Causal theories explaining the erosion in South African state and public services: a theoretical overview

Rozenda Hendrickse

(a) Senior Lecturer, School of Public Management and Administration, University of Pretoria, Room 3.127, Level 3, EMS Building, Private Bag X20, Hatfield, 0028, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The erosion of the South African state and its public services can be understood through various social, political and economic factors. These issues are complex and multifaceted, often intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Several theories and patterns can help explain the erosion of the state and public services in the country. The core objective of this paper is to elucidate the foregoing factors, using purposely selected theories as philosophical lenses through which to understand why service delivery dilemmas prevail, and why state institutions are eroding. This paper is located within a qualitative paradigm, in particular narrative reviews, where secondary sources of information was consulted. This paper makes a conceptual contribution to the notion of the erosion of South African public sector institutions in general, and the field of Public Administration in particular. The paper recognises that addressing the erosion of the South African state and public services requires comprehensive strategies and reforms, including tackling corruption, improving the education and healthcare systems, creating jobs, and addressing economic inequalities. In relation to tackling corruption for example it recommends the creation of independent bodies like South Africa’s Special Investigating Unit (SIU) with the mandate to investigate and recover assets obtained through corruption. Strengthening the legal framework to ensure these agencies have the necessary authority and resources, is paramount. This includes granting them autonomy and protection from political interference. A further necessity is the enhanced performance of state institutions and the promotion of good governance to restore public trust and to ensure sustainable development.

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Introduction

The erosion of the South African state and its public services can be understood through various historical, political, economic and social factors. These issues are complex and multifaceted, often intertwined and mutually reinforcing. State erosion refers to the weakening of state institutions, including the erosion of democratic norms, rule of law, and public trust in government (Tsheola & Sebola 2023). A public service is defined as “a resource offered by an organization, typically a government agency or private business, intended to support members of a community.

Public services include [for example] health care, waste removal and transportation, and are systems and solutions that can benefit various groups of individuals” (Indeed Editorial Team 2022). In South Africa, state erosion is influenced by a range of factors, including corruption, political infighting, and ineffective governance (Venter 2016).

Persistent social inequalities can contribute to state erosion by fuelling public discontent, undermining legitimacy, and eroding trust in government institutions to deliver services. Corruption scandals involving high-ranking officials, such as the Gupta family’s alleged influence over state affairs, have exposed vulnerabilities within state institutions and compounded public outrage (Tsheola & Sebola 2023; Buthelezi & Vale 2023; Brunette 2023).

* Corresponding author. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-7923-0479

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The core objective of this paper is to delve into the patterns of erosion of the South African state and public service and their possible causes as well as exploring theories which offer the best explanation for the erosion.

This study is located within a qualitative research paradigm, and takes the form of narrative reviews, where secondary sources of information such as books, journal articles, government documents and various databases such as Sabinet, Scopus, IBSS, Google Scholar and the like were scoured to find scholarly reasons as to why things are the way they are in the South African context. ChatGPT was also utilised to generate ideas and themes pertaining the topic under discussion.

Why qualitative research is apt for a study of nature is because the qualitative approach “is embedded in the philosophy of empiricism; follows an open, flexible and unstructured approach to enquiry, emphasises the description and narration of feelings, perceptions and experiences rather than measurement; and communicates findings in a descriptive and narrative rather than analytical manner, placing no or less emphasis on generalisations” (Kumar 2014: 14).

Narrative reviews in essence are a literature review, which seeks to arrive at an overview of a field of study through reasonably comprehensive assessment and critical reading of the literature. Such reviews might be works in their own right where an entire article, as in the case of this paper, can be based on a review of literature in a selected area (Bryman 2012: 102).

This paper makes a conceptual contribution to the Public Administration discourse by providing reflections on the patterns of erosion of South African state and public services and their possible causes. As mentioned earlier, it uses specifically selected theories as philosophical lenses offering explanations for the current state of affairs.

The erosion of the South African state and public services

To contextualise the topic under discussion, it is important to first understand the nature of Public Administration in a contemporary state. According to Naidu (2005:2) “Public administration occupies a central place in the complex and fast changing modern state. For good or ill its vast amounts of activities affects everyone everywhere. The benefits conferred by it on society have been growing in importance with the passage of time”. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (hereafter referred to as the Constitution) (South Africa 1996) maintains that within public administration there is a public service for the Republic, which must function and be structured, in terms of national legislation, and which must loyally execute the lawful policies of the government of the day. Chapter 7 in particular assigns local government the responsibility to ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner (South Africa 1996). Globally, the role of local government is perceived in the same way (Masuku & Jili 2019). Section 195 of the Constitution (South Africa 1996) further forwards basic values and principles that public institutions must adhere to. These include:

i. Maintaining professional and ethical standards;
ii. Providing social services in an efficient, economic, and effective manner;
iii. Instilling and maintaining a culture of transparency and accountability;
iv. Promoting people-centred and development-oriented government;
v. Building a capable state through continual human resources and capacity-building;
vi. Encouraging active public engagement in policy making processes, and
vii. Providing social services impartially, fairly, equitably and without bias.

Qwabe (2013: 21) argues that: “despite…constitutional provisions, government’s effectiveness and capacity for addressing the existing pressing socio-economic challenges, is highly contested”. The author maintains that challenges such as unemployment, poverty and inequalities, still prevail. Ofusori (2024) echoes similar doom, eleven years later, and alludes to the fact that South Africa faces a fiscal cliff which can be attributed to economic downturns, unsustainable debt levels, or inadequate budgetary policies. Scholars such as Koma (2010) and Chitiga-Mabugu and Monkam (2013) reported on persistent poor service delivery, corruption and the erosion of the state and public services. Further trials take the form of politicisation of administrative functions in municipalities, governance problems and backlogs, to name but a few (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, 2009). In order to make sense of the foregoing, a reflection on the trajectory of the patterns of erosion of the South Africa state and public services and the possible causes, from a historical, political, social and economic contexts, would be useful.

Historical context

The historical context of apartheid has left a lasting impact on South Africa. According to Sonneborn (2010), apartheid was a grand theory under the National Party, rooted in racial segregation and separate development. Its impact, both as a socio-economic and political framework, on the nascent democracy and citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa, is profound. Since the arrival of Europeans in the 17th century, South Africa underwent successive Dutch and British colonial administrations. These regimes methodically dispossessed indigenous peoples of their dignity, land, and political agency, relegating them to the margins of society. Enduring harsh wars, social ostracism, and economic disenfranchisement, indigenous populations were denied even their fundamental right to existence (Tshishonga 2019: 167). Tshishonga (2019: 167) further contends that apartheid, alongside the transition to democratic governance, fostered stark binaries predicated on inclusion, exclusion, race, class, gender and ethnicity. Deplorably, the author holds, the democratic government’s failure to redress structural and institutional inequities perpetuated these
divides, exacerbating democratic deficits and worsening levels of poverty and unemployment. Today, the adverse effects of apartheid are most felt amongst the black population (Sonneborn 2010; Tshishonga 2019).

**Political factors**

Whilst an examination of the post-apartheid political landscape, governance structures and their effectiveness, and an analysis of political ideologies influencing policies would be useful, for the purpose of the paper a brief discussion focused on corruption fuelled by politicians, proves more apt.

Rampant corruption within the government and public institutions has significantly undermined their effectiveness. Corruption diverts resources meant for public services into private hands, leading to a lack of funds and inefficient service delivery. Brunette (2023: 81) contends that: “Corrupt syndicates and political machines have proliferated in South Africa because the country’s public administrations are not appropriately insulated from politicisation, and its citizenry is widely impoverished”.

According to Pillay (2004:589), corruption has thrived due to institutional weaknesses. The typical drive for productivity among public sector employees has been compromised by various factors, including promotion unrelated to performance, the demoralisation caused by dysfunctional government budgets, insufficient supplies and equipment, delays in budget fund disbursement, and a loss of organisational direction. Moreover, motivation has been further eroded by senior officials and political leaders exploiting public office for personal gain.

The primary drivers of corruption within the South African public sector include undesirable social controls, outdated laws, excessive demand, opportunistic politics, bureaucratisation, excessive discretion, and flawed administrative frameworks (including inadequate controls). These factors have resulted in injustice, inefficiency, distrust of the government by citizens, misallocation of public resources, hindrance of entrepreneurship (particularly foreign investment), political instability, enforcement measures, and limitations on governmental policies (Pillay 2004:590; Manyaka & Nkuna 2014).

The aforementioned contentions around what drives corruption in the South African context, were further exasperated by Jacob Zuma’s ascension into the presidency in 2009. A project of plundering the state on the pretext of driving change through the slogan ‘radical economic transformation’ ensured. Up until his resignation in 2008 his leadership had been synonymous with extensive corruption, maladministration and enriching his family and cronies, within and outside state structures. Important state-owned enterprises, which were responsible for the operation, maintenance and development of public infrastructure, had also been corroded by state capture (Buthelezi & Vale 2023: 10-11).

**Social factors**

Social inequality, which plays a significant role in shaping the political landscape of countries, including South Africa, according to Caves (2005), transpires when resources within a society are dispersed unevenly, often as a consequence of inequitable allocation practices that produce distinct unequal patterns based on socially defined categories of people. Variances in accessing social goods within society are impacted by factors like power, kinship, religion, prestige, ethnicity, race, gender, age, sexual orientation, migration status, disability, and class (Caves 2005; Platt 2024). Social inequality usually implies the lack of equality of outcome, but may conversely be conceptualised as a lack of equality in access to opportunity (Caves 2005). To address the foregoing, sound social policy is imperative. According to Platt (2024) social policy pertains to the ways in which societies across the globe meet human needs for health, well-being, education, work and security. Social policy thus aims to identify and find ways of reducing inequalities in access to services and support between social groups.

In the South African context, in the 1990s and 2000s, the country embarked on significant efforts to ensure that a comprehensive social policy, including various institutional reforms, were in place. Efforts to strengthen capacity for social policy-making were pursued. At the time, cushioning the poor was paramount. The link between social and economic policies were emphasised. Engagement between various role players in society and the different spheres of government were at the order of the day (Gumede 2019:508; Moyo 2021). Despite these efforts, problems pertaining to social policy in South Africa still appears rife. Gumede (2019: 508) adds that several aspects of social policy such as education, health and social services are in place. Still, most proved ineffective due to lack of its pursuance to conclusion and weak implementation capacity. Health issues, particularly the HIV/AIDS epidemic, strain public health services and resources. A two-tier, highly unequal health system, limit access to healthcare for the majority of citizens. Unequal access to quality education affects the skill level of the workforce, impacting the state's ability to implement effective policies and programmes.

Transformative social policy, holds Gumede (2019: 508) is also absent. The various roles and functions of social policy have not been purposely pursued. The change from the Mbeki administration to the Zuma administration negatively affected policies, as well as their implementation, exacerbating social ills. The approach to social security shifted as well. Instead of implementing a comprehensive package, a fragmentary approach was followed in cases such as health insurance. Adjustments to incumbents in senior public office positions and Ministers affected the policy thinking and implementation, and differences in ideological orientation affected many promising initiatives. The disbandment of the Policy Coordination and Advisory Services in the Presidency created a coordination gap that exacerbated the problem of follow through and continuity. The author contends that for the advancement of socio-economic development, more thinking should go towards both social and economic policies as well as the
interface between them (Gumede 2019: 508). Moyo (2021: 173) ponders whether “the actual social policy framework in South Africa constitutes a shift towards a redistributive paradigm built on social justice or whether social policy is primarily viewed as a secondary element in a broader neoliberal economic vision”.

Economic challenges

In this section a cursory overview of South Africa’s economic policies and their implications for state finances are explored. An exposition of the role of economic or financial mismanagement at local government level, in state erosion, is also forwarded.

The demise of apartheid saw efforts to rebuild and transform the country’s economy after years of apartheid domination underpinned by economic isolation and financial sanctions imposed by the global community (Enaifoghe 2019: 120). Prior to the 1994 elections, the African National Congress (ANC) mooted its financial programme called the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) which was premised on creating a more equal society through re-making, improving and fortifying democratic principles and gains for every South African (African National Congress 1994). While the RDP was perceived as the ANC government’s improvement arrangement, when it became the country’s macro-economic policy, as for monetary development, it failed (Enaifoghe 2019: 120). A revised macro-economic strategy, the Growth, Employment and Restriction programme (GEAR) followed in 1996, with the view to aid quick monetary development needed to create assets to meet social venture needs (Visser 2004). This strategy aimed to lessen financial shortfalls, bringing down inflation, keeping up conversion standard solidness, diminishing hindrances to exchange and changing capital streams (Enaifoghe 2019: 120; Visser 2004). However, whilst it was adequate for the achievement of macro-economic goals, it failed to address the social difficulties of the nation in particular, poverty alleviation and business creation (Visser 2004). GEAR was replaced with the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA) in 2005 as an improved version of the two former strategies. ASGISA expanded on the RDP’s objectives of building a unified, vote-based, non-sexist and non-racial society, and a solitary incorporated economy. In 2010 the New Growth Path (NGP) replaced ASGISA. The NGP was formulated to fast-track development in the South African economy, and to affect such quickly to lessen destitution, joblessness and disparity. The National Development plan (NDP), which replaced the NGP, was introduced in mid-2013 and is perceived as a template for a future monetary and financial advancement strategy for the nation (Enaifoghe 2019: 120).

The post-apartheid state aimed to integrate the previously marginalised majority into the economy by addressing racial wealth and opportunity disparities as demonstrated by various macro-economic policies espoused above. At the end of apartheid, racial inequality persisted, notably in per capita income and unemployment rates, with blacks experiencing the lowest incomes and highest joblessness compared to whites. From 1996 onwards, policy initiatives sought to boost income growth to narrow these gaps. Subsequently, there has been a noticeable rise in average household income and employment rates across various income brackets. This has led to a reduction in the economic disparity between blacks and whites. However, despite these advancements, blacks still occupy the lower rungs of the economic ladder, facing challenges such as lower average household incomes, a higher proportion in lower income brackets, and elevated levels of unemployment and economic inactivity. Consequently, there have been calls for alternative strategies, such as Radical Economic Transformation (RET), to accelerate economic inclusion for the majority of previously marginalised black citizens (Leibrandt, Woolard, McEwen & Koep n.d; Moyo 2021). The post-apartheid government has implemented various legislative and policy measures, including Affirmative Action (AA), Employment Equity (EE), Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), and land reforms, to facilitate the economic integration of blacks and broaden the economic base (Moyo 2021: 210-211; Van De Rheede 2022). Still today, high levels of economic inequality persist, leading to disparities in access to basic services. The wealthy can afford private services for example, leaving the majority reliant on a struggling public sector. High levels of unemployment contribute to social unrest and increase pressure on public services as more people rely on them for support. At local government level, the economic and financial state, appear dire. The aforementioned inequalities, despite all policy initiatives, seems to deepen instead of being alleviated.

Municipalities, as the government closet to the people, are constitutionally mandated to provide essential services. Financial mismanagement of resources negatively impacts their core endeavours. In recent years, several South African municipalities have faced financial turmoil, drawing increased attention from provincial and national governments as well as the media. Various contemporary events have contributed to this focus on financial management challenges within municipalities. These include, among others, (a) the 2018 collapse of VBS Mutual Bank, resulting in substantial losses for municipalities that had unlawfully invested in the bank; (b) a surge in service delivery protests, with 237 occurring in 2018 and 218 in 2019; and (c) unfavourable reports from the Auditor-General, revealing that fruitless and wasteful expenditure amounted to 2.07 billion South African Rand in the 2018/19 fiscal year. Additionally, poor oversight of municipalities, whether internal or external, has been cited as a fundamental reason for their underperformance. However, the question of why these issues are so pervasive, and why previous interventions have failed to address the situation effectively, remains unanswered (Glasser & Wright 2020).

Selected theories explaining state erosion

This section forwards an exposition of selected theories, used as philosophical lenses to understand the erosion of the South African state and public services. A theory, according to Van der Waldt (2017:185) is “generally a systematic and formalised expression of previous observations, and is predictive, logical and testable”. The rudimentary purposes of theory are thus to describe, explain, predict, or control phenomena in a variety of contexts (Van der Waldt 2017: 185).
Neo-patrimonialism

Neo-patrimonialism theory suggests that African states, including South Africa, often exhibit neo-patrimonial characteristics where political leaders use state resources for personal gain, leading to institutional decay and weakened public services. In South Africa, a country whose constitutional democracy is internationally acclaimed, state elites are openly accused of crony capitalism and tenderpreneurship (Masenya 2017: 147), vestiges of neo-patrimonialism. We thus have to pose the question. What is understood by neo-patrimonialism and how does it manifest in the South African context. According to Cheeseman, Bertrand and Husaini (2019: n.p) neo-patrimonialism is a: theoretical framework for understanding the practice of politics in Africa from the colonial era onwards. Whereas ‘patrimonialism’ refers to a traditional form of government described by influential German sociologist Max Weber, the term ‘neopatrimonialism’ is intended to signify that, following the imposition of the colonial state, African political systems can no longer be treated as purely traditional. The reason for this is that patrimonial modes of conducting politics were grafted onto the trappings of the modern state, including political parties, legislatures, and judiciaries. In the process, both patrimonial and formal institutional structures were transformed. On the one hand, institutions such as legislatures did not perform as expected because they conformed to a patrimonial, rather than a rational–legal, logic. On the other hand, the fusion of traditional forms of authority with the centralized political structures of colonial rule often served to empower the position of traditional leaders, or chiefs, over their communities. During the 1980s and 1990s, neopatrimonialism became the dominant framework through which the continent was understood. However, the extent to which historical practices were shaped by the colonial moment remains highly controversial, as does the question of whether neopatrimonialism is a feature of all African states or should be treated as an ideal type that some states conform to more than others.

Conversely, neo-patrimonialism describes an informal patron-client dynamic that can span from top echelons of state institutions to individuals in remote villages. It may either underpin or replace the bureaucratic framework of the state, as real power often resides not with those in higher positions, but rather with those who have influential connections (See Kelsall 2011: s232–s233).

Masenya (2017: 146) argues that neo-patrimonial continuity in South Africa is demonstrated by three factors, inter alia: the concentration of political power, the award of personal favours, and the misuse of state resources by top government officials. Tom Lodge’s 2014 article titled: “Neopatrimonial politics in the ANC” extends this conversation. The article tracks Zuma’s ascension into presidency and the subsequent escalation of corruption and personalisation of power dynamics during his reign. Lodge (2014: 1) delves into three perspectives on comprehending neo-patrimonialism within country’s ruling party. Firstly, the author examined the notion that such political practices, as displayed by Zuma and his cronies, have deep roots within the ANC but were curtailed during its period in exile, only to resurface following the cessation of the armed struggle. Secondly, he theorised linking the party's historical connections to criminal syndicates and the pressures stemming from the transition to majority rule and contemporary electoral dynamics. Lastly, the author probed whether neo-patrimonialism mirrors broader trends in South African political and economic spheres. He concluded that all three factors were identified as contributing to the proliferation of neo-patrimonial politics, with their convergence elucidating why these dynamics have gained such firm traction within the party. Tsheolo (2014) contends that under neo-patrimonial governance, development is a lesser imperative to the neo-patrimonial state elites than the proliferation of their personal power and prestige. Hence the continuing erosion of the state and its resources to the detriment of its citizens.

State capture

The new millennium saw the coining of the phenomenon state capture by Hellman, Jones and Kaufmann (2000), who saw such as an anomaly in governance. State capture theory argues that powerful interest groups manipulate policies, regulations, and state institutions to their advantage. In South Africa, this has manifested as corruption and collusion between private interests and government officials and gained traction in the political discourse in 2016 with the publication of the Public Protector’s report called ‘State of Capture’ (Dassah 2018:1: Buthelezi & Vale 2023:3). Sitorus (2011:47) contends that state capture can assume two forms. The first characterises the types of institutions that can be captured, inter alia, legislative, executive, judicial, regulatory agencies and public works departments or ministries. Whilst most state institutions are susceptible to state capture by private parties, the most important ones are where political decisions are made. The second form pertains to the types of captors seeking to capture the state. These may include private firms, interest lobby groups, high-ranking officials and the like. Fazekas and Toth (2014:5) forwards a third form. Here the capture of a single organisation or government department (local capture) may occur, or on a larger scale the capture of all organisations or government departments (global capture). Party capture, is a fourth form forwarded by Fazekas and Toth (2014:5). In this context, the re-politicisation of the state by political parties occurs, with the view to achieve political monopoly. On the other hand, corporate state capture refers to the exercise of power by private parties to subvert legitimate channels of political influence mainly for private gain. Systemic state capture, a fifth form of state capture, refers to the influence institutions have on a state’s internal and external sovereignty, thereby averting it from following policies of its choice other than those advantageous to powerful interests or sectors (Mtimka 2016).

In the 2016, ‘State of Capture’ report, the Public Protector singled out the relationship between the then President Jacob Zuma and an Indian family, called the Guptas. Evidence suggested that untoward and illicit activities were underway between the parties. The evidence, as reported by Buthelezi and Vale (2023: 3) pointed to three central issues: “irregularity in the wording of public contracts; illegality in the appointment of board members and executives to state-owned corporations; and the repurposing of public
institutions”. The main targets of state capture according to Bhorat et al. (2017) as quoted in Dassah (2018:8) were “PRASA, Eskom, Transnet, and the National Treasury which houses the Financial Intelligence Centre, Public Investment Corporation, Chief Procurement Office, boards of major development finance institutions and the guarantee system that allows SOEs ‘to borrow from private lenders/banks without parliamentary oversight’ in the name of radical economic transformation. The claimed actors in state capture have already centralised power in seven identifiable areas”. Dassah (2018: 9) concludes that state capture, is essentially parasitic plundering of public resources, and poses a serious threat to the emerging South African democracy and needs to be taken seriously. He indicated that the ANC at the time felt that the South African state could be categorised as partially captured, which presented some hope of reversal. The main difficulty in combating state capture is that, as an aspect of administrative corruption, it is surreptitious and defies easy solutions. The damages to the country as a whole, is unspeakable.

Dependency Theory

This theory posits that developing countries like South Africa can remain economically dependent on developed nations, leading to a lack of internal development and perpetuating social and economic challenges. Dependency theory according to authors such as Bond (2018), Kufakurinani (2017), Armin (1976) and Frank (1966) is a sociological and economic theory that arose in the 1950s and 1960s as a revision of the modernisation theory. It advocates that the economic development of various countries in the Global South is hampered by their dependence on developed countries in the Global North. Dependency theory suggests that this dependency is not an ordinary state, but rather a consequence of historical and structural inequalities perpetuated by the global capitalist system.

Core features of dependency theory according to Bond (2018) and Kufakurinani (2017) include:

Core-periphery structure: The global economy is divided into a core of developed countries that control and benefit from the international economic system, and a periphery of underdeveloped countries that are exploited and marginalised within this system.

Underdevelopment: Dependency theorists claim that underdevelopment on the fringes is not a product of internal insufficiencies, but rather a result of their integration into the global economy on unequal terms, which perpetuates economic exploitation and social inequality.

Structural dependency: Economic dependency is sustained through several mechanisms such as unequal trade relations, technological dominance, financial dependence, and political interference.

Development of underdevelopment: Dependency theorists contend that the development of the core countries is complicatedly linked to the underdevelopment of the periphery. The affluence and prosperity of the core are built upon the exploitation and underdevelopment of peripheral countries.

Dependency theory is reflected in the South African context, in a number of ways. South Africa's colonial history, particularly under British and Dutch rule, lead to the extraction of resources and the misuse of its labour force for the benefit of colonial powers. This historical legacy of exploitation has left long-lasting economic and social inequalities in South Africa, reflecting the core-periphery structure outlined in dependency theory (Oliver & Oliver 2017; Gouws 2005). From an economic perspective, the country has long been dependent on the export of minerals in particular diamonds and gold. The terms of trade unfortunately favour the Global North, leading to limited economic diversification and continued dependence on mineral exports (Gouws 2005). South Africa, despite being regarded as one of the more developed economies in Africa, still severely relies on foreign investment and access to international financial markets. This financial dependency renders the country vulnerable to external shocks and limits its policy autonomy (Alemu & Lee 2015). UJ-TRCTI (2022) reports that South Africa, like numerous countries in the Global South, often depends on technology and expertise from the Global North for its development projects and industrial sectors. Technological dependency can constrain the development of indigenous industries and perpetuate the dominance of foreign corporations.

The foregoing deliberations illustrate how South Africa's historical, economic, and social dynamics align with the principles of dependency theory, emphasising the persistent inequalities and structural constraints that shape its development trajectory

Institutional theory

Institutional weaknesses, such as lack of capacity, inadequate training, and inefficient bureaucracy, hinder the state's ability to deliver public services effectively. Institutional theory according to Scott (2004: n.p) “attends to the deeper and more resilient aspects of social structure. It considers the processes by which structures, including schemas, rules, norms, and routines, become established as authoritative guidelines for social behavior. It enquires into how these elements are created, diffused, adopted, and adapted over space and time; and how they fall into decline and disuse. Although the ostensible subject is stability and order in social life, students of institutions must perform attend not just to consensus and conformity but to conflict and change in social structures”.

With an emphasis on the South African local government in particular, institutional theory plays out in the following way.

The failure to maintain the roles mandated by the Constitution and local government legislation has caused a lack or poor delivery of services. The issue of poor service delivery therefore, must be contextualised within the larger challenges confronting local government, as emphasised by scholars and government reports. These challenges include various factors, such as the inadequate implementation of policies, and the lasting legacy of autocratic and bureaucratic structures inherited from apartheid-era local
government (Ismail et al. 1997 as quoted in Tshishonga 2019: 161). Challenges extend to deficiencies in administrative capacity and coordination (Tapscott 2008). Tshishonga (2019:169) stresses that the task facing local government involves fostering democracy and development at the grassroots level through citizen participation.

Weak administrative capacity, combined with insufficiently trained personnel, stands out as a significant impediment to effective service delivery. The pervasiveness of nepotism and the deployment of unskilled personnel through cadre deployment exacerbate this issue (Booysen 2011). Corruption and mismanagement further compound the challenges faced by local government, diverting funds away from development purposes towards personal gain. Additionally, certain municipalities grapple with financial constraints, hindering their ability to generate sufficient revenue to address burgeoning urban demands (Tshishonga 2019:161).

Research by multiple authors, underscores the multifaceted challenges confronting South African local government, particularly in relation to finance, land availability, and human capacity, essential elements for effective service delivery. Poor deployment of incompetent human resources and a dearth of strategic planning exacerbate the deprivation of the public’s access to quality and sustainable services. Reddy and Maharaj (2008:197) highlight the failure of many municipalities to align their budgets with human resource deployment as a contributing factor to the absence of a coherent link between capacity development and integrated development planning.

The structures, schemas, rules, norms, and routines, laws which become established as authoritative guidelines, core aspects of institutional theory, have been eroded in the South African state and negatively impacts service delivery as is evident in the above discussions.

Social Contract Failure

The erosion of the social contract between the government and citizens, where the government fails to fulfill its obligations, can lead to public disillusionment and lack of trust in public institutions. The McCombe School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin (2024) consider “Social Contract Theory as the idea that society exist because of an implicitly agreed-to set of standards that provide moral and political rules of behavior”. Confirming and expanding on the foregoing, the Theory of Social Contract, an ancient concept tracing back to the origins of philosophy, posits that the moral and political obligations of individuals centres upon a mutual agreement or contract among them to create the society in which they reside. Social Contract Theory finds its place in modern moral and political discourse, getting its initial comprehensive exposition and defence through the works of Thomas Hobbes. Following in Hobbes's footsteps, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau arose as prominent proponents of this greatly influential theory, which has sustained its prominence throughout the history of modern Western moral and political thought. In the twentieth century, the philosophical motivation behind moral and political theory was revitalised with John Rawls's Kantian iteration of social contract theory, leading the way for subsequent analyses by scholars such as David Gauthier and others (The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy: a peer-reviewed academic resource n.d). In the South African context, the Constitution is perceived as a social contract and in essence makes service delivery on account of all spheres of government, mandatory (South Africa 1996). However, cooperative governance between the national, provincial and local government levels, appear problematic. Furthermore, municipalities, tasked with the delivery of very specific services, as also alluded elsewhere in the text, is racked with numerous challenges pertaining to various forms of resources in their services delivery endeavours (Chitiga-Mabugu and Monkam 2013). Ebi’s (2022) doctoral thesis used social contract theory as a lens through which to view the legal and policy framework of service delivery in South Africa. The study confirmed that the country’s history, democratic underpinnings and constitutional framework makes service delivery a social contract, whose performance is measured by how the state provides basic services to its populace. The erosion of the social contract between the South African government and citizens, where the government neglected and still neglects to fulfil its obligations, as purported throughout this paper, led to public disillusionment and lack of trust in public institutions at large.

Conclusion

This paper explores the erosion of the South African state and its public services, and focused specifically on various historical, political, economic, and social factors adding to this phenomenon. The erosion of the state encompasses the weakening of state institutions, democratic norms, rule of law, and public trust in government. Corruption, political infighting, and ineffective governance are identified as key influences on state erosion. Social inequalities exacerbate this erosion by fostering public discontent and undermining trust in government's ability to deliver services. The historical context of apartheid and its lasting impression on South Africa is discussed, highlighting the socio-economic and political ramifications. The transition to democratic governance exacerbated existing divides, contributing to democratic deficits and worsening poverty and unemployment levels. Political factors, particularly rampant corruption, are identified as significant contributors to state erosion. Corruption diverts resources from public services, leading to inefficiencies and a lack of funds for service delivery. The presidency of Jacob Zuma is highlighted as a period marked by extensive corruption and maladministration. Social factors, including social inequality, are examined for their role in shaping the political landscape. Weak implementation of social policies, particularly in health and education, exacerbates social ills and perpetuates inequality. Economic challenges, stemming from the transition from apartheid, are elucidated, including macro-economic policies aimed at addressing racial wealth disparities. Despite efforts to integrate the previously marginalised majority into the economy, economic inequality persists, leading to disparities in access to basic services. Financial mismanagement at the local
government level further exacerbates the erosion of state institutions. Municipalities face financial turmoil, contributing to service delivery protests and increased scrutiny from provincial and national governments. Overall, the first section of the paper provides a comprehensive overview of the erosion of the South African state and public services, highlighting the interconnectedness of historical, political, economic, and social factors in shaping the current state of affairs.

The second section of the paper discusses selected theories used to understand the erosion of the South African state and public services. Four main theories are outlined: Neo-patrimonialism, State capture, Dependency Theory, and Institutional Theory, with each providing insights into different aspects of state erosion. Neo-patrimonialism highlights how African states, including South Africa, often exhibit characteristics where political leaders use state resources for personal gain, leading to institutional decay and weakened public services. Neo-patrimonialism describes an informal patron-client dynamic, spanning from top echelons of state institutions to individuals in remote villages. It may underpin or replace the bureaucratic framework of the state. The continuity of neo-patrimonialism in South Africa is demonstrated by the concentration of political power, the award of personal favours, and the misuse of state resources by top government officials. State capture coined by Hellman, Jones, and Kaufmann, argues that powerful interest groups manipulate policies, regulations, and state institutions to their advantage, leading to corruption and collusion between private interests and government officials. State capture can manifest in various forms, including the capture of specific institutions or entire government departments. In South Africa, the "State of Capture" report highlighted instances of irregularities in public contracts, illegal appointments, and the repurposing of public institutions for private gain. Dependency Theory suggests that developing countries like South Africa remain economically dependent on developed nations, leading to a lack of internal development and perpetuating social and economic challenges. Dependency theory emphasises the core-periphery structure of the global economy, underdevelopment perpetuated by historical and structural inequalities, and the development of underdevelopment in peripheral countries. As for Institutional Theory, institutional weaknesses, such as lack of capacity and inefficient bureaucracy, hinder the state's ability to deliver public services effectively. The failure to maintain mandated roles, combined with challenges like nepotism and corruption, exacerbates issues with service delivery. South African local government faces challenges in administrative capacity, coordination, and financial constraints, affecting service delivery. Social Contract failure speaks to the erosion of the social contract between the government and citizens, where the government fails to fulfill its obligations. This leads to public disillusionment and lack of trust in public institutions. The Constitution is perceived as a social contract in South Africa, but challenges with cooperative governance and service delivery contribute to the erosion of trust between the government and citizens. Each theory offers a lens through which to understand different aspects of state erosion in South Africa, highlighting the complex interplay of political, economic, and social factors. The discussion underscores the multifaceted nature of the challenges facing the South African state and public services.

The paper recognises that addressing the erosion of the South African state and public services requires strategies, including tackling corruption, improving education and healthcare systems, creating jobs, and addressing economic inequalities. It also necessitates strengthening institutions and promoting good governance to restore public trust and ensure sustainable development. This paper, finally, forwards recommendations in the form of specific examples and practical action which could be taken to possibly counter the erosion of the state and public services (See Appendix). Finally, implementing these strategies requires a concerted effort from all sectors of society, including government, private sector, and civil society. Continuous monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation of these strategies will be essential to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability.

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Appendix
Tackling Corruption
Establishing strong anti-corruption agencies.

**Example:** The creation of independent bodies like South Africa's Special Investigating Unit (SIU) with the mandate to investigate and recover assets obtained through corruption.

**Action:** Strengthen the legal framework to ensure these agencies have the necessary authority and resources. This includes granting them autonomy and protection from political interference.

**Implementing Whistle-blower Protection Programmes**

**Example:** The introduction of robust whistle-blower protection laws, like the Protected Disclosures Act (PDA), to encourage the reporting of corrupt activities without fear of retaliation.

**Action:** Enhance the PDA to ensure effective enforcement and provide clear, accessible channels for reporting corruption.

**Promoting Transparency and Accountability in Public Procurement**

**Example:** Requiring all government contracts to be publicly accessible and subject to audit by bodies like the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA).

**Action:** Implement e-procurement systems that make the entire procurement process transparent and accessible to the public, reducing opportunities for corrupt practices.

**Investment in Infrastructure and Resources**

**Example:** The development of modern school facilities and hospitals, especially in rural and underserved areas.

**Action:** Allocate funds for infrastructure improvement projects and establish monitoring mechanisms to ensure proper utilisation of funds.

**Enhancing Teacher and Healthcare Worker Training**

**Example:** Programmes like the Funza Lushaka Bursary Programme which provides financial support for aspiring teachers, ensuring a steady supply of well-trained educators.

**Action:** Expand such programmes and introduce continuous professional development for teachers and healthcare workers to keep them updated with the latest best practices and technologies.

**Implementing Comprehensive Curriculum Reforms**

**Example:** Incorporating practical and vocational training in secondary education to better prepare students for the job market.

**Action:** Collaborate with industry experts to design curricula that align with current economic needs and future trends, ensuring students acquire relevant skills.

**Creating Jobs and Addressing Economic Inequalities**

Support for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

**Example:** Providing grants and low-interest loans to SMEs through programmes like the National Empowerment Fund (NEF).

**Action:** Simplify the application processes for programmes and offer training to entrepreneurs on how to effectively manage and grow businesses.

**Promoting Inclusive Economic Growth**

**Example:** Implement policies encouraging investment in sectors with high employment potential, such as agriculture, manufacturing, and technology.

**Action:** Establish Special Economic Zones (SEZs) with tax incentives to attract both local and foreign investors, focusing on underdeveloped regions.

**Social Protection Programmes**

**Example:** Expanding social grants to support vulnerable populations and providing access to basic services like housing, water, and sanitation.

**Action:** Ensure these programmes are effectively targeted and administered to reach those most in need, using data-driven approaches to identify beneficiaries.

**Strengthening Institutions and Promoting Good Governance**

**Judicial and Legal Reforms**

**Example:** Strengthening the independence of the judiciary by ensuring transparent appointment processes and adequate funding.

**Action:** Reform the judicial system to reduce case backlogs and improve the efficiency of legal processes, ensuring timely and fair justice.

**Capacity Building for Public Officials**

**Example:** Training programmes for government officials on good governance practices, ethics, and public administration.

**Action:** Establish partnerships with academic institutions and international organisations to provide ongoing training and professional development opportunities for public servants.

**Community Engagement and Participation**

**Example:** Initiatives like the South African Social and Economic Council (NEDLAC) involving civil society, labour, and business in policy discussions.

**Action:** Foster greater public participation in governance through regular consultations, public hearings, and feedback mechanisms, ensuring that policies reflect the needs and aspirations of the populace.

**Restoring Public Trust and Ensuring Sustainable Development**

**Regular Reporting and Public Communication**

**Example:** The annual State of the Nation Address (SONA) which provides an overview of government plans and achievements.

**Action:** Increase the frequency and detail of public communications from government bodies, ensuring transparency and accountability.

**Performance Monitoring and Evaluation**

**Example:** The implementation of performance agreements for public sector managers, tied to specific outcomes and metrics.

**Action:** Establish an independent body to monitor and evaluate government performance, making their findings publicly available to ensure accountability.

**Sustainable Development Policies**

**Example:** Policies aligned with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Africa Agenda 2060, and the South African National Development Plan (NDP) focusing on poverty eradication, environmental sustainability, and inclusive growth.

**Action:** Integrate SDGs into national development plans and establish a multi-stakeholder platform to monitor and report on progress towards these goals.