



## COVID-19 In South Africa: Corruption In The Running of State Affairs

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**Abstract:** In democratic societies, citizenry perceive government as an important role player in the amelioration of their socioeconomic status. South African government is no exception. The outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic presented a proliferation of unprecedented challenges and unethical conduct in the public service that plagues the essence of good governance. From the construct that constitute the essence of literature in Public Affairs, Covid-19 did not only lay bare the failures of public service in eradicating corruption but exposed the rampant elements of inequalities and corruption by those perpetuating political notoriety and power elitism, polemic against the profundity of good governance. The paper seeks to deconstruct how covid-19 exposed the extent in which corruption is deeply rooted in the public service. This paper is conceptual in nature. Theory building and critical scholarship review are methodological insights that largely informed the paper. Conclusion and recommendations are provided.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, governance, corruption, public service

### 1. Introduction

A plethora of scholars such as Mlambo and Masuku (2020) argue that COVID-19 did not only lay bare the inequalities embedded in society but also exposed the rampant corruption which has permeated through the structures of public service.

In their Journal article titled *Governance, Corruption and Covid-19: The Final Nail in the Coffin for South Africa's Dwindling Public Finance*, the above authors elaborate that the outbreak of the pandemic prompted governments not only in South Africa but across the world, to devise interventions and measures to contain the spread of the pandemic however, some government officials saw this process as opportunity for self-enrichment. Corruption has become a norm in the structures of public service.

Lannegren and Ito (2017) attest that almost each year there are reported cases of highly ranked politicians being involved in corruption or maladministration.

Underpinning contemporary scholarship is a growing common understanding that corruption has become an adversary to economic emancipation particularly in the context of South Africa.

Mlambo (2019) asserts that corruption has become a global occurrence for most African countries particularly in the post-colonial era where public officials enrich themselves at the expense of the general impoverished populace.

Sebake and Mudau (2020:490) also highlight that “*democratic societies are often confronted by unprecedented and unethical conduct that circumvent the essence of democratic process*”.

The above authors emphasize that corruption plagues service delivery. South African is among the countries that are experiencing an apex level of corruption.

Abbasi (2020) argues that politicians are perpetuating political notoriety by suppressing the interests of citizenry for their own financial benefit.

Through interrogation of the South African Auditor-General's *Second Special Report on Financial Management of Government's COVID-19 Initiatives* of 2020, the South African government responded to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic by redirecting state resources to fund a R500 billion package for its health response and the relief of social and economic distress.

The 2020 Auditor-General report further exposes the rampant corruption such as payments to deceased people, duplicates payments and over-payments in the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) and the COVID-19 Temporary Employer/Employee Scheme (TERS), flagged public servants and politicians applying and benefiting from the scheme (Sebake & Mudau, 2020).

If anything, the pandemic has taught the world to embrace the technological advancement in attempt to ameliorate the lives of citizens and the functioning of government departments to deliver services to the general populace.

However, some politicians saw this as an opportune moment for corruption in an attempt to enrich themselves. Lumumba (2014) argues that “*corruption is worse than prostitution*”. Lumumba's main argument is that whilst prostitution compromises the morals of one individual but corruption endangers the morals of an entire state.

### 2. Theoretical Underpinning

*Post-Positivism* and *Critical Paradigm* are research philosophies that largely underpin this paper.

The *raison d'être* underpinning reliance on the theoretical underpinnings is that the Researcher views reality as shaped by social, political, cultural, economic and other dynamics.



The Researcher believe that the word “I” is always subjective and influenced by one’s position and place in the society and value systems.

The paper is conceptual in nature and aims to deconstruct how covid-19 exposed the extent in which corruption is deeply rooted in the public service.

Theory building and critical scholarship review through the review of Journal articles, books and published government reports, are methodological insights that largely informed this paper which uses the *Elite Theory* to back up its arguments centred on corruption.

### 2.1 The Elite Theory

In his seminal work titled *The Power Elite*, Mills refers to power elites as “those political, economic and military circles which as an intricate set of overlapping cliques share decisions having at least national consequences” (Mills, 1997:18).

Mills further elaborates that the institutions that the elites control i.e. the State, corporations and the military occupy variegated spheres in society with different domains of jurisdictions.

The *Elite Theory* envisages a society as divided between the general populace and a ruling oligarchy and that power belongs to the latter.

From Mariotti’s point of view, Mills opines that no matter what or where – in every society, the larger extent of resources (economical, intellectual, and cultural) are concentrated in the hands of the elite who use different values and principles to justify the power struggling and to manipulate the consent of the ruled (Mariotti, 2020).

In the context of this paper, the utilisation of the *Elite Theory* intends to project an argument that COVID-19 exposed the extent in which corruption is deeply rooted in the public service.

### 3. The Emergence of The COVID-19 Crisis

The 1<sup>st</sup> March 2020 was the beginning of one of the devastating disasters in South Africa since the end of apartheid in 1994.

Apartheid policies discriminated against people of colour, black people in particular and deprived them of their human rights, dignity and freedom. During apartheid, majority of black people were killed because of the colour of their skin.

When the first case of COVID-19 struck, a sickness caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus was reported in South Africa, it was clear that the pandemic would cause havoc on the already ailing South African economy (Velavan, and Meyer, 2019; Ciotti, Ciccozzi, Terrinoni, Jiang, Wang, and Bernardini, 2020; Stiegler, and Bouchard, 2020).

The roots of COVID-19 were traced back to Wuhan, Hubei province, in a small town in China and was first reported in December 2019.

The abovementioned branch of pneumonia diseases was epidemiologically linked to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market (Ciotti et al., 2020).

By the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) was compelled to declare COVID-19 a global pandemic due to its spread and that thousands of people had already died because of the sickness.

Consequently, by May 2020 the virus had spread all over the world and infected 4,806,299 people, and caused 318,599 mortalities (Ciotti et al., 2020).

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic was devastating in South Africa, not only because of the weak health-related infrastructure and provision, but because of the high levels of inequality, weak economic growth and development (Velavan and Meyer, 2019; Ciotti et al,2020; Mahlala and Netswera, 2020; Mlambo and Masuku, 2020; Stiegler and Bouchard, 2020).

Unfortunately, the impact of COVID-19 on the health, economy and livelihoods of South African citizens as might be the case in other developing countries is immeasurable.

In South Africa, “the burden of the state during this period had not only been limited to health provisions such as the personal protective equipment (PPEs) but included the escalation in the provision of basic service beyond the norm of water, sanitation and electricity but to supporting households that had lost income as economies buckle under Covid-19 lockdown regulations”(Mahlala and Netswera, 2020: 480).

COVID-19 paralysed the fragile health care systems not only in South Africa, but in most African Countries. As with South Africa, very few African countries had sufficient and appropriate health diagnostic capacities and medical capacity and expertise to handle such outbreaks (Velavan and Meyer, 2019; Ciotti et al: 2020; Mahlala and Netswera, 2020).

Interestingly though, the COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact even in the most advanced First World economies. In other words, the pandemic did show that even the most advanced healthcare systems cannot sustain a massive influx of critically ill patients in their emergency departments (Ciotti et al: 2020).

In Italy for example, with “its 3.2 hospital beds per 1000 persons vs 2.8 in the United States had enormous difficulty to meet the needs of critically ill patients arriving in the hospitals in a short time” (Ciotti et al: 2020: 382).

In South Africa, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, government introduced a nationwide lockdown as a measure to reduce the spread of the deadly virus.



The national lockdown was in accordance with the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 to exercise lockdown regulations and re-allocate state budgets to address the COVID-19 pandemic (Mahlala, and Netswera, 2020; Mlambo and Masuku, 2020).

Some of the most visible actions that government undertook was the redirecting of resources to fund a R500 billion package in April 2020.

The fiscal relief package was not only funded by reprioritising the 2020-21 budgets, but by also securing additional funding from international loans (Mahlala, and Netswera, 2020).

This was done with an intention to support households and individuals in the relief of hunger and social distress through increases in social grants, aid companies in distress, and protect jobs by supporting workers' wages.

Further response strategies included purchasing hand and respiratory hygiene equipment, the use of appropriate personal protective equipment, safe injection practices, safe waste management, clean linens, environmental cleaning, and sterilization of patient-care equipment (Ciotti et al: 2020: 382).

It is evident that South Africa's efforts to curb the spread of Covid-19 bore some fruits, however, there were a number of challenges associated with it ((Mahlala, and Netswera, 2020; Mlambo and Masuku, 2020). One of the major challenges during the fight against Covid-19 was the high prevalent of corruption incidence.

#### 4. Challenges of Corruption in South Africa

According to Mahlala and Netswera (2020; Mantzaris and Ngcamu (2020) and Mlambo and Masuku (2020), the brutality and perpetual realities of corruption in South Africa showed its large scale eventuality during the most devastating impacts of COVID-19.

Consequently, *"COVID-19 pandemic has not only laid bare the inequalities within South African society but sadly, it has also portrayed how successive South African public sectors have failed to deal with corruption which has become entrenched within every sector of society"* (Mlambo and Masuku, 2020: 549).

Before elucidating any further on the devastating impact of corruption during the pandemic, it is important to conceptualise the concept of corruption, particularly in the context of South Africa.

Scholars such as Pauw, Woods, Van der Linde, Fourie and Visser (2009:344) state that the term corruption *"can be defined as the abuse of position for personal gain or for the benefit of an individual or a group to whom one owes allegiance"*.

The concept of corruption originates from Latin times namely *"corruptus"* which is the past participle of *"corrumpere"*, meaning to mar, bribe, and destroy (Bauer, 2005).

Corruption can be understood as abuse of official authority with intent for personal advantage. The most common types of corruption include bribery, fraud and the misappropriation of economic wealth.

Thornhill (2012) defines corruption as offering or granting, directly or indirectly to a public official or any other person, of any goods of monetary value, or other benefit, such as a gift, favour, promise or advantage for himself or herself or for any other person or entity, in exchange for any acts or omission in the performance of his/her public functions.

It has been difficult to universally define corruption *"because there are forms of corruption that are difficult to identify and there are forms that may not be seen as corruption by exponents of particular cultures"*, for instance social gestures such as gifting (Mahlala and Netswera, (2020); Mantzaris and Ngcamu (2020); Mlambo and Masuku, (2020).

Prasad, da Silva and Nickow (2019) state that in many countries, corruption persists because there is uncertainty over what constitutes a gift and what constitutes a bribe, as well as confusion over what is private and what is public.

Fortunately, in South Africa, there are specific legislations which define what is regarded as ethical and unethical conduct.

On the one end, the Chapter 10 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996 in Section 195(1)(a) and (b) emphasizes that the Constitutional values and principles must be underpinned by a high standard of professional ethics promoted and maintained alongside the efficient, economic and effective use of resources at all material times (Mahlala, and Netswera, 2020).

On the other end, the Public Finance Management Act 1 of 1999) emphasizes that the Accounting Officer of any public entity should charge any official who makes or permits an unauthorised expenditure, irregular expenditure or fruitless and wasteful expenditure (Munzhedzi, 2016).

South Africa's Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities (PRECCA) Act 12 of 2004, highlights that corruption occurs when any person directly or indirectly accepts or offers (or agrees to offer or accept) any form of gratification which many not necessarily be monetary which gratification will either benefit themselves or another person (Mahlala, and Netswera, 2020).

In terms of legislation in South Africa, corruption is looked at as an act that involves an improper/corrupt exchange between two or more parties. With all these clear legislative prescripts and other important frameworks, why does corruption persist in South Africa?



Why are legislative and policy framework outlined above undermined by gross incidents of accountability, political interference, appointment of inexperienced and unqualified officials and contractors, lack of technical expertise in the respective bid committees, lack of understanding of relevant regulatory frameworks; noncompliance with policies? (Mlambo and Masuku, (2020).

### **What are the Corruption Enablers in South Africa?**

Some of the main enablers of corruption in many of the developing countries including South Africa include “weaker application of the legislation and oversight mechanisms; insufficient political will; political deployments, low wages, and an absence of meritocratic systems” (Manyaka, 2014:1574).

The most dominant enable is weak procurement and tender processes in the public sector.

Dorasamy and Fagbadebo (2021) argue that in Africa, the procurement–corruption nexus is a major challenge for accelerated growth and development, in spite of the abundant human and material resources.

While procurement is an institutional arrangement to advance effective public service delivery, the menace of corruption permissible by the political elite compromises the responsibility of the government, thereby jeopardizing good governance. Prasad, da Silva and Nickow (2019); Netswera (2020); Mantzaris, and Ngcamu, 2020).

In order to redress apartheid processes which were discriminatory in nature when it comes to securing economic opportunities in government, the democratic South African government introduced a reform in the public sector procurement through a preferential procurement system to address the socio-economic objectives (Mantzaris, and Ngcamu, 2020).

Through this process previously disadvantaged groups are given preference when it comes to business opportunities within government sectors. This is as a result of the fact that the pre-democratic South Africa’s procurement system was characterised by discrimination and prejudices that favoured the white minority and disadvantaged the black majority (Munzhedzi, 2016).

Unfortunately, the tendering processes has been plagued by high levels of corruption activities which robs the South African society of its well-deserved efficient service provision.

Consequently, the procurement–corruption nexus is the prevalence of governance crisis. In other words, corruption in the procurement process is one of the biggest challenges facing the South Africa government.

Because the procurement process is compromised through corruption, the quality of the outputs are suspect, and the outcomes create poor service delivery (Prasad, da Silva and Nickow, 2019; Mahlala, and Netswera, 2020).

The consequences of corruption goes beyond just poor service delivery (Mantzaris and Ngcamu (2020); Mlambo and Masuku (2020); Dorasamy and Fagbadebo (2021).

Corruption has been associated with lower economic growth and increased poverty. It compromises the democratic credentials and objectives of the state.

When the ethical standard and rules become compromised, service delivery is hampered while good governance is in jeopardy as well (Dorasamy, and Fagbadebo, 2021).

Manyaka and Nkuna (2014:1572) “view corruption as problematic for most developing nations primarily because resources that are meant to achieve socio-economic and developmental objectives, often, are diverted to the benefit of a few corrupt elites, thereby undermining the developmental goals of these nations”.

Corruption harms poor citizens in a poor country more than rich countries thus entrenching global inequalities (Prasad, da Silva and Nickow, 2019).

Millions of taxpayer funds which could have been used to alleviate poverty is stolen through corrupt activities. Consequently, during the time of crisis in 2020, a majority of poor people were exposed to the ravages of COVID-19 because of the squandering of resources which were meant to assist them.

Munzhedzi (2016), purports that in order to succeed in the battle against corruption in the public sector procurement, officials who contravene rules must be arrested, tried and jailed.

Mafunisa (2013:751) puts it precisely that “corrupt actors must be named and punished so that a cynical citizenry believes that an anti-corruption drive is more than words”.

### **5. Corruption Trends in State Affairs- A Moral Degeneration of the state**

Sebola, Tsheola and Mafunisa (2014) write that corruption and democracy have achieved inescapable currency across the world and the common denominator between these two is absolute power (Douglass, 2009).

Whereas democracy, according to Pope (2000) is inherently associated with absolute power, political equality and corruption at the expense of the improvised.

Sebola et al (2014:1) asserted that “if the public sector is corrupt under a democratic system where freedom of expression are upheld and freely exercised, the society itself must be corrupt”.



These authors underscore the significance of society to remain whistle-blowers, polemic against the rampant corruption thread in the public service.

According to Marsiah (2002), a central feature of development in most countries over the past three decades has been engulfed by corruption.

Mudau (2021) argues that in geopolitical discourse, monopolistic institutions and developed states continue to compete for Africa's resources and corruption remains at the heart of this competition.

The narrative of corruption fuelled politics drives privatisation initiatives that seek to advance the interest of an elite that perpetuate political infamy (Feigenbaum, et al, 1998:42). One of the greatest challenges confronting Africa in the post-colonial era is corruption, maladministration and politicians interfering with administration (Mekoa, 2019).

Abbasi (2020) asserts that COVID-19 has unleashed state corruption that undermined humanity.

Politicians and senior government officials are suppressing humanity and casting aspersions on hard earned democracies. Humanity is suppressed for political and financial gain.

According to Mudau, Mokgokong and Khanya (2021) the contemporary developments brought by COVID-19 demands a capable state that is prepared to transform with the changing developments.

Mudau and Mukonza (2021) on the other hand, attest that in the heart of this capable state is innovation and the paucity of corruption. Williams & Taylor (2000) contend that the South African transition from the institutionalised racism of apartheid to a universally franchised democracy was remarkable.

However, a proliferation of literature contends that this transition was engulfed by corruption.

Bond (2014) writes that the contemporary political space went from force of liberation to serving the economic interest of the elite.

Asham and Newman (2011) argues that South Africa is the most unequal society in the world. This pandemic has exposed that inequality and in the process, politicians and senior government officials squandered public fund aimed at advancing the interest of the impoverished.

Mekoa (2019) opines that any study on Africa's context is limited if it doesn't make reference to corruption and neoliberalism.

The author argues that exploitation was at the heart of colonialism however, the "*real exploiters in post-colonial Africa are African leaders themselves*" (Mekoa, 2019:48).

The same people who are supposed to defend, protect and meliorate the lives of impoverished citizenry are responsible for institutionalised looting in most African countries (Mekoa, 2019).

This paper posits that corruption and neoliberalism has been institutionalised in Africa and must be acknowledged as a factor during key policy decision-making. Ayittey (1992) explains that corruption "*decreases the efficiency of the civil service and its ability to formulate and implement government development policies*".

Mlambo (2019:204) on the other hand opines that "*corruption has become a widespread occurrence for almost all African states post the colonial era and has manifested itself to make certain individual rich and the general populace poorer*".

Literature bears testimony that, particularly within the context of South Africa, corruption and neoliberalism are not a contemporary phenomenon but a perennial problem.

Mlambo (2019) emphasizes that due to the dynamic environment, corruption continuously takes different forms, for instance, the corruption during apartheid varies from the current spate of corruption one in independence.

Kgatle (2018) notes that post-1994 independent South Africa, the country reserved a high volume of National Party polices and brought with these into the new state that was to be democratically driven (Mlambo, 2019:208). The paper posits that these included corrupt state practices.

The 2021 Third Special Report of the Auditor General on the financial management of government's COVID-19 initiatives seeked to undertake an audit on financial management initiatives and funds at the 43 selected municipalities.

The report covered the R3.7 billion dispensed by those municipalities from March to December 2020. The area of focus was on the procurement and the utilisation of personal protective equipment (PPE), the delivery of COVID-19 related infrastructure projects and other related initiatives. When interrogating the above special reports, the following were some of the findings that were extracted but not limited to;

- Municipalities failed to respond to the increased risk of fraud in a crisis situation by adjusting their fraud risk management processes and implementing potent preventative controls.
- Poor workmanship, project delays and non-adherence to infrastructure-related requirements were observed on water and sanitation projects.
- Where funds were utilised for quarantine sites and temporary shelters, inadequate planning by some municipalities resulted in the facilities being over or under-utilised.



- The procurement of PPEs were also testament to the haphazard manner in which municipalities responded to the crisis thus, there was no adequate analyses prior to the procurement of PPEs.
- Unfairness in awarding of government business and caution was not taken into consideration regarding overpricing

These reports of the Auditor-General are testament to the rampant corruption during COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. The Auditor General's 2020 Special Report on financial mismanagement of government's COVID-19 initiatives also laid bare the extent in which corruption is deeply rooted in the structures of the public service.

Among others, the report postulates the red flags of payment to deceased people, duplicate payments and over payments in the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) and the Covid-19 Temporary Employer/Employee Relief Scheme (TERS).

Sebake and Mudau (2020) argue that a common synopsis on the AG's first and second special reports on COVID-19 initiatives is poor financial management of public institutions and embezzlement of public funds.

This paper submits that the COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity for corruption to flourish in healthcare and other sectors of the economy. Teremetskyl *et al* (2021) attest that at the heart of this corruption is the misuse and mismanagement of resources.

Sebake (2020) writes that governments are mandated to ensure service delivery that restores dignity. He argues however, that this pivotal responsibility is continuously undermined and confronted with challenges chief of whom is corruption.

Corruption implies that the public sieve is governed by politicians and public servants who have lost a sense of honesty and are faced with ethical dilemmas (Sebake & Sebola, 2014).

## 6. Summary and Recommendations

The aim of the paper was to deconstruct how COVID-19 exposed the extent in which corruption is deeply rooted in the public service.

With the perused literature above, the paper deduces and concludes that corruption has severe effects on the running of state affairs.

Both politicians and senior government officials are engulfed by corruption resulted in the compromise of service delivery at the expense of the impoverished.

The paper has found that corruption in South Africa has exposed government's inability to govern effectively and efficiently during the pandemic. This however does not imply lack of corruption in the private sector.

This paper avers that corruption is dynamic, flexible and forever mutating.

Politics and corruption are interrelated and interconnected hence a profuse number of politicians are linked with a plethora of orchestrated maladministration and corruption.

Therefore this paper proffers the following recommendations:-

- In order to encourage voluntary disclosure of information, government should build capacity and awareness regarding the protection of whistle-blowers.
- Strengthen Chapter Nine (9) institutions and Commissions of Enquiry, in other words, the recommendation of any investigated case made by Chapter 9 institutions or any Commission of Enquiry, should be implemented.
- The "checks and balance" by the Judiciary need to be strengthened because politics has assume a role of absolute power in all arms and spheres of government.
- The need for an autonomous judiciary still remains an outcry in the public discourse. The above measures will assist the State to wipe out the imprints of corruption in the public service.

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