

THE LOYALTY TAX

How Political Patronage Is Destroying South Africa and What a Real Fix Would Look Like

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2026

SECTION ONE

The Problem Nobody Is Fixing

South Africa is suffering from a political loyalty system. Party leaders are promoting each other based on political affiliation while the actual work of governing goes undone. This is not a theory. It has a name **cadre deployment** and it has been eating the country from the inside out for decades.

Research confirms what most South Africans already know from lived experience: “*cadre deployment undermines merit-based recruitment, compromises the professional integrity of the public sector, and destroys accountability. **The result is leaders with no viable skills, no economic interest in the country's growth, and every personal interest in protecting the network that put them there.** The South African Constitution and the Municipal Systems Act both require that recruitment be ethical and based on merit. In reality, municipalities are riddled with politically motivated appointments. The law says one thing. The system does another. And nobody is held responsible.*”

What makes it worse is that this is not incompetence by accident. Corruption in South African municipalities follows organised patterns, influence is gained through irregular appointments and patronage, then used to manipulate legitimate systems for personal gain, protected by either administrative or violent means. These are not a few bad actors. **It is a system designed to extract, protect, and repeat.**

"Since 1994, an estimated R700 billion+ in public funds has been lost to corruption, much of it through rigged government contracts."

That is not a statistic. That is schools not built, hospitals not staffed, water not delivered, and communities left to collapse while the people responsible attend state functions and give

speeches about service delivery (*This is what they preach in every campaign they do, fucken lies!*).

The tender system has become the feeding trough. **BEE, which was meant to correct historical economic exclusion, has in many cases been hijacked into a political affiliation arena where tenders go to those with the right connections, not the right capability.** The Auditor-General flagged OR Tambo District Municipality for nearly R1 billion in unauthorised, irregular, fruitless and wasteful expenditure in 2025 alone. One municipality. One year. A billion rand. While the people in that district go without clean water.

There are exceptions worth acknowledging. **Dr Kgosientsho Ramokgopa actually stabilised the energy crisis through technical competence and consistent execution. That is what meritocracy looks like in practice. You appoint someone who knows what they are doing, give them the mandate to do it, and measure them on results.** The fact that it stands out as remarkable says everything about how low the bar has fallen everywhere else.

“The current consequence management is not working. South Africa ranked 82nd out of 180 countries on Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index, scoring 41 out of 100.” **Court cases drag on for years, consuming more state resources in the process. People who looted billions walk out on bail, hire expensive legal teams paid for by money they should not have, and return to their networks untouched.** The system they corrupted is now being used to protect them from accountability. That loop needs to be broken, really fucken broken!

BY THE NUMBERS

Estimated public funds lost to corruption since 1994: **R700 billion**

SA Corruption Perceptions Index score (2024): **41 / 100** — ranked 82nd of 180 countries

OR Tambo District Municipality irregular expenditure (2025): **Nearly R1 billion in a single year**

Madibeng Local Municipality GPI ranking: **19th out of 19 in its category**

SECTION TWO

The Issues in Detail

Cadre Deployment:// Loyalty Over Competence

The ANC's cadre deployment policy was originally designed to transform a public sector shaped by apartheid. The intention had merit. The execution became a machine for patronage. Ruling parties justify cadre deployment as ensuring policy coherence and ideological alignment. **In practice, it means that the person running your water supply, managing your municipality's finances, or overseeing infrastructure contracts got the job because of who they know, not what they can do.**

The consequences are documented and severe. Cadre deployment weakens the operational independence of public institutions, hinders service delivery, and increases the risk of state capture. **In countries like Botswana and Rwanda, where recruitment and promotions are primarily determined by qualifications and performance, public institutions demonstrate greater resilience, reduced corruption, and stronger alignment with national development goals.** The comparison is damning.

The Tender System and the Tenderpreneur Culture

BEE was meant to dismantle apartheid's economic legacy and build inclusive ownership. What it became, in too many cases, is a front for political kickbacks. The tenderpreneur is not a myth. It is a documented feature of the procurement landscape. **Corrupt networks inside and outside municipalities form organised processes that facilitate personal benefit, maintain them over time, and protect them from consequence(including eliminating whistleblowers).** Bank account tampering, tender fraud, illegal investments, duplicate payments, these are not isolated incidents. They are coordinated operations.

The pattern is consistent across municipalities:// influence is built through political and family appointments, that influence is then used to control procurement, and the resulting corruption

is protected through the same patronage network that enabled it. The Municipal Finance Management Act governs these interactions. The problem is that the lack of internal compliance and consequence management means the law functions as a guideline, not a constraint.

The Revolving Door of Accountability

The most dangerous part of the current system is not the looting itself. It is the signal the system sends about what happens to those who loot. The answer, too often, is:// not much. Cases stretch across years. Bail is granted. High-powered legal teams are funded by stolen money. Appeals delay proceedings further. Some accused return to positions of influence before a verdict is ever reached. When the population watches this happen repeatedly, the rational calculation changes. The risk of stealing is low. The reward is high. And the people best positioned to steal are the ones with the most political protection.

South Africa does not have a shortage of laws against corruption. It has a shortage of consistent, fearless enforcement of those laws against people who have the power and connections to resist them. South Africa needs extremists who will navigate their way to eliminate the failures leading us and install meritocracy.

Go against the system and they'll silence you before you can even speak. [I know this might even get me flagged for saying too much. We've seen journalists who were taken out.]

What a Real Fix Looks Like

South Africa does not need another commission of inquiry or another policy document that collects dust. It needs structural reform with consequences attached. Here is what that actually looks like.

1. Radical Meritocracy:// The Performance Contract Model

Every leader from Mayor to Minister must be appointed on a fixed performance contract with measurable economic targets. GDP growth, job creation, infrastructure delivery, service uptime, these become the conditions of tenure, not loyalty to a party structure.

- **KPI-Based Tenure://** 2-year performance contracts for all appointed leaders. Targets not met means automatic removal, no negotiation.
- **Professional Civil Service://** Directors-General and Municipal Managers hired by an independent board of qualified experts, not politicians. Political appointees are barred from technical roles entirely.
- **National Performance Leaderboard://** Local leaders ranked publicly on economic and service delivery output. Top performers receive increased budget allocation. Underperformers face administrative takeover by a competency-based oversight body.

This is not a radical idea. It is how high-functioning organisations in both the public and private sectors operate. **The only reason it feels radical in South Africa is because the current system has run so long on the opposite principle.**

2. High Stakes Accountability: The Anti-Looting Protocol

The standard court system is too slow, too expensive, and too easy to manipulate for people with resources and connections. Corruption cases involving state resources need a dedicated, accelerated track.

- **S**pecialised Anti-Corruption Tribunals:// Dedicated 24/7 courts for state resource crimes. Cases resolved in weeks, not years. No delays, no adjournments for political convenience.
- **A**utomatic Asset Forfeiture:// Upon indictment for looting state funds, all personal and family assets are frozen immediately. You cannot buy your way out of a case using the money you stole to fund it.
- **L**ifetime Public Office Ban:// Anyone found guilty of defrauding the state is permanently barred from any public office, government consulting role, or government tender, for life. No rehabilitation path back into the system you broke.

"You cannot buy your way out of accountability using the money you stole to fund your defence."

3. Fixing the Tender and BEE System

The tenderpreneur culture survives because the tender system creates too many points of human discretion where political influence can be applied. **The solution is to remove as much of that discretion as possible.**

- **A**utomated E-Tendering:// Should be designed to minimise discretionary political influence by prioritising verified performance data, cost efficiency, and technical capacity in line with Section 217 of the Constitution.

- **BEE 2.0 Productive Equity:**// Shift BEE away from ownership transfers and share deals that benefit politically connected individuals. Award BEE points for skills transfer, industrial output, factory creation, and genuine employment generation.
- **Open Ledger:**// Every rand of a government tender tracked on a publicly accessible platform. Citizens can see who was paid, for what, and when. Transparency replaces gatekeeping.

4. The No-Bail Deterrent

The revolving door of corruption stops when the consequences become genuinely severe and genuinely unavoidable. That requires amending the legal framework for serious economic crimes against the state.

- **Non-Bailable Offenses:**// Amend the Criminal Procedure Act to classify theft of state resources above R5 million as a non-bailable offense, in line with the existing Schedule 5 and 6 serious offence categories.
- **Mandatory Minimums:**// 20-year to life sentences for senior officials convicted of looting state resources. Treat it as what it actually is: economic treason against the citizens of the country.
- **No Suspended Sentences:**// Conviction means incarceration. No community service, no fines, no suspended sentence for crimes that stripped communities of water, electricity, healthcare, and education.

The Chinese government executes officials convicted of serious corruption. That is the extreme end of the spectrum. South Africa needs to go there. Because the distance between where South Africa currently sits and where it needs to be is significant, and it needs to be closed fast.

5. The Great Decoupling: Ending the Party-State Monopoly

The current crisis exists because the line between the party and the state has been erased. Political parties are private clubs. The National Treasury is a public trust. Those two things cannot share the same hands. **To fix South Africa, we do not need to reform that relationship. We need to end it entirely. This is not a restructure. It is a divorce.**

The Total Separation of Party and State

Any politician caught recommending a candidate for a technical public role faces a mandatory 5-year prison sentence for Administrative Interference. Not a warning. Not a disciplinary hearing. **Prison.** The firewall between party structures and civil service appointments must be enforced with criminal consequences, not internal party processes that protect the people doing the interfering.

Beyond that, a full baseline audit of all municipal and provincial directors must be conducted. **If your CV does not match your salary grade, you are walked out of the building that day.** No golden handshakes. No redeployment to a different department. No transition period. You are finished. The positions are filled by people who actually qualify for them.

The Claw-Back Mandate

The R700 billion lost since 1994 is not gone. It is sitting in offshore accounts, luxury real estate, and high-end vehicle fleets registered to cousins, business partners, and front companies. **A Special Asset Recovery Unit with full legal authority to pursue third-party beneficiaries, not just the primary accused, must be established.** If you held the stolen money, you are liable for it.

- **Generational Debt:**// The loyalty tax is a debt owed to the South African people. Recovery does not stop at the person who signed the tender. It follows the money wherever it went.
- **No Statute of Limitations:**// Economic crimes against the state do not expire. If you stole in 1999, the unit is coming for your pension in 2026. Time does not clean the debt.

The Citizen's Right to Self-Govern

If the state fails its basic contract, protection and service delivery, it forfeits its right to collect taxes unchallenged. **Citizens who are paying rates into a municipality that cannot deliver water for 20 consecutive days should have the legal right to divert those rates into a Local Service Account, managed by professional engineers and independent auditors, bypassing the corrupt council entirely until it is replaced or taken over.**

Beyond that, we call for skilled professionals, engineers, data scientists, doctors, financial managers, to refuse to serve under cadre-appointed leadership. **The patronage system survives because competent people keep it functioning despite its failures.** Remove that competence. Let the system collapse under the weight of its own appointments. That is the merit strike. It is not sabotage. It is professionals refusing to be complicit.

The Sovereign Accountability Clause

Leaders have hidden behind collective responsibility for too long. That ends now. If a Minister signs off on a deal that is later found to be fraudulent, they are personally and civilly liable. Not the department. Not a vague institutional failure. The individual who signed. We take their house. We take their cars. We recover their children's private school fees if they were funded by public money.

This is the final deterrent. If the law will not protect the taxpayer, the taxpayer will eventually stop protecting the law. South Africa is approaching that threshold. **The moderates have sat quietly for thirty+ years while the country was stripped for parts.** The patience of ordinary citizens who pay taxes, go without water, and watch the perpetrators walk free has a limit. We are close to it.

"If the law will not protect the taxpayer, the taxpayer will eventually stop protecting the law."

What South Africa needs is not another commission of inquiry. The Constitution is solid. The laws exist. What is missing is the will to enforce them against the people who wrote them for everyone else. That will not come from within the system that benefits from the dysfunction. It will have to come from citizens, civil society, and a generation of leaders who are more interested in building something that works than in protecting what they have already taken.

"The laws exist. What is missing is the will to enforce them against the people who wrote them for everyone else."

About the Author

Paul Mothapo

*Paul Mothapo is a human, just like you. Nothing more to say and
nothing less to say*