on 1 June 2026].
- — —. 2024. A single anti-corruption agency is a high-risk option for South Africa. *Institute for Security Studies Today*. 26 August 2024. [Online]. Available at: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/a-single-anti-corruption-agency-is-a-high-risk-option-for-south-africa> [Accessed on 1 June 2026].
- Bruce, D., Ashton, C. and Frank, C. 2025. "The Future of South Africa's Special Investigating Unit." *ISS Policy Brief* 198, July. Institute for Security Studies. ISS policy brief.
- Camerer, L. 1999. "Tackling the Multi-Headed Dragon: Evaluating Prospects for a Single Anti-Corruption Agency in South Africa." *ISS Occasional Paper* 38. Institute for Security Studies. ISS paper.
- De Sousa, L. 2010. "Anti-Corruption Agencies: Between Empowerment and Irrelevance." *Crime, Law and Social Change* 53: 5–22.
- De Vrieze, F., and Glušac, L. 2025. "Parliament's Interaction with Anti-Corruption Agencies: It Is Your Own Device, Make It Powerful." In *The Routledge Handbook of Anti-Corruption Research and Practice*, edited by J. Pozsgai-Alvarez and R. Bratu, 32–44. Routledge.
- Doig, A., and Norris, D. 2012. "Improving Anti-Corruption Agencies as Organisations." *Journal of Financial Crime* 19 (3): 255–273.
- Dolley, C. 2025. "Scorpions' 2009 Disbandment 'a Mistake, and SA's Problems Prove It'—Firoz Cachalia." *Daily Maverick*, November 5, 2025. Daily Maverick article
- Duigan, R. 2026. "Permanent Oligarchy." *PRISM Magazine*, March 2, 1–76.
- Fukuyama, F. and Recanatini, F. 2018. "Beyond Measurement: What Is Needed for Effective Governance and Anti-Corruption Reforms?" In *Governance Indicators: Approaches, Progress, Promises*, edited by Helmut K. Anheier, Matthias Haber, and Mark A. Kayser, 43–70. Oxford University Press.
- Johnston, M. 2025. "The Instrumentalization of Reform." In *The Routledge Handbook of Anti-Corruption Research and Practice*, edited by J. Pozsgai-Alvarez and R. Bratu, 551–561. Routledge.
- Legalbrief Forensic. 2026. Scorpions a 'Monster' That 'Must Be Undone'. *Legalbrief Forensic*, 3 July. [Online]. Available at: <https://legalbrief.co.za/diary/legalbrief-forensic/story/scorpions-a-monster-that-must-be-undone/> [Accessed 23 August 2026].
- Mashele, P. 2006. "Will the Scorpions Still Sting? The Future of the Directorate of Special Operations." *South African Crime Quarterly* 17: 25–29. [Article PDF](#)
- National Planning Commission. 2012. *National Development Plan 2030: Our Future – Make It Work*. Pretoria: National Planning Commission.
- Passas, N. 2010. "Anti-Corruption Agencies and the Need for Strategic Approaches: A Preface to This Special Issue." *Crime, Law and Social Change* 53: 1–3.
- Pillay, K.B. 2026. "Ad Hoc Committee Draft Report Flags Senzo Mchunu's Conduct in Disbanding PKTT without Consultation." *Briefly*, May 29, 2026. Briefly article.
- Quah, J.S.T. 2024. "Anti-Corruption Agencies." In *Elgar Encyclopaedia of Corruption and Society*, edited by Luís de Sousa and Susana Corrado, 5–8. Edward Elgar Publishing..
- South African Communist Party. 2007. *SACP statement regarding latest developments at the NPA*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.sacp.org.za/docs/pr/2007/pr1009.html> [Accessed on 1 June 2026].
- Special Investigating Unit (SIU). 2026. *About SIU*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.siu.org.za/about-us/> [Accessed on 1 June 2026].
- Steinberg, J. 2007. *Notes from a Fractured Country: Selected Journalism*. Jonathan Ball Publishers.
- Taylor, J.D., and Raga, K. 2014. "A Comparative Analysis of the Implementation of Anti-Corruption Legislation by Anti-Corruption Agencies in the Provinces of the Eastern and Northern Cape." *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 10 (1): 219–240.
- Zúñiga, N. 2018. "The Impact of 'Islands of Integrity'." *U4 Helpdesk Answer* 2018:1. U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, Chr. Michelsen Institute. U4 report.