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Political patronage: A catalyst for corruption and misgovernance in South Africa

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Abstract: Political patronage has become a notable concern in the South African public sector, often compared to a new epidemic because of its adverse effects on governance and public administration. This phenomenon involves by political leaders offering rewards and appointment people for key government positions and allocating resources to them based on their political loyalty rather than their abilities and qualifications. This intensifies corruption by fostering a culture in which competence is subordinate, resulting in inadequately qualified individuals assuming key positions and receiving benefits, thereby amplifying opportunities for unethical conduct. In turn, this practice undermines the effectiveness and integrity of public sector institutions. The purpose of this article is to offer a broader analysis and implications of political patronage and how it fuels corruption and governance in the South African public sector. This article employs a secondary research method through the review of existing literature to examine the nature of political patronage, its nexus with corruption and misgovernance in the public sector, drawing reference to contemporary, renowned corruption cases. This paper submits that overcoming these challenges necessitates a holistic approach that involves the professionalization of the public sector, robust measures to combat corruption, and improved transparency. The objective is to establish and promote a public service that emphasizes competence, responsibility, and the fulfilment of governance functions in order to serve the wider interests of citizens.

Keywords: politics; patronage; government; corruption; governance; public sector

1. Introduction

Political patronage is a prevalent issue in South African politics and governance, enabling political leaders within governmental institutions to exercise their authority by appointing preferred individuals to government positions and allocating resources to them to maintain loyalty (Olver, 2021). This practice can create opportunities for corruption, allowing for the inappropriate use of government resources. Additionally, politicians often select loyal supporters for government roles, displacing highly qualified candidates. This can result in the appointment of individuals who may lack the necessary expertise and skills relevant to public administration, negatively impacting their ability to make informed decisions and provide effective guidance on governmental operations (Campbell, 2020). Moreover, the preference for loyalists over citizens in the fair distribution and allocation of government resources leads to inefficiency, suboptimal resource utilization, and insufficient service delivery. Such behaviors undermine good governance and foster an environment where corruption becomes normalized. Ultimately, this system erodes accountability, threatens service delivery, perpetuates injustice, and creates an atmosphere of impunity where misconduct remains unaddressed (Toral, 2019). Consequently, public trust diminishes

when citizens view politicians and government officials as corrupt and unresponsive to their needs and expectations (Toral, 2019).

The historical context of political patronage can be traced back to the colonial era, during which it was perceived as a mechanism for social regulation and governance. Political leaders used patronage networks to ensure loyalty from individuals and to maintain their authority, frequently in return for resources and privileges. This system, however, frequently overlooked numerous communities and sustained disparities within the social and political domains (Gray, 2017). Following South Africa's transition to democracy, the persistence of political patronage was evident as leaders utilized similar strategies to uphold their power and influence. This situation evolved further when the African National Congress (ANC) encountered issues of factionalism and internal discord (Mongale and Venter, 2024), which solidified the dynamics of patronage and entrenched networks that ultimately compromised the pursuit of accountability and transparency within public sector institutions. This system has markedly contributed to inequality and exclusion, as individuals lacking political connections often find themselves marginalized from opportunities, with political leaders favoring patronage over equitable access. The allocation of resources and governmental benefits has favored a certain number of individuals, rather than serving the broader populace of South Africa, resulting in occurrences of corruption and the mismanagement of public institutions (Brett, 2020). Recent developments in political patronage are driven by the corruption scandals that have unfolded over the past decade, capturing national attention, and serving as critical examples of the manifestations of political patronage currently occurring in South Africa, thereby underscoring the necessity for reform and transformations.

This phenomenon has been identified as a sign of unstable government in contemporary South Africa. Political patronage is acknowledged as a crucial promoter of corruption and other negative activities in the public sector (Olver, 2018). The state capture case involving former President Jacob Zuma and the Gupta family is a significant example of patronage tactics. The Gupta family had significant influence over government appointments and contracts, resulting in the recruitment of unqualified individuals to critical positions within State-Owned Enterprises, including Eskom (Brett, 2020). Furthermore, as demonstrated by the Digital Vibes controversy in 2021, the impact of patronage on the distribution of tenders and contracts favors businesses with significant links to politicians over those offering better value (Davis, 2021).

Despite widespread criticism for its negative impact on governance and public service delivery, Toral (2024) contends that the patronage and appointment of candidates to public positions fosters a relationship between administrators and politicians that improves institutional oversight, accountability, and service provision. Political appointments have the potential to improve accountability efficiency and service delivery. However, the significant benefits of political patronage are outweighed by several obvious negative aspects. In South Africa, the political patronage system has created an environment in which appointments are driven by party allegiance rather than merit. This technique weakens the contributions of skilled and certified experts, instead rewarding less experienced persons with political connections (Tsako, 2020).

Certain political appointees have difficulties making well-informed decisions that are consistent with the government's developmental objectives. This results in inefficiencies in government operations and poor service delivery, ultimately jeopardizing the integrity and governance of public sector institutions (Mlambo et al., 2022). According to Labuschagne (2017), political patronage has jeopardized the government's vital duty, particularly in terms of resource allocation, reducing the delivery of government services. As a result, there has been a significant increase in corruption within governmental entities, as well as mismanagement and improper use of public funds and resources, all of which have a negative impact on institutions. One could argue that patronage promotes political stability by ensuring that those in power have the support of their constituents; however, the long-term consequences of such stability frequently undermine accountability, transparency, and the proper allocation of resources intended for public welfare (Olver, 2018).

Political patronage creates a dysfunctional public sector, compromising public institutions' efficacy and integrity. The practice undermines both accountability and transparency, creating an ongoing cycle of inefficiency in service delivery that affects historically underprivileged communities. The conflict between personal interests and loyalty to public service has resulted in insufficient development initiatives and a loss of trust in governmental institutions (Shava and Mazenda, 2021). The public sector can eliminate corruption-enabling structures by improving oversight systems, prioritizing meritocracy, and cultivating ethical leadership. This approach seeks to restore institutional stability, assuring effective governance and cultivating a democratic public service committed to justice, accountability, and sustainable development.

The purpose of this article is to explore the dynamics of political patronage and its implications within the South African public sector and provide an analysis of how patronage networks and their contributions to corruption and misgovernance. The choice to focus on political patronage is driven by its significant impact on public sector governance, particularly in the context of ongoing challenges related to corruption and ineffective governance. Understanding political patronage is vital for the advancement of accountable and transparent government; therefore, this article aims to contribute to the discourse on enhancing governance through the development of a more efficient public sector. Furthermore, the article intends to explain ways in which the dynamics of patronage can be effectively managed to improve governance and service delivery.

2. Literature review and theory

2.1. Conceptual analysis of political patronage

Political patronage is defined by the patron-client relationship between a political leader and their supporters. The phenomenon is conceptualised as a patron-client connection, a prevalent structure of reciprocity, wherein patrons provide material assistance and protection to clients, who, in return, offer loyalty to the patrons (Driscoll, 2018). The notion of patronage is examined within an anthropological framework, where it is associated with peasant societies and likened to the idea of the "big man" who supports others (Lewis and Hossain, 2022). Owing to insufficient

resources, peasants affiliate themselves with influential patrons who supply essential resources for survival. The expected reciprocity in the connection between a patron and a client epitomizes the essence of patronage (Mlambo et al., 2022). Despite the seeming inequality between a patron and a client, their interdependence is evident. The patrons offer tangible incentives and security as rewards to clients, who are anticipated to reciprocate with loyalty to the patrons.

From a political standpoint, literature on political patronage predominantly depicts it as a transaction occurring between voters and political parties. Political patronage primarily concerns the methods by which political party leaders allocate state resources to their loyal individuals in return for electoral backing (Campbell, 2020). The ruling party provides various benefits, including projects, tenders, positions, and other rewards, to clients who are anticipated to return with loyalty, manifested through votes essential for the patrons to maintain political power (Oliveros, 2021). The symbiotic relationship between a patron and a client in political patronage is reinforced and driven by the patron's authority in a political office, which is acquired solely through the faithful votes of the clients. Provided the patron offers advantages to the client and the clients respond by voting for the patron in political elections, their connection is likely to endure.

Perspectives on the effectiveness of political patronage differ considerably in terms of its strengths and weaknesses. For instance, researchers such as Toral (2019) argue that patronage plays a crucial and pervasive role in upholding the fundamental principles of democracy. In contrast, other scholars, including Subandi et al. (2022), view it as a barrier to progress in effective service delivery and good governance. Okojie and Ebonine (2024) also argue that it is a natural tendency for leaders to align themselves with loyal and reliable supporters; therefore, it is not surprising that political leaders prefer to interact with party members who demonstrate steadfast commitment, support, and loyalty. In a similar vein, Dyzenhaus (2021) articulates that political patronage appointments may serve as mechanisms to improve efficiency within the public service and to counteract bureaucratic sabotage. In contrast,

In contrast, in a system characterized by political patronage, politicians cultivate a dynamic culture wherein patrons confer positions, favors, and rewards to their clients in return for the loyalty and political support. This situation presents challenges as a result of improper and unlawful practices within government institutions, where resources intended for equitable service delivery to the public are, instead, diverted to supporters of influential individuals. The complex nature of this relationship is often exemplified by the tendency of political leaders to compensate party members and supporters for their loyalty by synchronizing their interests with those of the leaders themselves (Okojie and Ebonine, 2024). Due to their interdependent relationship, politicians engage followers to acquire political power, while supporters depend on politicians to obtain opportunities and resources. This association fosters corruption and mismanagement in the public sector by creating an environment where loyalty and favouritism overshadows merit and accountability (Peters and Boanchi, 2020). This exemplifies a perpetual cycle wherein constituents are compelled to support politicians, often sacrificing greater morality, accountability, transparency, and the needs of the broader population. Moreover, the benefits and privileges provided to supporters, such as the allocation of government contracts and tenders, establish a cycle of corruption

that prioritizes individual gain over the collective welfare of all citizens, simultaneously utilizing public resources for private benefit. The consequences of these actions bolster political patronage, erode the fundamental principles of governance, and destroy public confidence in governmental institutions. Moreover, the system perpetuates inequality by marginalizing disadvantaged individuals from accessing governmental benefits, thereby exacerbating social divisions. Opportunities and resources are allocated unevenly among citizens, favoring those with political connections.

2.2. Nexus of political patronage, corruption, and mismanagement in public institutions

Patronage and corruption are closely interdependent concepts. Politicians and patrons provide favors through appointment of individuals to government positions in return for their support and political loyalty. Corruption arises when this process involves unethical practices such as nepotism, bribery, and inadequate use of resources. Individuals elevated to positions of authority through patronage may perceive themselves as entitled to exploit their influence for personal gain (Zeeshan et al., 2022). For example, a politician might recruit an associate to a senior government role and thereafter utilize that individual to channel government contracts to their own business or enterprise. Consequently, corruption may result in inefficiency, as individuals lacking qualifications or competence are appointed to positions of authority only due to their loyalty to the patronage system (Motswaledi and Maseng, 2024). This may result in a scenario where those in authority are incapable of fulfilling their responsibilities, causing stagnation in societal progress and development. This relationship causes threats to effective governance, complicating the efforts to achieve good governance by creating a system of political favors.

Oluseye (2024) asserts that the political patronage system fosters corruption by prioritizing political loyalty over public interests, hence undermining effective governance. Ceva and Ferretti (2021) consider this as preferential treatment in the distribution of the benefits, resources and appointments of public officials on the basis of political patronage to be against the principle of merit-based system, thus engendering systemic corruption. Ojo et al. (2020) maintains that patronage and corruption overlap, however this overlap is of different types. Patronage at times lead to corruption while at other times it is corruption. As a starting point, the concept of patronage is not as penetrating as corruption; it is done in the open and not under the table as most corruption deals are in the current era of South African public service. However, the overlap into corruption is obvious when these appointments are done for the purpose of providing private kickbacks. This shows that patronage can be instrumental for a politician to achieve a political mileage through the deployment of loyal members who embrace and advance the interests of a political party. However, a common phenomenon in a country like South Africa is that patronage invariably leads to corruption because state resources are at the disposal of the ruling political parties under very weak government systems.

Patronage, corruption, and mismanagement can create a challenging cycle that is difficult to disrupt, with each component influencing the others. For example,

corruption often arises from patronage, which can undermine governance. This, in turn, exacerbates mismanagement within public sector institutions, leading to a decline in the quality of services provided. The implications of political patronage extend beyond inefficiency and are closely linked to the broader issue of corruption. The relationship between patronage networks and corrupt activities significantly undermines the integrity of public institutions. Notable corruption cases, such as those involving the Gupta family and former President Jacob Zuma, serve as examples of how political patronage fosters an environment conducive to systematic corruption. These instances underscore a concerning trend in which state resources are diverted for personal benefit, ultimately eroding public trust in government institutions.

2.3. Adverse effects of political patronage on effective governance and society

Patronage has different aspects and may manifest differently in various communities. While some see it as a necessary part of doing business, others view it as a corrupt and unethical practice that undermines the principles of fairness and meritocracy (Ahmed, 2024). One of the most significant impacts of political patronage is that it undermines meritocracy. When political appointments are made based on loyalty rather than qualifications, it leads to incompetent individuals holding positions of power. This can result in poor governance, corruption, and a lack of accountability. Political patronage can also perpetuate inequality by favoring certain groups of individuals over others. For example, if a politician only provides benefits to their supporters, it can create a system where certain groups have an unfair advantage over others. This can lead to social unrest and a lack of trust in the government (Ahmed, 2024).

In an ideal democratic society, the recruitment of political and public office bearers along with the distribution of resources, would be determined by the skills and abilities possessed by individuals. However, the political appointments favor loyalty more than competence in South Africa (Polga-Hecimovich, 2021). For instance, SOEs recently encounter challenges with leadership, as executive appointments are made largely on political affiliations rather than managerial competencies. This practice not only impacts government but also facilitates a rise of corruption. Most recently, the SOEs (Eskom, SAA, SABC) have been under scrutiny due to mismanagement and ineffective leadership, which is often attributed to the consequences of political patronage. The increase in economic disparities confronting South Africa is also considered to be an outcome of political patronage. When politicians provide privileges and benefits through government positions and incentives to their associates, they create a culture in which resources and opportunities are inequitably distributed. The allocation of tenders, such as the Digital Vibes contract, to individuals linked to politicians results in inequities by excluding those who are not within the political sphere and lack connections to politicians.

Political patronage violates the constitutional principles of public administration, particularly accountability and transparency. This idea leads to dysfunctional governance systems that fail to accomplish the intended objective of service delivery (Cameron, 2022). When individuals are appointed through political networks and

connections, institutions are managed by individuals lacking adequate abilities and management competencies. This generates a misalignment that leads to poor decision-making and fosters a culture characterized by operational inefficiencies and inadequate service delivery. Moreover, politically selected leaders often experience a sense of power and autonomy, resulting in a failure to adhere to ethical and regulatory requirements. The abuse their power and authority without regard for consequence and ignore the systems intended to ensure accountability, resulting in an increase of corruption within the public sector and perpetuating a cycle of poor performance, mismanagement, and inefficiency (Mophethe, 2023).

Furthermore, Majid and Memon (2019) contend that political patronage has a significant impact on society, particularly detrimental to disadvantaged and marginalized groups, thereby exacerbating inequality and socio-economic disparities. When governmental resources are allocated to individuals who are strong supporters of political leaders, historically marginalized populations, who often rely on government assistance, are frequently left out of this distribution. This practice fosters social division, placing greater emphasis on loyalty than on the collective welfare of the community. As a result, marginalized individuals may feel deprived, leading to a decline in trust and confidence in government institutions. When citizens perceive that their political leaders prioritize personal interests over the common good, their willingness to engage in governmental processes diminishes, which can also manifest in social protests (Majid and Memon, 2019).

2.4. Comparative review of political patronage: Global and African context

Research indicates that the patronage system is a prevalent issue affecting numerous countries in Africa and beyond, presenting itself in various forms across diverse contexts. Similar to South Africa, Brazil and Kenya have encountered considerable challenges that have affected governance, economic development, and public trust. Despite their differing circumstances, the substantial implications of political patronage are comparable and in line with those observed in South Africa. In both countries, patronage is manifested through political connections, corruption, and the allocation of resources based on political affiliation.

In Brazil, there exists a political system in which elected officials provide resources, services, and favors to their supporters in exchange for political loyalty. This dynamic undermines democratic governance by fostering dependency, causing citizens to rely on political connections rather than established institutional frameworks for accessing government resources and opportunities (Bardhan, 2021). The 2014 Operation Car Wash scandal serves as a significant example of this issue, exposing extensive networks of patronage involving politicians, business leaders, and state-owned enterprises engaged in widespread corruption, bribery, and misappropriation of public funds (Vilchez et al., 2020). This investigation revealed instances of contractors bribing executive management and politicians to secure tender contracts, alongside misappropriation of funds intended for political campaigns and personal gain. Further reports highlighted the political affiliations that facilitated such corruption and the misallocation of public funds (Cherry, 2021).

In Kenya, political patronage is often tied to ethnic affiliations, where government resources and opportunities are allocated among ethnic groups in exchange for loyalty and support. Mutuku et al. (2023) argue that this system fosters ethnic discord and fragmentation, thereby undermining governmental efforts to cultivate a unified national identity and promote national development. Much like Brazil, this patronage leads to increased corruption, as evidenced by the recent National Youth Service scandal involving the misappropriation of public funds (Wang and Wissenbach, 2019). Consequently, political patronage establishes a cycle of dependency in which political leaders secure support by offering employment opportunities, contracts, and incentives to their constituents. This perpetuates political corruption, hindering operational efficiency in government, and compromising service delivery and sustainable development.

2.5. Theoretical perspective: Clientelism theory

Clientelism, often referred to as the patron-client politics, pervades modern political systems globally. The concept denotes a network of personal relationships between political patrons or leaders and their respective clients. These connections are established on reciprocal material benefit. The patron provides resources (such as financial support, and employment) to loyalists in exchange for their support (Berg and Yüksel, 2022). Clientelism has a significant impact on crucial issues such as weakening democracy and economic progress, as well as being a manifestation of a dysfunctional political system. For others, clientelism weakens citizens' ability to hold elected officials accountable, both individually and collectively, and forces them to maintain autocratic and corrupt governments out of fear and self-interest. (Peters and Bianchi, 2020). Clientelism also diverts limited resources that may otherwise be utilized for economic development and creates incentives to maintain constituents in a state of poverty and dependence. It both mirrors and perpetuates greater levels of corruption, ultimately reducing public confidence in democratic institutions (Hicken, 2011).

The foundation of clientelism aligns with the main subject of this study by examining the patron-client relationships constituted by political patronage. Clientelism is a kind of anti-democratic accountability in which politicians seek voter support by offering material incentives in return for continued support. Kuo (2018) presents various viewpoints on the consideration of clientelism. She further says that in governmental election processes, this theory is synonymous with vote purchasing. Politicians provide citizens with financial incentives, sustenance, and employment opportunities in exchange for their votes (Kuo, 2018). This behavior does not align with genuine democratic principles; rather, it resembles a form of vote buying, undermining the genuine free will of citizens. In governmental administration, clientelism refers to circumstances in which politicians allocate incentives such as government contracts, grants, and job offers to persons in exchange for loyalty and support (Kuo, 2018).

The theory contends that leaders offer rewards, privileges, and opportunities to voters to secure political support. This type of relationship may result in the distortion of democratic processes, as politicians prioritize politically connected individuals over

the general populace, so further undermining accountability, and effective government (Althaus, 2022). These examples reinforce corruption, as patronage transactions are executed in a manner that exemplifies nepotism through the recruitment of unqualified supporters and loyalists to critical government positions. It also denotes instances of bribery wherein politically connected individuals provide monetary or other favors in return for advantageous decisions and government contract awards. Furthermore, it illustrates the misallocation of government resources diverted to projects that serve political elites rather than community needs, and it also exemplifies the abuse of power, wherein politicians exploit their authority to reward and confer benefits to supporters, thereby undermining constitutional obligations and the equitable treatment of citizens. These instances result in institutional failure as politicians prioritize the allocation of government resources and opportunities to specific groups, thereby neglecting the broader citizens. This fosters social divisions and undermines service delivery, as these resources are intended for public service provision as the primary goal of government (Althaus, 2022).

3. Methodology

The relationship between political patronage and corruption was investigated through a comprehensive literature review ensure a thorough understanding of the dynamics within the South African political context. This review included an analysis of various scholarly articles, online resources, and government reports to gain insights into the definitions, characteristics, and consequences of political patronage, as well as its contribution to corruption and unethical practices in the South African public sector. Renowned academic databases such as Google Scholar, ProQuest, and Emerald Insights were utilized to identify relevant material. The literature focus centered on the specific themes of political patronage, corruption, and misgovernance, with particular attention to recent examples of corruption connected to political patronage documented over the past decade because of their relevance and contemporaneity. The selection of literature was guided by significant issues such as patronage mechanisms, case studies of notable scandals, and theoretical frameworks that clarify the interplay between political behavior and governance. This approach included recurring themes and patterns, such as the conceptual analysis of political patronage and corruption processes, alongside relevant case studies that highlight patronage characteristics. Furthermore, by focusing on a limited number of case scenarios, the research recognizes a broader spectrum of corruption occurrences in the public sector that extend beyond established networks. To maintain a clear geographic focus and ensure contextual relevance regarding the unique aspects of the South African public sector, cases from outside South Africa were excluded. This methodology synthesizes findings from multiple sources, linking theoretical frameworks with empirical evidence to analyze the functioning of political patronage in South Africa, thereby revealing systemic vulnerabilities and underscoring the need for reform.

4. Results

The existing literature on patronage in South Africa indicates different levels and instances of corruption stemming from political influence and patronage. The table

below presents a concerning summary of renowned, high profile corruption cases substantially driven by political patronage during the last decade in South Africa. These cases expose several manifestations of corruption, encompassing procurement and tender-related malfeasance, alongside political corruption within state-owned companies. The case studies were chosen for their relevance and effectiveness in illustrating specific examples of political patronage in South Africa. Additionally, they emphasize broader patterns of patronage and its tangible implications for governance and society as a whole.

These corruption scandals signify the longstanding issues associated with patronage networks that have persisted over the years. The following themes emerged from the review of literature findings (**Table 1**):

Table 1. Notable cases of corruption linked with political patronage in South Africa.

Case/s	Period	Nature	Corruption Category
Nkandla security upgrade scandal	2014	Public funds of approximately 246 million rands were improperly utilized for former President’s security upgrade at his homestead (Bester and Dobovšek, 2021).	Mismanagement of funds
Gupta family scandal (2016)	2016	This case encompasses the Gupta family’s influence over the appointments and dismissals of South African cabinet members, the unlawful allocation of state contracts to Gupta-affiliated entities, the preferential treatment of Gupta-owned enterprises by banks (Dassah, 2018).	Political patronage, political and procurement corruption
Parastatals of State-Owned Enterprises (with specific reference to ESKOM, SAA, SABC)	2014–2016	The leadership problems at South Africa’s state-owned companies (SOEs) have resulted from significant political interference in their management. These SOEs have become unsustainable owing to ineffective leadership and preferential appointments based on political connections and associations (Dassah, 2018).	Political patronage, fraud, corruption, misuse of resources
Bosasa contractor scandal	2018	Allegedly bribed ANC politicians in exchange for substantial contracts with the government departments (Business Live, 2019).	Bribery
Looting of VBS mutual bank	2018	A wide scale of looting, fraud and corruption was found where an amount of over a million was transferred to fifty-three individuals where leadership of the EFF and the ANC benefitted, (Corruption Watch, 2018).	Misallocation of funds, political patronage
Digital vibes scandal	2021	Involves the former Minister of Health awarding a Covid19 communications tender to a family member (Magome, 2021).	Procurement fraud and patronage appointment

Source: Generated by author from online articles.

4.1. Mismanagement of public funds

The Nkandla Security Upgrade incident presents significant case study in the examination of the misappropriation of funds, illustrating how political patronage leads to governance failures. Millions of rands were allocated to unnecessary enhancements to the private residence of former President Jacob Zuma. These expenditures were positioned as essential components of the presidential package; however, they sparked ethical and legal concerns regarding their appropriateness (Motsaathebe, 2023). The incident demonstrate a concerning factor where public resources were used for personal gain and enrichment, ultimately undermining the integrity of public institutions.

Furthermore, the Gupta family has notably influenced the political landscape of the country, with allegations surrounding political patronage and corruption. This situation has raised alarms regarding the family’s role in the appointment of cabinet members, the illegal acquisition of government contracts, and the preferential

treatment received from banks and other businesses. Consequently, practices such as bribery and influence peddling have been brought to light, as the Gupta family has amassed wealth at the expense of South African citizens (Dassah, 2018). These actions reveal a system where loyalty to political leaders is more important and overrides accountability and transparency, leading to instances of corruption.

These cases exemplify a troubling trend where political leaders exploit state resources for personal advantage, fostering a culture of entitlement that undermines public institutions. This leads to governance crises and exacerbates social inequalities. The Nkandla scandal, in particular, highlighted the diversion of resources from essential services to security enhancements, thereby impeding economic development and contributing to rising poverty levels. Furthermore, the case signifies a culture of political patronage, as the actions of former President Zuma were defended by those loyal to him who benefited from this favouritism, thereby perpetuating unethical governance and eroding accountability. This situation has severely undermined democratic governance, as citizens have lost trust in governance structures after witnessing substantial misallocation of funds for personal gain, sidelining public needs, and further weakening democratic processes. Additionally, the involvement of the Gupta family in government affairs exemplifies the consequences of political patronage, as they leveraged their close ties with the former President to influence governmental appointments and secure contracts within state-owned enterprises.

4.2. Bribery and political interference in SOEs

The management of SOEs has also been affected by political patronage. Appointment of individuals to occupy leadership and management positions often favor loyalty over competency, leading to a governance structure that supports party interests over operational efficiency (Apriliyanti, 2023). SOEs such as South African Airways, ESKOM, South African Broadcasting Cooperation (SABC) have been grappling operational efficiency due to political decisions that prioritizes political interests and personal gains over the SOE's operational targets. This has led to poor governance of SOEs, poor financial sustainability, corruption and mismanagement. (Bester and Dobovšek, 2021). A notable Bosasa contractor scandal also gained significant attention in 2018 also signified the depth of political patronage wherein the company found itself at the centre of corruption scandals involving the ruling party members (ANC) and government officials. The connection of this company with prominent politicians and government officials was extensive. As a result, the reports indicate that politician were benefiting through receiving monthly payments from the company as a form of bribery in order to secure government tenders and contracts worth millions of rands (Myeza et al., 2021). Such corruption illustrates how patronage in in public procurement processes can lead to misuse of funds, as decisions are made based on political connections rather than the best interests of government institutions and the citizens at large.

The nature of political patronage and the extensive implications it has on governance and economic development have made their presence known. Mismanagement and operational failures have occurred as a result of the appointment of executive management of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) based on political loyalty.

When it came to managing state-owned enterprises (SOEs), political links were frequently favored over standard management procedures. As a consequence of this, there has been a misalignment, which has led to operational inefficiencies and increasing debts. Additionally, the Bosasa contractor exemplified political patronage in public procurement by securing contracts and tenders through bribery and unethical contacts with high-profile politicians and public officials. This situation was a prime example of political patronage in public procurement. This brought to light the corrupting effects of patronage on procurement procedures, which ultimately resulted in government contracts being granted on the basis of political connections. These occurrences provide a manifestation of a concerning pattern that routinely undermines the capability of the government to carry out its duties.

4.3. Procurement fraud and patronage appointment

The VBS Bank scandal underscores the significant impact of patronage and has recently attracted public attention due to extensive corruption involving both executive management and political figures. Politicians were implicated in this scandal by means of receiving bribes and monies for their political campaign. This resulted in loss of millions of rands, including invested monies by the public in a form of stokvels (Van Rensburg, 2020). The most recent Digital Vibes scandal revealed procurement irregularities including the orchestration of funds intended for the Department of Health tender which was awarded to the company that is associated with the former minister of the Department of Health- Dr Zweli Mkhize. This also indicated the abuse of power wherein the minister played a significant role in influencing the procurement processes for the benefit of the company he has close ties with (Ravidasan, 2023). Additionally, the reports revealed that improper procurement processes were followed which raised concerns regarding irregularities and misuse of public funds.

The cases illustrate how patronage perpetuates corruption within South Africa. The VBS scandal exemplifies practices driven by political considerations that ultimately leading to financial loss and eventual collapse of the bank. In light of personal and political affiliations, there has been a diversion of funds into private accounts through misappropriation. Municipalities overseen by politicians who maintained intimate connections with the bank allocated millions, culminating in significant losses when the bank eventually collapsed. This highlights the peril inherent in political patronage, as it elevates allegiance above professional standards and cautious fiscal oversight. The collapse of VBS bank significantly hindered the municipalities' capacity to provide essential services, thereby exacerbating a wider governance crisis. In a comparable manner, the Digital Vibes company maintained strong connections with political figures and acquired funding via questionable procurement methods, thereby undermining the integrity of procurement processes. This led to a lack of efficiency and a misallocation of resources to companies with strong connections to political figures. The wider implications contribute to a scepticism surrounding the integrity of political leaders and their institutions. In summary, the examples of these cases illustrate how political patronage can compromise governance and contribute to systematic corruption in South Africa. The mismanagement of funds, bribery, procurement fraud are manifestations of a trend that

hinders the ability of government to serve its citizens effectively, and thus perpetuating social inequalities.

5. Discussion

Implications of political patronage on governance efficiency, economic development and public trust

The cases highlight the adverse effects on governance, democracy, and economic development, revealing both systemic challenges and the detrimental influence of political patronage on accountability and transparency. Consequently, they contribute to the governance crises and socio-economic inequalities currently facing South Africa (Zeesha et al., 2022). These instances illustrate a breakdown in governance characterized by the misallocation of resources that detracts from providing equitable services to the community. This mismanagement has significant implications for economic development; when funds intended for essential progress are misallocated, it exacerbates socio-economic issues that disproportionately impact disadvantaged communities reliant on government services (Gray, 2017). This undermines the government's ability to achieve its primary objective of service delivery, resulting in pressing social issues such as insufficient service provision, poverty, and unemployment.

The repercussions of patronage on socially disadvantaged communities are severe, as these populations depend heavily on governmental support. The presence of corruption and ineffective government operations directly affects these communities. For example, the inefficiency of state-owned enterprises like ESKOM has led to frequent power outages, which are a direct result of poor management. Additionally, job losses in the tourism sector due to staff reductions at SAA have significantly impacted marginalized communities. The misappropriation and misuse of financial resources for personal gain hinder the delivery of essential services (Olver, 2018). As individuals gain a deeper understanding of corrupt practices and the lack of accountability within governmental institutions, they may disengage from public participation and the electoral process (Cherry, 2021). This disengagement can result in decreased voter turnout and reduced public involvement in governmental matters, leading individuals to feel that their voices are overlooked. Such disconnection weakens the institutions' ability to function effectively and respond to the needs of citizens.

In consideration of global and African context, the findings revealed that political patronage remains a systemic and global challenge faced by developing countries, including South Africa. The trends observed in Brazil, Kenya, and South Africa suggest that patronage functions as a survival mechanism, with political figures utilizing it to maintain power and influence. This creates an environment where politicians prioritize the loyalty of their supporters over the fundamental needs of the public, rewarding their backers with favors and appointments in pivotal government roles. Such practices promote nepotism and the misallocation of resources to benefit political allies at the expense of public interests. Drawing parallels with Brazil's Operation Car Wash investigation which closely resembles South Africa's State

Capture inquiry, there is clear evidence of extensive patronage-driven corruption involving politicians and their loyal associates. In Kenya, the phenomenon of political patronage frequently correlates with ethnic divisions, as politicians seek to gain support, resulting in social fragmentation where certain ethnic groups receive more significant benefits than others. In the South African context, individuals with political connections are often more likely to benefit from patronage than historically disadvantaged citizens, thereby perpetuating inequality. Both Kenya and South Africa continue to face considerable challenges arising from political patronage networks, where politicians engage in corrupt practices to maintain loyalty and reinforce their power.

The results underscore the critical necessity for the assessment of governance structures, guaranteeing accountability and openness. Conventional systems frequently presume political frameworks based on meritocracy and logical decision-making; however, the impact of political patronage undermines these assumptions, illustrating how political affiliations and loyalty can affect governance outcomes. The findings demonstrate the adverse impact of patronage on the efficacy of government institutions, and comprehending how political patronage influences institutional dynamics can guide policy frameworks aimed at combating corruption and promoting good governance. Furthermore, it necessitates the efficient establishment of oversight mechanisms to guarantee that appointments and resource allocations are grounded in merit rather than political allegiance, while also ensuring that operational processes are scrutinized and assessed to uphold transparency and accountability in the public sector.

6. Recommendations and conclusion

To effectively address political patronage and its impact on governance and economic stability in South Africa, a comprehensive approach is essential for identifying solutions that strengthen government institutions, enhance accountability and transparency, and promote good governance. Institutions may consider implementing the following strategies to combat political patronage and corruption:

6.1. Depoliticize government institutions

A fundamental shift towards depoliticizing public sector institutions is necessary to ensure that appointments are made based on merit and qualifications rather than political affiliations. Even in strategically significant positions, such as executives and board members in state-owned enterprises, it is essential to establish clear criteria for appointments to guarantee that individuals possess the requisite expertise. Furthermore, there should be a strengthened emphasis on professionalizing the public sector by implementing initiatives aimed at enhancing standards and practices, thereby ensuring that operations are conducted at a high level of expertise and ethical conduct. This approach should transcend the entire political and administrative spectrum. Additionally, the deployment of politicians should be guided by their skills and competencies relevant to public office. Such practices have the potential to transform public service, promoting greater accountability, transparency, and effective governance while fostering a culture of a knowledgeable and skilled public service.

6.2. Strengthen oversight structures

A reevaluation of the role of oversight structures within government institutions is essential. Recently, the independent oversight bodies in South Africa have faced political influences that compromise their ability to make independent decisions. This is illustrated by the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into State Capture, which was intended to operate autonomously. However, the outcomes raised concerns regarding political influence, particularly as politicians who testified created circumstances leading to legal complications and challenges in navigating political loyalty within the commission's framework (Swanepoel, 2021). This situation underscores the difficulties in maintaining independence in a politically charged atmosphere. For effective accountability of institutions regarding maladministration, it is imperative that oversight structures, such as the Auditor-General, Public Protector, and Commissions of Inquiry, retain full independence. Their autonomy is vital to implement accountability measures without political interference, thereby fostering public confidence in governmental operations.

6.3. Enhance regulatory frameworks for accountability and transparency

The initiative to enhance anti-corruption systems and practices is crucial for effectively tackling the issue of political patronage. It is essential to establish a clear framework that specifies defined corruption practices, corresponding penalties for violations, and measures for the recovery of misappropriated resources. Furthermore, improving procurement systems by mandating the public disclosure of procurement processes from tender evaluation to award decisions will promote transparency and reduce opportunities for corruption. The formation of autonomous anti-corruption commissions is crucial for a thorough investigation of matters pertaining to corruption, the influence of patronage, and the misallocation of public resources. Furthermore, a comprehensive examination and revision of current oversight bodies, including the Office of the Auditor General and the Public Protector, could be conducted to pinpoint deficiencies and improve operational efficiency. This could encompass strategies aimed at enhancing their power and independence, consequently reducing the influence of politicians in their operations. Promoting public engagement is essential in cultivating collaborative alliances that can proficiently oversee governmental activities and ensure accountability. Moreover, the formulation of regulations that encourage the utilization of technology to establish transparent and accessible platforms for overseeing public sector activities could be instrumental in eradicating political patronage and fostering a culture of integrity and sound governance within public service.

6.4. Adoption of global best practices

Addressing political patronage necessitates collaboration among countries worldwide. The implementation of a merit-based system, as demonstrated in Singapore and Rwanda, serves as a model that South Africa can consider mitigating the issue of appointing individuals based on political connections rather than qualifications. Singapore emphasizes meritocracy by establishing a system that transparently evaluates individuals based on their abilities and qualifications,

promoting the notion that socioeconomic advancement should be accessible to all. Similarly, Rwanda has initiated civil service reform efforts to foster meritocracy. South Africa could adopt similar approaches applied in Rwanda and Singapore such as merit-based recruitment and mandatory skills programmes to improve the skills of public officials and reduce dependency on political connections. Furthermore, it could adopt a clear performance metrics for public service and align incentives with national priorities. It could also consider establishing an independent body to oversee recruitment processes and merit-based appointments to reduce the influence of patronage.

Furthermore, countries such as Georgia have embraced principles of open government partnerships, which ensure that citizens have access to government data and decision-making processes, allowing them to engage in government affairs. While South Africa advocates for similar transparency and accountability, challenges persist, including a lack of public interest and insufficient feedback mechanisms from the government (Matloga et al., 2024). This area requires further exploration to enhance the effectiveness and productivity of public service. Implementing and strengthening these measures has the potential to effectively dismantle patronage networks. Through these reforms, South Africa can develop a more functional, accountable, and transparent public service that is responsive to the needs of the citizens.

In summary, this paper has thoroughly examined the impact of political patronage on corruption and governance in South Africa. The findings indicate that political loyalty often takes precedence over meritocracy, resulting in political leaders prioritizing their supporters over the general population when distributing government resources. This system exacerbates corruption, diverting government resources to benefit political loyalists, causing inefficiencies in SOEs due to politically appointed executive management, and leading to the misallocation of funds. To address these issues, this research proposes several policy frameworks, including the establishment of a depoliticized public sector where the influence of political leaders on institutional operations and key appointments is minimized. Additionally, there is a need to prioritize the professionalization of the public sector, ensuring that meritocracy guides hiring and promotion practices. Strengthening oversight institutions will also be crucial in monitoring operational processes, reducing corrupt practices, and enhancing accountability and transparency. Furthermore, referencing global best practices is essential for adopting effective models that promote a corruption-free government. By addressing the challenges posed by patronage, the government can fully leverage its potential for effective governance, fostering a robust and capable administration that prioritizes the needs of its citizens.

The research is constrained by its emphasis on notable cases documented in the past decade that underscore their relevance to contemporary discussions surrounding politics, corruption, and governance in South Africa. This may result in a limited understanding of political patronage within the country. The study primarily utilized secondary data and focused specifically on the South African context, which may restrict the exploration of global perspectives and introduce potential biases and reporting inaccuracies. Future research efforts could benefit from examining a broader range of cases, including experiences from local governments and diverse

geographical contexts, to enhance the comprehension of political patronage and its impact on governance.

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