

# Corruption in South Africa: A Clear Case of Seeing is Not Believing in an African National Congress-led Government

Corrupción en Sudáfrica: un claro  
caso de *ver no es creer* en un gobierno  
encabezado por el Congreso Nacional  
Africano

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 **France Khutso Lavhelani Kgobe**

Master in Development Studies  
The Independent Institute of Education  
Varsity College, Pretoria Campus  
South Africa  
email: [fkgoobe@iie.ac.za](mailto:fkgoobe@iie.ac.za)

## Abstract

This article examines the pervasive issue of corruption in South Africa, particularly under the leadership of the African National Congress (ANC). Despite the ANC's historical significance in transitioning South Africa to democracy and its rhetoric on combating corruption, the reality often suggests that "seeing is not believing." The origins of corruption in South Africa can be traced back to colonial and apartheid-era influences, with the ANC's ascendancy to power marking a critical juncture in this narrative. However, major corruption scandals have severely undermined public trust, exemplified by the state capture during Jacob Zuma's presidency and the Gupta family's alleged corrupt activities. The article also assesses the legal and institutional frameworks for combating corruption in South Africa. It critically evaluates the effectiveness of existing laws and regulations and highlights key challenges, including political interference, lack of transparency, and weak institutions. Proposed reforms aim to enhance the capabilities and transparency of systems, ensure fairness and sustainability, re-establish investigative and prosecutive capabilities, and explore options in civil law and administrative sanctions. It scrutinises the ANC's approach to corruption, questioning whether their actions align with their commitments and reflecting on the role of the Zondo Commission in promoting accountability. In conclusion, the article underscores the pressing need to combat corruption in the interest of South Africa's future and advocates for ongoing efforts to rebuild public trust and integrity. It emphasises that mere visibility of corruption does not equate to belief in the government's commitment to tackle it, thus highlighting the necessity for concrete actions beyond rhetoric.

**Keywords:** Accountability, Anti-corruption measures, Governance, Public integrity, State capture, Transparency.

## Resumen

Este artículo examina el problema generalizado de la corrupción en Sudáfrica, particularmente bajo el liderazgo del Congreso Nacional Africano (ANC). A pesar de la importancia histórica del ANC en la transición de Sudáfrica hacia la democracia y de su retórica en torno a la lucha contra la corrupción, la realidad a menudo sugiere que "ver no es creer". Los orígenes de la corrupción en Sudáfrica pueden rastrear hasta las influencias de la época colonial y del apartheid, siendo la llegada del ANC al poder un punto de inflexión en esta narrativa. Sin embargo, los grandes escándalos de corrupción han socavado gravemente la confianza pública, como lo ejemplifica la captura del Estado durante la presidencia de Jacob Zuma y las supuestas actividades corruptas de la familia Gupta. El artículo también analiza los marcos legales e institucionales para combatir la corrupción en Sudáfrica. Evalúa de manera crítica la eficacia de las leyes y regulaciones existentes y destaca desafíos clave, entre ellos la injerencia política, la falta de transparencia y la debilidad institucional. Las reformas propuestas buscan fortalecer las capacidades y la transparencia de los sistemas, garantizar la equidad y la sostenibilidad, restablecer las funciones de investigación y

enjuiciamiento, así como explorar opciones en materia de derecho civil y sanciones administrativas. Además, se examina el enfoque del ANC frente a la corrupción, cuestionando si sus acciones se corresponden con sus compromisos y reflexionando sobre el papel de la Comisión Zondo en la promoción de la rendición de cuentas. En conclusión, el artículo subraya la necesidad urgente de combatir la corrupción en beneficio del futuro de Sudáfrica y aboga por esfuerzos continuos para reconstruir la confianza pública y la integridad. Se enfatiza que la mera visibilidad de la corrupción no equivale a creer en el compromiso del gobierno para enfrentarla, lo que resalta la necesidad de acciones concretas más allá de la retórica.

**Palabras clave:** Captura del Estado, Gobernanza, Integridad pública, Medidas anticorrupción, Rendición de cuentas.

## Introduction

The African National Congress (ANC) has held power in South Africa since the end of apartheid in 1994. Despite public commitments to combating corruption and promoting ethical behaviour and accountable government (Bruce, 2014), the ANC's shift towards corruption began during South Africa's transition in 1994 (Southall, 2016). The challenges of economic transformation within a racially polarised capitalist economy created opportunities for careerism, personal enrichment, and corruption. The ANC's relationship with large-scale capital was shaped by the necessity for political party funding and the promotion of the National Democratic Revolution through Black Economic Empowerment. This relationship lies at the heart of the ANC's moral dilemmas (Bruce, 2014). Although the ANC-led government has attempted to tackle corruption, allegations against prominent figures, including former President Jacob Zuma, have posed significant obstacles. Nevertheless, the ANC's popularity and dominance in most provinces remain largely unchanged, even as corruption has become widespread and significantly affects South Africa's economic growth (Ofusori, 2020). According to Corruption Watch's latest report, there has been a concerning increase in corruption complaints nationwide, with certain provinces emerging as 'hot spots'. In 2023, the most common types of corruption included maladministration, fraud, employment irregularities, bribery/extortion, and procurement irregularities (Thorne, 2024). For example, in the Western Cape, reports primarily focused on fraud, maladministration, dereliction of duty, abuse of power, and employment irregularities (Daniels, 2024). Despite its prevalence, corruption in South Africa has numerous significant impacts on the country's economy.

Corruption in South Africa carries substantial implications for both its economy and society. Economically, it undermines sustainable development and global competitiveness by creating barriers to both local and foreign investment (Ofusori, 2020). Moreover, corruption diverts public resources away from essential services, such as social grants, education, healthcare, and infrastructure development, resulting in delays, poor quality, and increased costs (Corruption Watch, 2024). Corruption exacerbates income inequality by distorting fiscal policies and redirecting funds away from poverty alleviation programs, such as income grants and housing subsidies (Corruption Watch, 2024). This weakens service delivery and perpetuates social disparities. Corruption also contributes to political instability, eroding public trust in the ability of elected officials to govern effectively (Corruption Watch, 2024). Furthermore, it damages South Africa's international reputation, affecting its rankings in global indices, such as Bloomberg's Misery Index (Ofusori, 2020). Efforts to combat corruption, such as calls for the establishment of an Anti-Corruption Commission, are underway (Breytenbach, 2024). However, corruption remains prevalent and significantly hinders South Africa's advancement. Addressing this issue requires sustained commitment and multifaceted strategies to promote transparency, accountability, and good governance.

This study aims to shed light on the issue of corruption within the South African government, particularly under the leadership of the ANC. This exploration is significant because of its potential impact on South Africa's socio-economic development, political stability, and international standing. By closely examining corruption, the article attempts to promote transparency, foster accountability, and bolster democratic institutions in South Africa. Additionally, it encourages citizen awareness and active engagement in anti-corruption efforts. Through these efforts, the study endeavours to contribute to the ongoing fight against corruption and support progress towards a more just and equitable society. This study is guided by the following research questions: To what extent do institutional weaknesses, political interference, and public perceptions contribute to the persistence of corruption in post-apartheid South Africa under ANC-led governance? Furthermore, how can the Theory of Planned Behaviour explain the normalisation of corrupt practices in this context?

## Problem statement

The roots of corruption in South Africa can be traced back to its colonial and apartheid history. Corruption emerged early during the colonial era, dating back to 1652 when Jan van Riebeeck, dispatched by the Dutch East India Company to colonise the Cap. He was appointed despite having been previously dismissed for personal financial misconduct (Friedman, 2020). The Dutch rule, until 1795, was characterised by tax evasion and corruption among public officials. Subsequent British colonial administration saw public funds directed towards private interests. Throughout the apartheid era, corruption remained prevalent, with black citizens bearing the brunt of exploitation due to their lack of rights and protections. Politicians and officials routinely abused government power for personal gain, particularly during the latter years of apartheid, when efforts to counter international sanctions were often shrouded in secrecy. Despite the transition to democracy, corruption persisted, particularly in the post-apartheid era (Mlambo, Mubecua & Mlambo, 2023). Significant corruption allegations have marred the ANC-led government at its upper echelons of power.

Examining the historical context of corruption in South Africa reveals its deep entrenchment in the country's political landscape, predating the ANC's rule (Friedman, 2020). Therefore, addressing corruption in South Africa entails more than just confronting moral deficiencies; it requires grappling with questions about advancing justice and fairness in society (Bruce, 2014). This understanding is crucial for devising effective strategies to combat corruption and promote good governance. Corruption has pervaded various sectors in South Africa, manifesting as maladministration, fraud, bribery, extortion, and irregularities in employment and procurement. ANC corruption has profoundly impacted South Africa's political terrain, eroded public trust, and undermined the post-apartheid consensus. During Jacob Zuma's presidency, allegations of state capture emerged, involving influential individuals who used their influence to manipulate state institutions, contracts, and policies for personal gain. The Gupta family, with close ties to Zuma, featured prominently in these allegations. Additionally, the ANC government faced scandals over the misappropriation of COVID-19 relief resources, which were diverted or misused instead of aiding struggling citizens. These scandals have had significant repercussions, tarnishing the ANC's reputation and exacerbating public disillusionment with the government.

Several prominent ANC leaders, such as Nathi Mthethwa, Lindiwe Sisulu, Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, Beaty Dzulane, Mnyamezeli Booi, Ruth Bengu, and others, have been implicated in irregular and corrupt practices. State capture

eroded public confidence in the ANC-led government, as citizens observed a systemic disregard for accountability and transparency, leading to widespread disillusionment. These scandals fuelled anger and frustration among South Africans, particularly when relief funds were mismanaged during the COVID-19 crisis. Consequently, trust in the ruling party plummeted. Overall, corruption within the ANC has weakened the party and eroded public trust in South Africa's democratic institutions. Renewal and accountability are essential if the ANC is to regain credibility and address South Africa's pressing challenges. Such revelations have tarnished the ANC's image and contributed to the fragmentation of its traditional support base.

## Theoretical underpinnings – theory of planned behaviour

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), proposed by Icek Ajzen in 1985, evolved from the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), initially introduced by Fishbein and Ajzen in 1980 (Kan & Fabrigar, 2017; Bosnjak, Ajzen, & Schmidt, 2020). Building upon theories of attitudes and attitude change, including learning, expectancy-value, attribution, and consistency theories, the TRA laid the groundwork for the TPB (Kan & Fabrigar, 2017). Ajzen expanded upon the TRA by incorporating the "perceived behavioural control" component, enhancing its ability to predict actual behaviour (Kan & Fabrigar, 2017). The TPB posits that an individual's behavioural intentions comprise three core components: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Brookes, 2023; TheoryHub, n.d.). In the context of corruption within the ANC-led government in South Africa, the TPB provides a useful framework for understanding why corrupt practices persist. By examining individuals' attitudes towards corruption, the influence of societal norms, and their perceived control over engaging in corrupt behaviour, the TPB can provide insights into why corrupt practices continue despite efforts to combat them. Below is an explanation of the principles underlying TPB.

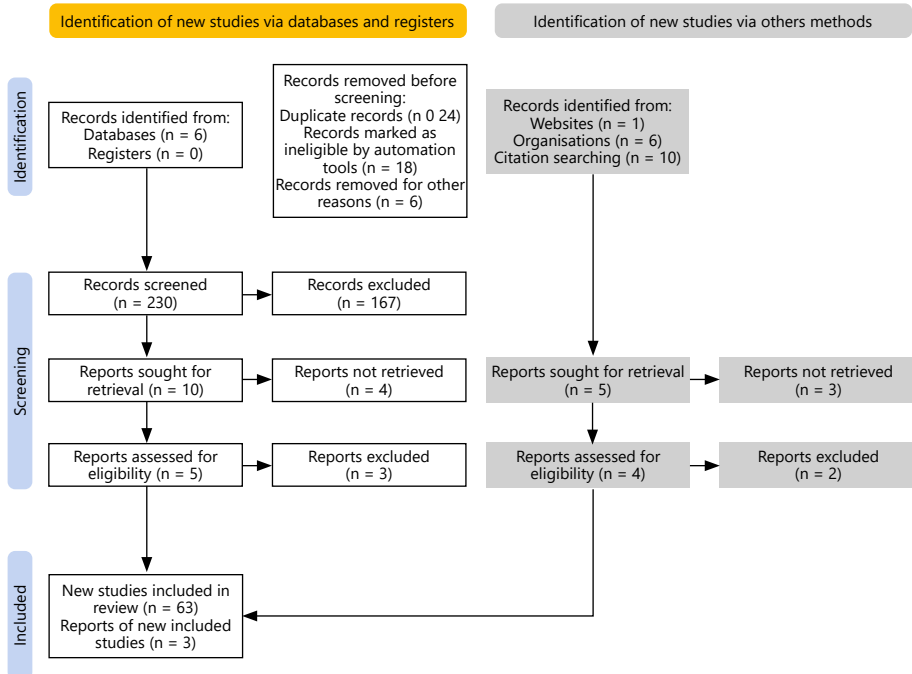
- **Attitude:** This refers to the perceived consequences of a behaviour and the evaluation of those consequences (TheoryHub, n.d.). In the case of corruption, if the perceived benefits (such as personal gain or political advantage) outweigh the perceived negatives (such as potential punishment or social disapproval), individuals may be more likely to engage in corrupt practices.

- **Subjective Norms:** This concept considers how individuals perceive the attitudes of others regarding a particular behaviour (Brookes, 2023). If corruption is viewed as commonplace or tacitly condoned within the political sphere, individuals may feel less personally accountable or morally conflicted about participating in such activities.
- **Perceived Behavioural Control:** This refers to how individuals believe they can control their behaviour (Brookes, 2023). If individuals perceive that they can act corruptly without facing consequences, or if they justify their actions based on the pursuit of political power or personal wealth, they may be more inclined to engage in corrupt practices.

The ANC has faced accusations of tolerating and even shielding corrupt practices, contributing to a perception that corruption is escalating under its current leadership (The Conversation, 2022; Daily Maverick, 2021). Applying the TPB to this context suggests that significant shifts in attitudes, norms, and perceptions of behavioural control regarding corruption are necessary for meaningful improvement. The TPB offers a valuable framework for understanding the persistence of corruption in South Africa. It indicates that combating corruption effectively requires a comprehensive approach that addresses both legal and institutional factors, as well as the underlying beliefs and attitudes that normalise corrupt behaviour.

## Research methods and materials

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using a scoping review. A scoping review is a systematic method of synthesising evidence that maps existing literature on a broad topic or field. It offers an overview of current research, identifies key concepts, and pinpoints knowledge gaps (Peters, Marnie, Colquhoun, Garritty, Hempel, Horsley, & Tricco, 2021). It is an exploratory process focused on recognising different types of evidence, clarifying central concepts, and understanding research in the field. The process involves defining the research question, searching relevant literature, selecting studies, and synthesising the results. Rather than relying on statistical analysis, scoping reviews typically summarise evidence descriptively, often through data chart. Scoping reviews offer greater flexibility in the types of evidence considered, including primary research, systematic reviews, policy documents, and other relevant sources of information. The PRISMA extension for scoping reviews was published in 2018 (Page, McKenzie, Bossuyt, Boutron, Hoffmann, Mulrow, & Moher, 2021). Figure 1 illustrates the PRISMA-ScR framework adopted in this work.

**Figure 1. PRISMA-ScR**

**Source:** Author's compilation using Shinyapps.io Software.  
[https://estech.shinyapps.io/prisma\\_flowdiagram](https://estech.shinyapps.io/prisma_flowdiagram)

## Preparation and Database Search

This study began with a review of government reports and news to understand the extent of corruption in the public sector, including local governments. As part of the process, the researcher then hypothesised that certain factors create conditions conducive to corruption. The study was motivated by reports of a rising number of whistleblowers documented by Corruption Watch and Afrobarometer. The next step involved a search for relevant studies. The keyword search initially yielded 230 results across five databases. For consistency, only the first ten results from each database were considered (N = 10). Google, Google Scholar, Sabinet, DOAJ, ResearchGate and IBSS indices were used to retrieve relevant literature. Data collection was guided by specific keywords such as 'corruption,' 'watchdogs,' and 'South African government,' which enabled comprehensive searches across multiple databases. The research outputs included journal articles, book chapters,

government reports, institutional reports, and online sources. After screening these studies, reports, and sources, the author identified sixty-three (N=63) sources suitable for citation in this study. One hundred sixty-seven (N = 167) duplicates and other irrelevant studies were removed from the selection. Table 1 below presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria followed in this scoping review.

## Inclusion, Exclusion Criteria and Selection of Relevant Studies

This study examined 230 studies —including journal articles, book chapters, government reports, and online sources— to assess them against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Table 1 below displays the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

**Table 1.** Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

|                                 | <b>Inclusion Criteria</b>   | <b>Exclusion</b>   |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Year of Publication</b>      | Studies and reports published between 2000 and 2025.  | Studies and reports published prior to 1999.   |
| <b>Quantity</b>                 | The study retrieved 230 research outputs, of which 63 were cited.   | Of the 230 studies, 167 were excluded due to ineligibility.  |
| <b>Type of research outputs</b> | Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, government reports, institutional reports, and online sources on corruption in the South African public sector.                              | Non-academic sources, conference proceedings, commentaries, book reviews, published theses, dissertations, and editorial documents were excluded.. |
| <b>Document Language</b>        | Documents published in English  | Documents not published in English   |
| <b>Study Area</b>               | The study only examined articles, reports, and online sources related to South Africa.  | Studies focusing on countries other than South Africa were excluded from this analysis.  |
| <b>Relevance of Studies</b>     | The first 54 studies on corruption in South Africa were identified. The relevance was identified through abstracts of journal articles, while reports and online sources were read in full. | The research studies are not relevant to the topic being studied.  |

**Source:** Mamokhere (2025)

## Data Analysis Process

Data analysis followed a scoping review model that systematically mapped key concepts and findings. First, data were collected from academic databases, government reports, institutional reports and online sources. Second, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to filter relevant studies. Third, thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns related to corruption. Fourth, the data were charted to capture categories of corruption, perceptions of reporting, impacts, challenges and barriers, and the realities of the ANC's anti-corruption efforts. The findings of this study are further discussed in the results and discussion section.

## Results

### Understanding Corruption

Corruption is often defined as the abuse of entrusted public resources or power for private gain (Ellis, 2012). Zhang & Vargas-Hernandez (2025) cited in Munyai (2024:240) argue that various definitions of corruption generally share common components, including but not limited to the following: 'the actor or perpetrator, often a public or an association of officials; public resources or goods that are being transferred or traded for private gains or benefit; the perpetrated act(s) violates laws decrees or institutional regulations; affects or dispositions public interests; the perpetrated acts are done in secret or often concealed.' Following this working definition and the components of corruption, types or subtypes of corruption include: bribery, extortion, fraud, embezzlement, nepotism, cronyism, misappropriation of resources, abuse of power, maladministration, dereliction of duty, procurement irregularities, and employment irregularities (Myint, 2000)..

The most common forms of corruption in South Africa include maladministration, fraud, employment irregularities, bribery or extortion, and procurement irregularities (Corruption Watch, 2024). This discussion focuses on these types of corruption within the South African public sector, from national to local levels, to better understand how they occur. Fraud encompasses a range of activities and generally involves deliberate deception aimed at gaining unfair or unlawful benefits or depriving someone of their legal rights. (Melone, 2021). Typically, fraud involves misuse of entrusted power for personal gain, often

through under-the-table cash transactions, often leaving little or no trace in financial statements that a crime has been committed (World Bank, 2017). Most fraud cases are uncovered through tips or complaints from third parties, often via fraud hotlines, or detected during internal reviews, external audits, and financial inspections. In the public sector, including State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), fraud originates from both internal and external sources (World Bank, 2017). Internal fraud can be committed at any organisational level, ranging from minor abuses of travel expenses to large-scale schemes involving high-value contracts and control breaches. Such activities can have serious material consequences (World Bank, 2017). Abuse of power occurs when individuals, groups, or entities misuse their entrusted duties or authority to engage in corrupt practices (Munyai, 2024). For example, public officials may misuse their authority to appoint relatives, or they may use their power to divert public funds into their personal bank accounts, which benefits them privately rather than serving the public interest (Munyai, 2024). Maladministration refers to actions that threaten the effective functioning of the bureaucracy, though it may not always be illegal (Onyango, 2022). It involves behaviours that undermine compliance or public values like fairness, responsiveness, and representation (Onyango, 2022). Caiden (2017), among others, views maladministration as a systemic dysfunction that can be remedied. It relates to conduct by public officials that bypasses proper authority, uses it for unintended purposes, or neglects legal obligations in delivering public services, leading to material or immaterial losses for the community and individuals (Sampara, 2014).

Other prevalent forms of corruption include extortion, money laundering, and bribery. Extortion involves obtaining money or other valuables through force or threats, such as when someone demands payments from a public official to prevent the release of damaging information (Cambridge Business English Dictionary). Money laundering, as described by the Commonwealth Secretariat, is a process where criminals hide the origins and ownership of illicit proceeds to avoid prosecution, conviction, and confiscation (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2006). Bribery is often used to expedite the approval of permits, licences, and other authorisations required for legal activities (Myint, 2000). This practice, often called 'grease money,' is meant to facilitate bureaucratic procedures- ideally in a legitimate way. However, overly complex rules and regulations can lead to a situation where paying bribes becomes the only way to move forward. Dereliction of duty refers to intentionally neglecting responsibilities or obligations related to one's role, rather than making accidental errors (Fagan, 2000). It involves a deliberate failure to perform assigned tasks or meet expected standards, representing a serious lapse in responsibility (Mackay, 2020). Misappropriation of resources, often used interchangeably with

embezzlement, is a common form of corruption. Embezzlement is defined as ‘the crime of secretly taking money that is in your care or belongs to the organisation or business you work for’ (Kamwani, Vieira, Madaleno, & Azevedo, 2022). Misappropriation involves stealing entrusted property or funds and using them for personal gain (Kamwani et al., 2022). Although similar, embezzlement involves outright theft, while misappropriation refers to the misuse of funds or property (Munyai, 2020). Both often involve public officials with control over public funds or property diverting these into personal channels (Ibodullaevich & Kizi, 2021). Procurement irregularities are loopholes, vulnerabilities, or risk indicators that create conditions conducive to corrupt practices within the procurement process (Lukhele, Botha, & Mbanga, 2022). While not necessarily direct causes of corruption, these irregularities foster environments where corruption can more easily occur (Matebese- Notshulwana, 2021).

## From Concepts to Realities of Corruption in South Africa

Political interference is a significant challenge and barrier to combating corruption in South Africa. The nature of political leadership in Africa, including South Africa, often leads to an abuse of power (Fagbadebo & Dorasamy, 2021). Entrenched vested interests of the political elite have promoted corruption and abuse of power as tools of governance, rendering statutory oversight structures ineffective. (Fagbadebo & Dorasamy, 2021).

For instance, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) has been affected by political interference, resulting in poor leadership, irregular appointments, and a lack of autonomy within the board (Ngobeni, Barnard, & Molate, 2023). This interference has led to a deficit in accountability and fostered corruption, while also creating obstacles to implementing effective corporate governance (Ngobeni et al., 2023). Furthermore, systemic factors such as structural inequalities and a corrupting political culture also promote corruption (Moore, 2016). Hence, addressing political interference is essential for effectively and sustainably fighting corruption in South Africa. The ANC has been associated with several corruption cases in South Africa, including the case involving Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula. The former Speaker of Parliament, Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, was charged with twelve counts of corruption and one count of money laundering (The Guardian, 2024; The Star, 2024). She resigned amid allegations of soliciting bribes while serving as Defence Minister (The Guardian, 2024). The second case concerns the state capture during Zuma’s

presidency. The Zondo Commission, an inquiry into corruption during Jacob Zuma's presidency, uncovered how every branch of the state was undermined and left bankrupt by leaders of the ANC (Maseko, 2022). The report revealed the theft of billions of rand from South Africa's state coffers (Maseko, 2022).

State capture, which became prominent during Jacob Zuma's presidency, refers to corruption in which businesses and politicians collude for personal gain. It involves weakening law enforcement and turning policymaking into a commodity for exploitation. Initially discussed in a 2003 World Bank report on Eastern Europe and Central Asia, it explained how oligarchs controlled vulnerable democracies in the former Soviet bloc. Over time, it has been used globally to describe questionable dealings between corporations and governments. During Zuma's term, state capture was evident, with investigations highlighting Zuma's family and the Guptas, Indian-born brothers who moved to South Africa after apartheid. They used lobbying and payments to influence laws and institutions, undermining legislation, enforcement, and laws for private benefit, actively manipulating the system rather than merely exploiting legal loopholes. State capture in South Africa harms governance, service delivery, and the economy by prioritising private interests over the public interest, as seen in the Zuma-Gupta network. It undermines democracy, diminishes services, and destabilises the economy. To combat it, transparency, anti-corruption measures, and strict enforcement are essential.

Institutional strength is crucial in combating corruption, as robust institutions uphold the rule of law, promote accountability, and deter corrupt practices. In South Africa, however, weak institutions present a major challenge. Ineffective oversight mechanisms often fail to monitor public officials, allowing corruption to thrive (Manyaka & Nkuna, 2014). A key issue is the lack of political will to enforce anti-corruption measures, often due to vested interests within the political elite, which promotes corruption and abuse of power (Fagbadebo & Dorasamy, 2021). This weakens statutory oversight structures (Fagbadebo & Dorasamy, 2021). Additionally, the absence of merit-based appointments leads to incompetence and accountability issues, creating opportunities for corruption (Manyaka & Nkuna, 2014).

In 2021, the South African government faced scandals involving Covid-19 relief funds. President Cyril Ramaphosa's administration was marred by controversies over the misuse of Covid-19 relief funds (The Guardian, 2021). The ANC launched a comprehensive inquiry into allegations of corruption, directing all provincial branches and leaders to compile lists of those charged with or implicated in misconduct (Mashilo & Kgobe, 2021). In the final months of

2021, the party came under intense scrutiny due to various reports of corruption linked to Covid-19 contracts, sparking outrage among South Africans. The Special Investigative Unit (SIU) was investigating R5 billion worth of government contracts that may have been awarded to officials without proper due diligence (Mashilo & Kgobe, 2021). However, the SIU's investigations are not limited to procurement fraud. Government employees were also under scrutiny for diverting food deliveries intended for vulnerable populations. In one notable case reported by *The Sunday Times*, a politician involved in PPE fraud within the Gauteng Health Department allegedly profited by reselling equipment to the government at markups as high as 800% (Mashilo & Kgobe, 2021). These cases highlight the extent of political interference and corruption within the ANC, emphasising the urgent need for stronger measures to combat corruption in South Africa. South Africa can only mitigate the threats posed by state capture to governance, service delivery, and economic stability through concerted efforts.

Transparency is crucial in fighting corruption by ensuring accountability, fairness, and discouraging unethical practices. In South Africa, the lack of transparency, especially in procurement processes (South African Christian Leadership Initiative, 2021), hampers anti-corruption efforts. The opaque procurement process relies on whistle-blowers to reveal irregularities, often leading to exemptions, policy bypasses, and political interference (Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse, 2020). This opacity contributes to South Africa's poor ranking (54th out of 178) on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (Gumede, 2017), indicating widespread corruption fuelled by transparency issues. Besides scoring 41 in 2023 and 43 in 2022, South Africa scored 44 from 2019 to 2021. In 2018 and 2017, it scored 43, with a high of 45 in 2016. Before that, it managed 44 (2014 and 2015), 42 (2013), and 43 (2012) (Corruption Watch, 2024). This indicates that public sector corruption remains a significant issue in South Africa.

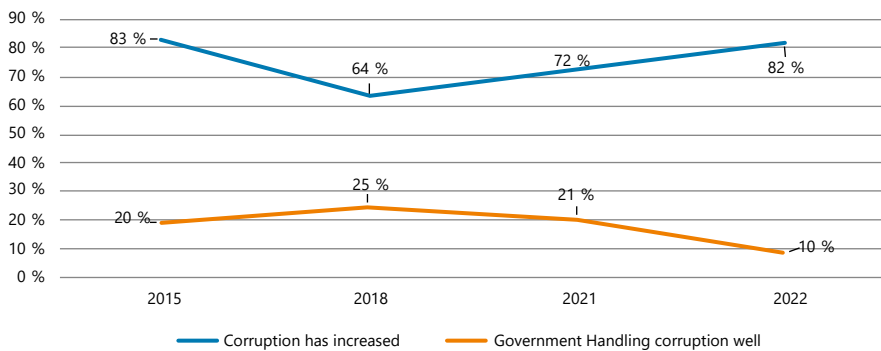
Institutional weakness in South Africa's anti-corruption architecture is vividly demonstrated through concrete examples. The National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), a key institution in prosecuting corruption, has historically faced critical vacancies in leadership positions, with prolonged delays in appointing a permanent National Director of Public Prosecutions (NDPP), thereby weakening prosecutorial leadership (Madonsela, 2018). Further, the Financial Intelligence Centre (FIC), responsible for combating money laundering, reported inadequate funding and limited investigative authority, hampering its role in tracking illicit financial flows (CMS Legal, 2024). Another major challenge is the politicisation of key appointments. For example, the Public Protector and the heads of the

Hawks and SABC have faced accusations of being politically aligned, raising questions about their independence (Ngobeni et al., 2023). Courts have occasionally exposed these deficiencies: in *Democratic Alliance v President of South Africa* (2017), the High Court ruled that the appointment of Shaun Abrahams as NDPP was invalid due to political interference, illustrating judicial recognition of institutional capture. Collectively, these examples demonstrate how institutional fragility impedes the effective prosecution and deterrence of corruption.

## Public Perceptions of Reporting Corruption

The figure below shows an upward trend in perceptions of increased corruption, rising from 64% in 2018 to 82% in 2022, with a slight dip in 2021. This suggests that more people believe corruption has worsened over time. On the other hand, the perception that the government is managing corruption effectively declined from 25% in 2018 to 10% in 2022. This reflects declining public confidence in the government's anti-corruption efforts. These trends show increasing public dissatisfaction with South Africa's anti-corruption efforts. The government needs to act more effectively, as perceptions of corruption and poor management have intensified. Improved communication, greater transparency, and stronger public engagement are essential to rebuild trust and demonstrate genuine commitment to reform.

**Figure 2.** Perceptions of Corruption in South Africa from 2015 to 2022

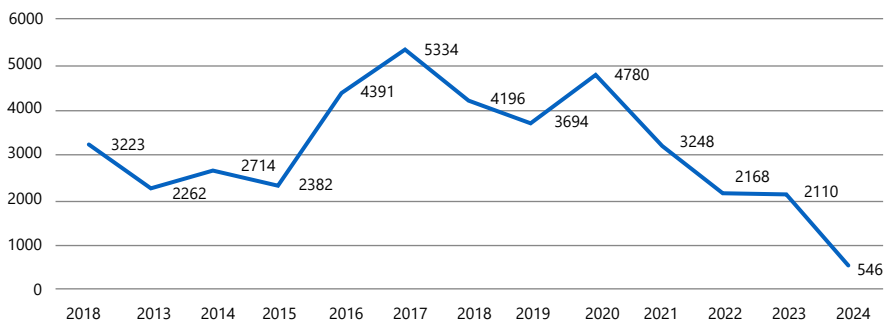


**Source:** Felton, van Wyk-Khosa, & Mpani (2023).

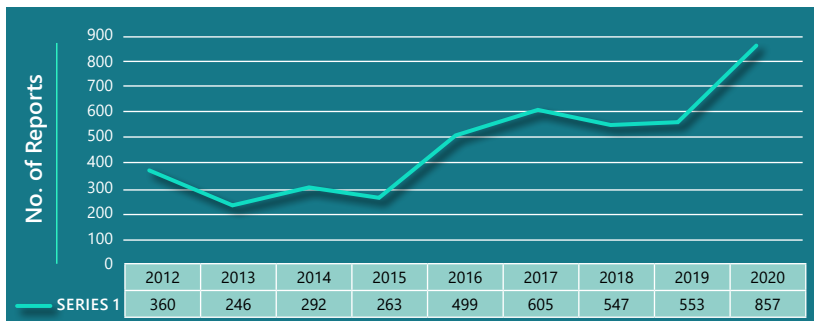
## Whistleblowers and reporting of corruption

Whistleblowing is the act of reporting perceived misconduct within an organisation to entities capable of prompting actions (Uys & Radulovic, 2025). In South Africa, it became more prevalent as the country moved towards democracy in the early 1990s. Figures 3 and 4 provide an overview of corruption ranging from local to provincial to national contexts. Since 2012, Corruption Watch has received 33,000 whistle-blower reports, with 16% related to local government corruption, mainly gathered in the last four years. The peak was in 2020, when 16.8% of these reports were received during the COVID-19 pandemic. 41% of local government cases involve Gauteng, particularly the City of Johannesburg (16.5%), as well as other municipalities such as Ekurhuleni (8.3%) and Tshwane (7.6%). From 2012 to 2020, 32,998 reports indicated that 16% alleged local government corruption, primarily from Gauteng (41%), KwaZulu-Natal (11%), and Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and North West (8%). Top municipalities include Johannesburg (700 reports), Ekurhuleni (354), Tshwane (325), eThekweni (166), and Cape Town (125). Common types of corruption include bribery (28%), procurement irregularities (24%), employment issues (11%), abuse of power (9%), and embezzlement (8%). Most cases implicated municipal managers (34%) or local police (30%), with additional reports involving housing, transportation, and executive offices. In 2020, a record 857 reports highlighted local government corruption, representing a 50% increase compared to previous years, with significant rises in the Eastern Cape, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, and Western Cape (Corruption Watch, 2021, p.2).

**Figure 3.** Whistle Blower Reports from 2012 to 2024



**Source:** Corruption Watch

**Figure 4.** Whistle-Blower Reports relating to local government from 2012 to 2020

**Source:** Corruption Watch (2021)

## Corruptions Impacts

Corruption undermines state outcomes related to development, political stability, good governance, and the pursuit of a corruption-free society (Munyai, 2024). The effects of corruption are extensive, as it erodes trust, weakens democracy, hampers economic development, and further exacerbates inequality, poverty, social division, and environmental crises (Brockmann, 2023, p. 334, Munyai, 2024, p. 41). Mamokhere (2023) attributes service delivery issues in South African municipalities to corruption, political patronage, and skill shortages, arguing that corruption undermines institutional effectiveness, demoralises officials, and hampers planning and oversight. Kota (2021) notes that corruption facilitates impunity, undermining fair recruitment and limiting access to public services. Mashilo & Kgobe (2021) argue that corruption deepens disparities for vulnerable communities, while Felton et al. (2023) state that it leads to the misappropriation of resources. Corruption in the form of embezzlement, misappropriation, or misuse of public funds directly undermines the delivery of public services (Munyai, 2024). Corruption demoralises government, weakens policy formulation and implementation (Graycar, 2015). It further diminishes services and causes fiscal stress, but most importantly, it undermines public trust and corrodes legitimate community expectations

## The ANC's Stance on Corruption: Rhetoric, Actions, and Accountability

Before critically examining the shortcomings of the ANC-led government in addressing corruption, it is important to recognise the limited yet notable efforts it has undertaken to combat corruption and unethical conduct. After the controversial disbandment of the Directorate of Special Operations (commonly known as the Scorpions) in 2009, the government strengthened the mandate of the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA). However, its performance produced mixed results due to capacity and political constraints. The Special Investigating Unit (SIU) has also played an increasingly prominent role, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when it investigated widespread procurement irregularities resulting in billions of rand in losses. Furthermore, the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into state capture, though initiated under pressure from civil society and opposition parties, was formally established by Parliament under ANC leadership. The Commission's extensive work has helped expose entrenched patterns of corruption and state dysfunction. These institutional efforts, while often undermined by inconsistent political will and enforcement, reflect a partial recognition by the state of the need to address systemic corruption and restore public trust.

The ANC has consistently expressed its commitment to combating corruption. In its 2014 election manifesto, the ANC pledged to 'intensify the fight against corruption', stating it 'is committed to a corruption-free society, ethical behaviour across society, and a government that is accountable to the people' (Bruce, 2014). However, the rhetoric has often contrasted with reality, particularly when corruption allegations surfaced within the party itself (Bruce, 2014). Despite the strong rhetoric, the ANC's actions have frequently fallen short of its promises, as numerous corruption scandals have eroded public trust (Gumede, 2019). For instance, the ANC has faced criticism for failing to hold its members accountable for corrupt practices (Coetzee, 2024). Prominent cases include the looting of VBS Mutual Bank (Gottschalk, 2022) and the rare imprisonment of an ANC MP, Tony Yengeni, in 2003, for fraud and corruption (Gottschalk, 2022). However, to regain public trust, the ANC outlined measures in its 2024 election manifesto to combat corruption and hold those accountable (Coetzee, 2024). These measures include establishing a special anti-corruption unit, imposing stricter penalties for those guilty of corruption, and strengthening oversight mechanisms (Coetzee, 2024).

The Zondo Commission, a judge-led inquiry into 'state capture' in South Africa, has significantly promoted accountability (Pinsent Masons, 2022). The commission's report into allegations of high-level corruption under former

President Jacob Zuma found that he advanced the interests of the Gupta family, Indian-born businessmen with close ties to his administration (Allie, 2022). The commission's findings have profoundly influenced public authorities, private companies, and individuals in South Africa and abroad (Pinsent Masons, 2022). While the ANC's rhetoric on tackling corruption has been strong, its actions have not always matched its promises. The role of the Zondo Commission in promoting accountability has been significant, but the fight against corruption requires a concerted effort from all sectors of society. In 2023, the ANC used its majority in parliament to vote against establishing an ad hoc committee to probe allegations of rampant corruption and criminal cartels operating at Eskom, which allegedly involved high-ranking ANC politicians (Mail & Guardian, 2023). Whether the ANC will deliver on its promises remains uncertain. However, one thing is clear: the fight against corruption must be a top priority for any government seeking to serve the people's interests truly.

While the ANC has often been criticised for its perceived failure to combat corruption effectively, it is important to acknowledge that some institutional and partisan efforts have been undertaken. Following the disbandment of the Scorpions in 2009, the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) was tasked with continuing high-level prosecutions, albeit with limited success due to political interference. The Special Investigating Unit (SIU) has played a notable role in investigating corruption, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, where it has probed over R5 billion in irregular procurement contracts. Moreover, the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into state capture, though catalysed by civil society pressure, was formally established by the ANC-led Parliament and has significantly advanced public accountability by exposing the inner workings of state corruption. These developments indicate that, despite systemic weaknesses, pockets of resistance to corruption remain within the state apparatus. However, these measures have often lacked continuity, sufficient political support, and enforcement power, limiting their overall effectiveness.

## Discussion

Southall (2016) argues that the ANC's trajectory towards internal corruption can be traced to the compromises made during the transition to democracy in 1994, during which elite pacts and the imperatives of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) inadvertently promoted clientelism and personal enrichment. Bruce (2014) echoes this view, noting that the relationship between the ANC and large-

scale capital, especially through BEE, created moral and structural dilemmas that weakened the party's ethical constraints. The Zondo Commission's findings on state capture during Jacob Zuma's presidency, particularly the Gupta family's manipulation of contracts and institutions, demonstrate how political rationalised corruption as a means of influence and economic gain (Maseko, 2022; Allie, 2022). These rationalisations align with the attitudinal component of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB): when the perceived benefits of corruption outweigh the risks, individuals are more likely to intend to engage in corrupt acts (Bosnjak, Ajzen & Schmidt, 2020).

Rather than asserting that 'the ANC lost the battle' against corruption, it is more accurate to frame it as a critical assessment of internal failures. Gottschalk (2022) contends that the ANC's repeated inability to address corruption within its ranks reflects a deepening moral crisis, not simply a lack of technical capacity but rather a breakdown in internal accountability mechanisms. Similarly, Mlambo, Mubecua, and Mlambo (2023) highlight how corruption has become systemic in the post-apartheid state, with senior officials acting with impunity and facing few consequences. These dynamics reveal how subjective norms, the perceived expectations of influential actors or peers, have shifted within the ANC. When individuals observe that corruption is not only tolerated but often goes unpunished, they internalise a belief that unethical behaviour is the norm. The ANC's selective accountability, such as its muted response to the VBS Mutual Bank scandal and the looting of COVID-19 relief funds, supports this shift in social norms (Mashilo & Kgobe, 2021; Coetzee, 2024). The party's own rhetoric, while condemning corruption, has often not been matched by consistent disciplinary action, further entrenching these norms (Bruce, 2014).

The perception that corrupt acts can be undertaken without facing significant institutional or legal consequences aligns with the perceived behavioural control component of TPB. Fagbadebo and Dorasamy (2021) argue that entrenched political interests and elite protectionism have rendered many oversight institutions ineffective. During Zuma's administration, institutions such as the Hawks and the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) were strategically weakened, enabling state capture (Madonsela, 2018; Bester & Dobovšek, 2021). Ngobeni et al. (2023) provide a telling example in the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), where political interference eroded corporate governance and enabled unchecked irregularities. The SIU's ongoing investigations into pandemic procurement fraud highlight how government officials exploited systemic weaknesses, emboldened by the low probability of detection or sanction (Mashilo & Kgobe, 2021). Within this environment, corrupt actors perceive a

high level of behavioural control, allowing them to act with few constraints. As Ajzen's TPB suggests, when people believe they can easily perform a behaviour here —**in this case, corruption**— they are more likely to do so (Brookes, 2023; Bosnjak et al., 2020). The persistence of corruption in South Africa's ANC-led government is best understood as a convergence of favourable attitudes, enabling subjective norms, and high perceived behavioural control. These three dimensions, central to Ajzen's TPB, interact to create a behavioural ecosystem in which corrupt actions are normalised, rationalised, and largely unpunished. Public perceptions support this analysis. Afrobarometer data show a steep decline in confidence in the government's handling of corruption, from 25% in 2018 to just 10% in 2022, while 82% of respondents believe corruption has increased (Felton, van Wyk-Khosa, & Mpani, 2023). Meanwhile, Corruption Watch reports a surge in whistleblower complaints implicating senior municipal and national officials in procurement fraud, bribery, and abuse of power (Corruption Watch, 2024). These indicators reflect a broader climate where corruption is no longer an exception but a behavioural norm, facilitated by permissive attitudes and system-wide impunity. This study demonstrates that TPB provides a robust analytical framework for understanding the persistence of corruption in South Africa under the ANC-led government. Each component, attitudes —subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control— is evident in both historical patterns and contemporary practice. Attitudinally, ANC leaders and officials rationalise corrupt behaviour through a logic of political necessity and personal gain (Southall, 2016; Bruce, 2014). Normatively, the party's internal culture and failure to consistently discipline members have created a permissive environment where corruption is tolerated or ignored (Gottschalk, 2022; Mlambo et al., 2023). Structurally, weakened institutions and selective accountability have fostered a belief that corrupt acts can be executed with minimal risk (Fagbadebo & Dorasamy, 2021; Ngobeni et al., 2023).

While TPB does not fully account for broader structural determinants — such as socio-economic inequality, historical injustice, or systemic patronage— it provides valuable insight into the psychological and social mechanisms that perpetuate unethical behaviour. It highlights that addressing corruption requires more than legal reform or institutional strengthening; it also demands reshaping the beliefs, norms, and perceived constraints that govern decision-making within political parties and the state. Unless these behavioural drivers are directly confronted, South Africa's anti-corruption efforts are unlikely to achieve lasting success.

## Conclusion

This article critically examined the persistence of corruption in post-apartheid South Africa, particularly under the ANC-led government. Through a scoping review and application of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), it demonstrated how corruption has become embedded in the institutional and behavioural fabric of South African governance. The findings show that while the ANC espouses a strong rhetorical stance against corruption, its inconsistent enforcement, selective accountability, and internal complicity have eroded public trust and enabled widespread unethical conduct. The article traced the roots of corruption to colonial and apartheid governance, but argued that the democratic era, particularly during Jacob Zuma's presidency, witnessed an intensification of state capture and political patronage, exacerbated by weakened institutions and opaque procurement systems.

TPB offered a valuable analytical framework to understand how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control converge to normalise corrupt behaviour. Many ANC officials see corruption as both low-risk and politically and economically rewarding, reinforcing permissive social norms within political circles. Institutional fragility, evident in the compromised capacity of bodies like the NPA and SIU, reinforces this perception, indicating that reform efforts must address both behavioural drivers and structural weaknesses. Despite the limited successes of mechanisms like the Zondo Commission and renewed prosecutorial attempts, these efforts remain insufficient in the face of entrenched political interference and elite protectionism.

Public perceptions, whistleblower trends, and empirical evidence from the review collectively underscore a dangerous social shift. Corruption is no longer seen as a deviation from the norm but as a functional feature of the political system. This not only corrodes public integrity and democratic legitimacy but also undermines service delivery, economic development, and social cohesion. Anti-corruption strategies must therefore move beyond technocratic fixes and embrace a holistic approach that restores ethical leadership, bolsters independent institutions, and reshapes political culture.

In conclusion, combating corruption in South Africa demands more than institutional reform; it requires a moral and political reckoning within the ANC and the state. Unless the behavioural norms that justify and sustain corruption are addressed, even the best-designed policies will falter. The future of South Africa's democracy hinges not just on exposing corruption, but on dismantling

the ecosystem that enables it. Rebuilding public trust therefore depends on transparent leadership, sustained civic engagement, and a steadfast commitment to justice and accountability.

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