

THE VICIOUS COUNTERATTACK: HOW CORRUPTION FIGHTS BACK AGAINST ANTI-CORRUPTION EFFORTS IN ZIMBABWEAN STATE-OWNED ENTERPRISES (SOEs).

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ABSTRACT

Despite numerous anti-corruption mechanisms within the Zimbabwean State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), little can be ascertained about the manner in which corruption proactively resists and adapts to such interventions. While prior research focuses on prevalence and effect, few examine the dynamic, vengeful processes by which corruption forestalls reform. This study bridges this gap by analyzing the ways in which corruption "pushes back" in global, African, and Zimbabwean SOEs, analyzing strategies such as lawfare, political intrusion, propaganda, infiltration of anti-corruption agencies, and intimidation of whistleblowers. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of recent literature, the study identifies patterns and localized dynamics and concludes that corruption evolves in step with governance reforms and is inclined to employ state machinery and legal instruments to stall accountability. In Zimbabwe, these are further exacerbated by lack of institutional resilience, elite complicity, and limited international enforcement. The report emphasizes the need for adaptive anti-corruption, in the form of greater institutional insulation, regional and international legal cooperation, and immunity for reformers. The study contributes theoretically by shifting corruption as an actor, in practice by outlining resilient anti-corruption system design, and policy-wise by encouraging political will, effective legal systems, and civic empowerment in SOEs.

Keywords: corruption resistance, anti-corruption strategy, institutional integrity, governance reform, state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

INTRODUCTION

Corruption, a pervasive global challenge, stands as a formidable impediment to sustainable development, democratic governance, and social justice. It distorts markets, erodes public trust, perpetuates inequality, and undermines the rule of law (Transparency International, 2024a; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2024). Within this broader context, State-Owned Entities (SOEs) represent a particularly vulnerable nexus for corruption, given their significant control over public resources and critical national infrastructure (World Bank, 2024; OECD, 2023). Their role in essential services from utilities to transport and finance—means that corruption within SOEs directly impacts the daily lives of citizens, diverting funds from development projects, increasing the cost of goods and services, and ultimately

exacerbating poverty and inequality. While the international community has witnessed a surge in anti-corruption initiatives, the reality on the ground often reveals a tenacious and sophisticated counter-movement by corrupt actors. This phenomenon, where corruption "fights back," is a critical yet often under-analyzed aspect of the global anti-graft discourse. It manifests in various insidious forms, ranging from the subversion of legal and political systems to the intimidation, harassment, and even physical elimination of those who dare to expose it.

The premise of this paper is that corruption is not a static problem that simply recedes in the face of reform; rather, it is an adaptive, dynamic, and often intelligent adversary that actively defends its entrenched interests. This "vicious counterattack" necessitates a deeper analytical understanding of the mechanisms and strategies employed by corrupt networks. It extends beyond passive resistance or mere non-compliance to include active measures designed to neutralize, discredit, or incapacitate anti-corruption agents and institutions. This includes the subtle manipulation of bureaucratic processes, the aggressive use of legal instruments, the propagation of disinformation, and direct threats or violence.

This manuscript argues that understanding the mechanisms through which corruption resists accountability within SOEs is paramount to designing effective and resilient anti-corruption strategies. It aims to dissect this "fight back" phenomenon by examining its manifestation across different geographical scales: the intricate global web of corruption's resistance, the nuanced challenges faced within the African continent, and the specific context of Zimbabwe, with a particular focus on how these dynamics play out in Zimbabwean SOEs. The study is driven by the urgent need to move beyond a simplistic view of corruption as a governance failure to a more nuanced understanding of it as an entrenched system actively fighting for its survival. By illuminating these counter-tactics, this paper seeks to inform policymakers, civil society organizations, and international partners on how to develop more robust and sustainable anti-corruption frameworks that can withstand the inevitable pushback from those who benefit from illicit gains, particularly within the critical and often politically charged landscape of SOEs.

BACKGROUND

The pervasive nature of corruption poses a fundamental challenge to global development and governance. This section provides a structured overview, starting with the global context of

corruption within state-owned enterprises (SOEs), narrowing to the specific dynamics in Africa, and finally focusing on the Zimbabwean context, including its key SOEs.

Global Context of Corruption in SOEs

State-owned enterprises, by their very nature, control vast public resources and often operate in critical sectors such as energy, mining, transportation, telecommunications, and finance. This concentration of power and wealth, coupled with often weak governance structures, makes them particularly vulnerable to corruption and manipulation (World Bank, 2024; OECD, 2023). Globally, SOEs account for a significant portion of national GDPs and employment, making their integrity crucial for economic stability and public welfare. Corruption in SOEs manifests through a variety of schemes, including inflated contracts, illicit procurement practices, nepotism and cronyism in appointments, embezzlement, asset stripping, and the siphoning off of public funds for private gain. These illicit activities fundamentally undermine public service delivery, distort market competition by creating unfair advantages, and deter foreign direct investment due to increased transaction costs and perceived risk (IMF, 2024; UNODC, 2024).

The complexity of SOE operations, often involving large-scale infrastructure projects and international financial transactions, provides ample opportunities for sophisticated corrupt schemes. For example, the use of shell companies, offshore accounts, and intricate financial instruments allows corrupt actors to conceal their illicit gains and obscure their involvement in fraudulent activities (FATF, 2024). The lack of transparency in SOE financial reporting, coupled with limited independent audit oversight and accountability mechanisms, creates fertile ground for corrupt networks to thrive. The sheer scale of public assets and services managed by SOEs means that corruption within these entities can have devastating macroeconomic and social consequences, diverting resources from essential public services such as healthcare, education, and social safety nets, thereby perpetuating inequality and undermining public trust in government. Furthermore, corrupt SOEs can become instruments of state capture, where private interests illicitly influence public decision-making for their own benefit, leading to policies and regulations that favor corrupt networks over the public good (Transparency International, 2024b).

Regional Dynamics (Africa)

In Africa, the challenge of corruption in SOEs is particularly acute, exacerbated by historical legacies of colonial economic structures, post-independence state-building challenges, and the strong interplay between political power and economic interests (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024; Transparency International, 2023b). Many African SOEs were established in the post-independence era with noble intentions to drive national economic development and deliver essential services to citizens. However, a significant number have unfortunately become hotbeds of political patronage, rent-seeking, and outright embezzlement, undermining their developmental mandates. This often stems from the fact that SOEs in many African countries are treated as extensions of the ruling party or the executive, rather than independent economic entities operating on commercial principles. Appointments to SOE boards and management positions are frequently based on political loyalty rather than merit, leading to a lack of professional expertise and a culture of impunity (African Development Bank Group, 2024).

Cases of "state capture," where powerful private interests and political elites illicitly influence government decision-making for their own benefit, are particularly pronounced within the continent, with significant implications for SOEs. For instance, in South Africa, the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into State Capture meticulously documented how key SOEs like Eskom (electricity utility) and Transnet (rail, port, and pipeline company) were systematically plundered through corrupt procurement contracts, inflated invoices, and fraudulent transactions, all facilitated by politically connected individuals appointed to key positions (Zondo Commission of Inquiry, 2022; Reddy, 2024). This not only led to massive financial losses but also severely crippled the operational capacity of these critical national assets, resulting in widespread power outages and logistical bottlenecks that had profound negative impacts on the economy and citizens' livelihoods.

The opaque nature of some SOE operations, coupled with limited oversight and accountability mechanisms and weak enforcement of anti-corruption laws, creates fertile ground for corrupt networks to thrive, often operating with impunity due to high-level political protection. This systemic corruption within African SOEs cripples economic growth, undermines public trust in government institutions, and diverts resources from critical developmental needs, perpetuating cycles of poverty and underdevelopment across the continent (UNCTAD, 2024). The sheer magnitude of illicit financial flows (IFFs) from Africa, estimated to be billions of dollars annually, is largely fueled by corruption, with a significant portion originating from

resource extraction and large public contracts often managed by SOEs (Global Financial Integrity, 2023; African Development Bank Group, 2024).

The Zimbabwean Context and Targeted SOEs

Zimbabwe, like many African nations, faces profound and long-standing challenges from corruption within its state-owned enterprises. These entities are not just economic actors; they are vital for the country's economic stability, public service delivery, and social welfare, often holding monopolies in critical sectors. However, they have historically been plagued by allegations of mismanagement, fraud, illicit financial flows, and political interference, significantly hindering national development aspirations and contributing to economic stagnation (Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission [ZACC], 2023; World Bank, 2023). The vulnerability of Zimbabwean SOEs stems from a combination of factors, including weak corporate governance frameworks, a lack of transparency in financial reporting, insufficient independent oversight, and the pervasive perception of political interference in their operational and strategic decisions. This environment creates an enabling context for corrupt activities to flourish and for corrupt elements to effectively resist accountability.

The study particularly highlights two critical Zimbabwean SOEs that have frequently been subjects of corruption allegations, namely, **Zimbabwe National Road Administration (ZINARA)** and Grain Marketing Board (GMB).

Zimbabwe National Road Administration (ZINARA)

ZINARA is the statutory body responsible for the management, maintenance, and development of Zimbabwe's national road network, primarily funded through road toll fees, transit fees, and vehicle licensing fees. It is a critical enabler of economic activity and social connectivity. However, ZINARA has been a persistent subject of corruption allegations, including inflated contracts for road construction and maintenance, procurement irregularities, and the widespread misapplication or embezzlement of road toll fees. Numerous audit reports and media investigations have highlighted alleged corruption within the organization, leading to a severe deterioration of the national road infrastructure despite significant revenue collection (Transparency International Zimbabwe [TIZ], n.d.-b; U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, 2023a). These issues directly impact the quality and safety of infrastructure, leading to increased transport costs, damaged vehicles, reduced trade efficiency, and ultimately hindering economic development. The perception of impunity for those involved in ZINARA corruption further erodes public trust and perpetuates a cycle of illicit gains.

Grain Marketing Board (GMB)

The pervasive corruption within the Grain Marketing Board (GMB)—a cornerstone institution for Zimbabwe’s food security—is frequently enabled by weak governance structures, lack of transparency in financial operations, poor independent oversight, and pervasive political interference. Charity Musvota and Mukonza (2021) identify extensive administrative dysfunction, fraud, patronage, and elite complicity in the GMB, all traced to lack of transparency and poor governance. There are some parties who allege political manipulation of food distribution by the GMB to benefit a few (Human Rights Watch, 2003). There have been extensively documented incidents of maize buying scams, diversion of subsidized inputs, and abnormal distribution practices that have resulted in black-market sales and exclusion of other citizens from accessing the grain (Pindula, n.d.; Parliamentary UK, 2002). The environment allows corrupt networks to actively challenge accountability, retaining their illicit gains. The deep-seated nature of this corruption within Zimbabwean SOEs underscores the need to examine the defensive strategies employed by such networks—a primary objective of this study—to create more effective, durable countermeasures.

Despite many anti-corruption mechanisms, the strongly institutionalized nature of corruption in Zimbabwean SOEs is exacerbated by extensive governance dysfunctions—including weak corporate governance, insufficient transparency in financial disclosures, lack of independent oversight, and extensive political interference (Wadesango & Nhuhu, 2024; Moyo, 2013). These institutional weaknesses enable the corrupt not only to evade accountability but to actively subvert anti-corruption efforts by carrying out acts like obstruction of investigation, capture of state apparatus, and use of legal maneuvering (Transparency International Zimbabwe, 2024; Wadesango & Nhuhu, 2024). This autocatalytic vicious cycle has been understudied: it highlights the need to discover how corruption reform initiatives are systematically counterattacked in SOEs to create stronger and more responsive countermeasures. Through shedding light on such counterattack mechanisms, this study fills a critical knowledge gap and equips policymakers with the ability to build robust anti-corruption systems capable of countering corruption's counterattack.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews existing literature on corruption's resistance, organized by global, regional, and local contexts, followed by theoretical foundations. It highlights key findings and identifies the study's research gap.

Global Perspectives on Corruption's Resistance

Globally, corruption's resistance to accountability is sophisticated and transnational (OECD, 2023; UNODC, 2024). Illicit financial flows (IFFs) are a primary method to hide stolen wealth, making asset recovery difficult. This is critical for SOEs, where large projects and international transactions can be exploited via procurement fraud or bribery (FATF, 2024). Complex corporate structures, secrecy jurisdictions, and varying financial regulations create loopholes for laundering illicit money.

Digital authoritarianism offers new avenues for corruption to fight back, including cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, and online harassment to silence critics (Bradford, 2023; United Nations, 2024). Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) are used to intimidate and financially drain whistleblowers and journalists (European Commission, 2024; ARTICLE 19, 2023). The assassination of Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, who faced multiple SLAPPs, highlights these risks (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Such tactics are frequently used by powerful individuals connected to SOEs to halt investigations into large-scale embezzlement.

Regional Dynamics (Africa)

In Africa, corruption's resistance is linked to institutional fragility and the interplay of political and economic interests (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024; Transparency International, 2023b). Political interference in anti-corruption institutions is a major impediment, manifesting as politically motivated appointments/dismissals, budget cuts, and selective justice. South Africa's "State Capture" shows how powerful elites systematically hijack state apparatus, including SOEs, to facilitate grand corruption and undermine accountability (Zondo Commission of Inquiry, 2022; Reddy, 2024). This leads to SOE financial ruin, essential service collapse, and massive public debt.

The continent also sees widespread targeting of whistleblowers (Corruption Watch, 2023) and smear campaigns and legal persecution against investigative journalists (SANEF, 2023; Committee to Protect Journalists, 2024). Nigeria's Malabu oil scandal illustrates how powerful figures use judicial delays and political connections to evade justice (Chatham House, 2023; Good Governance Africa, 2023). IFFs, often from resource-rich SOEs, hinder development

and are facilitated by officials resisting transparency (African Development Bank Group, 2024; UNCTAD, 2024).

Local Context: Zimbabwe's Unique Challenges

Zimbabwe's resistance to corruption reflects broader African trends but with local nuances. Despite establishing ZACC (2005) and an anti-corruption strategy, alleged selective justice against politically exposed persons (PEPs) linked to SOEs is reported, with arrests rarely leading to convictions (ZACC, 2023; TIZ, n.d.-b; U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, 2023a; Ncube, 2024).

Targeting whistleblowers and independent media is a growing concern. Inadequate legal protection and restrictive legislation, such as the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Amendment Bill (Patriot Act) of 2023, create risks for those exposing corruption and can shield SOE malfeasance (Amnesty International Zimbabwe, 2023; U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, 2023b; Freedom of Expression Institute, 2023).

Slow asset recovery and the ability to hide wealth internationally contribute to impunity (TIZ, n.d.-a; Global Financial Integrity, 2023). Informal networks and patronage systems deeply embedded within Zimbabwean SOEs create a resilient ecosystem that shields corrupt activities, overriding formal rules and hindering accountability (Good Governance Africa, 2023; U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, 2023a).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE STUDY

The mechanisms of corruption's resistance can be analyzed through several theoretical lenses:

- **Principal-Agent Theory:** Corruption arises when agents (e.g., SOE executives) act in self-interest over principals (public). "Fight back" involves agents concealing information, forming illicit cartels, or sabotaging audits (Eisenhardt, 1989; Khan, 2022).
- **State Capture Theory:** Powerful private interests collude with elites to illicitly influence state decision-making, distorting governance (World Bank, 2024; Transparency International, 2023a). In Zimbabwe, this involves influencing SOEs like ZINARA and GMB through legislative manipulation or strategic appointments (TIZ, n.d.-b; Khan, 2022).

- **Rational Choice Theory:** Corrupt actors weigh benefits against costs. "Fight back" tactics are rational strategies to reduce perceived costs and maximize impunity, such as investing in legal teams or disinformation campaigns (OECD, 2023).
- **Institutional Theory:** Formal and informal institutions shape behavior. Corruption resists by manipulating formal rules or leveraging informal norms and patronage systems, creating environments resistant to reform, as seen in Zimbabwean SOEs (North, Wallis, & Weingast, 2009).
- **Resource Mobilization Theory:** Corrupt networks mobilize significant illicitly-gained resources for legal defense, public relations, political lobbying, and direct intimidation to protect their interests (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, n.d.-b). This is pronounced in high-stakes SOE corruption.

RESEARCH GAP

Despite extensive literature on corruption's impacts and anti-corruption measures, there is a lack of integrated studies systematically analyzing the multifaceted and active mechanisms through which corruption fights back. Most studies focus on prevalence or policy effectiveness in isolation. There is a specific need for research bridging global, regional (African), and local (Zimbabwean) contexts to holistically understand these counter-tactics, particularly how they manifest within State-Owned Enterprises. This study aims to fill this gap by comprehensively examining these resistance strategies and their implications for anti-corruption initiatives in the SOE sector.

METHODOLOGY AND RATIONALE

The study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on desk research and vast literature review, employing qualitative content analysis to examine how corruption counterattacks against reform initiatives in State-Owned Entities (SOEs). Qualitative content analysis is suitable to examine advanced, evolution processes such as corruption's countermeasures where immediate access to SOE actors is not feasible (Bengtsson, 2016). It is also frequently blended with other interpretive techniques to enhance analytical richness and spot intricate patterns within extensive text corpora (Alejandro & Zhao, 2020). Its coding and categorization functions allow for systematic theme extraction from legal texts, policy reports, and the media (Bengtsson, 2016; Mende, 2022). In the areas of sensitive research subjects—where initial hand access is possible—content analysis is a very handy means for monitoring how corruption

unfolds in response to reforms in government. Through utilization of existing text-based sources, the study builds an empirically grounded theory map of the retaliatory means used by corruption, addressing a significant gap in anti-corruption methodology studies.

Exploratory and Interpretive Approach

To unpack how corruption operates to actively resist intervention, an exploratory, interpretive approach is needed. Qualitative content analysis permits intensive, thematic interpretation of texts, case studies, and policy documents—especially relevant in studying covert behavior in SOEs (Bengtsson, 2016).

Breadth and Depth through Comparative Contexts

By employing content analysis in literature of international, regional, and Zimbabwean focus, there is broad comparative insight as well as detailed case-specific knowledge—a method bolstered by cross-context sociological inquiry (Mende, 2022).

Application of Secondary Data for Ethical and Practical Purposes

Due to political sensitivity towards corruption, especially among SOEs, explicit fieldwork could be unsafe ethically. Use of credible secondary sources such as peer-reviewed articles, Transparency International, World Bank, UNODC reports, and commission reports enables ethical, pragmatic, and academically rigorous data application (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019).

Precedent for Content Analysis in Anti-Corruption Research

Content analysis is increasingly being employed in corruption research. Boyko et al. (2024), for example, employed it in the examination of post-reform rhetoric in Eastern Europe, Magakwe (2023) employed it in researching South African public opinion in procurement cases, and Hope (2024) employed it in court reactions to grand corruption across Africa—proving its efficacy and applicability.

Application of Contemporary and Contextual Sources

With over 80% of the citations from 2021–2025, this study specializes in currency to gain insights into evolving corruption strategies based on the most recent trends and dynamic countermeasures.

DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY

A systematic literature review was the primary data collection method.

- *Keyword Search:* Academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR) and anti-corruption portals (U4, Transparency International, World Bank, UNODC, UNDP, AU, OECD, FATF) were searched using terms such as “*corruption fight back*,” “*SLAPPs*,” “*state capture*,” “*SOE corruption*,” and Zimbabwean SOE names (e.g., ZINARA, GMB).
- *Inclusion Criteria:* Peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books, and reports from reputable organizations published mainly between 2021–May 2025 (with older foundational works where relevant), focusing on corruption resistance in SOEs across global, African, and Zimbabwean contexts.
- *Exclusion Criteria:* Opinion pieces, unverified online content, and older sources **without critical insights.**

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the qualitative content analysis, identifying and detailing the multifaceted tactics employed by corrupt actors to resist anti-corruption efforts, particularly within the context of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). The analysis revealed five overarching themes of counterattack: (1) Weaponization of Legal Systems (Lawfare and Strategic Litigation); (2) Political Interference and Co-optation; (3) Disinformation, Smear Campaigns, and Reputation Laundering; (4) Direct Intimidation, Harassment, and Violence; and (5) Infiltration and Institutional Capture. Each theme is supported by evidence from global, regional (African), and local (Zimbabwean) contexts, with a specific focus on its manifestation within SOEs.

1. WEAPONIZATION OF LEGAL SYSTEMS (LAWFARE AND STRATEGIC LITIGATION)

This tactic involves corrupt actors transforming formal legal processes into instruments of harassment and intimidation. The analysis shows this is a preferred method for powerful, well-resourced individuals associated with SOEs.

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)

Findings consistently illustrate SLAPPs as a key tool to silence critics, imposing prohibitive legal and emotional costs. The European Commission (2024) and U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre (n.d.-a) highlight their use for defamation or data protection claims, not merit-based victories. The assassination of Maltese investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, who faced over 40 SLAPPs, underscores the extreme danger (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). In Zimbabwe, broad defamation laws and the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Amendment Bill (Patriot Act) of 2023 serve similar chilling effects on independent media and voices investigating SOEs (Media Institute of Southern Africa, 2024; Amnesty International Zimbabwe, 2023).

Exploiting Legal Loopholes and Procedural Delays

Corrupt actors, often from SOEs, leverage skilled legal teams to identify ambiguities, technicalities, and judicial backlogs to delay investigations and trials. This tactic is effective in overstretched judicial systems (Khan, 2022; TIZ, n.d.-b). Brazil's "Operation Car Wash" saw powerful figures use numerous appeals and challenges to delay justice despite overwhelming evidence, often involving state-owned oil companies like Petrobras (Transparency International, 2023c; Center for Latin American & Latino Studies, 2023). In Kenya, high-profile corruption cases face numerous injunctions and delays (International Crisis Group, 2023; Odhiambo, 2024). In Zimbabwe, the slow pace of high-profile corruption trials and frequent bail for SOE officials indicate similar exploitation, creating a "revolving door" perception (ZACC, 2023; Ncube, 2024).

POLITICAL INTERFERENCE AND COOPTION

This theme highlights how corrupt networks actively seek to influence, capture, or dismantle political and institutional checks and balances, particularly relevant for SOEs directly subject to political influence.

Undermining Anti-Corruption Institutions (ACIs)

Analysis reveals deliberate budget cuts, politically motivated appointments or dismissals of ACI leadership, and legislative changes that dilute their powers (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024; UNDP, 2024). Many African anti-corruption commissions are rendered "toothless bulldogs" due to lack of genuine political independence (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Examples include the removal of Malawi's Anti-Corruption Bureau head and reported interference in Nigeria and Kenya (Human Rights Watch, 2024; Transparency International, 2023b). In Zimbabwe, concerns exist about ZACC's operational independence, especially in investigating powerful figures in SOE corruption (U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, 2023a; TIZ, n.d.-b).

Political Appointments and Nepotism

Corrupt actors strategically influence appointments to key government, regulatory, and SOE positions, ensuring compliant individuals or loyal cronies are in powerful roles (World Bank, 2024; Transparency International, 2023a). South Africa's State Capture allegations meticulously detailed how strategic appointments to Eskom and Transnet boards facilitated widespread corruption (Zondo Commission of Inquiry, 2022; Reddy, 2024). In Ghana, politically connected individuals appointed to SOE boards have led to poor performance and corruption allegations (IMANI Africa, 2023). In Zimbabwe, political patronage influences appointments within SOEs like ZINARA and GMB, enabling corrupt practices and frustrating accountability.

DISINFORMATION, SMEAR CAMPAIGNS, AND REPUTATION LAUNDERING

Corrupt actors engage in psychological warfare to protect themselves, weaponizing information to discredit opponents and confuse the public.

Smear Campaigns Against Whistleblowers and Journalists

A common tactic is to attack the messenger, launching aggressive smear campaigns using false allegations, character assassination, and fabricated scandals to discredit individuals (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2024; ARTICLE 19, 2023). In Mexico, journalists face social media bots and orchestrated attacks (Freedom House, 2024). South African whistleblowers exposing SOE corruption faced campaigns labeling them disgruntled

employees or criminals (Corruption Watch, 2023). In Zimbabwe, journalists investigating SOE corruption are labeled "enemies of the state," eroding trust and creating a chilling effect (Media Institute of Southern Africa, 2024).

Disinformation and Propaganda

Corrupt networks engage in broader disinformation campaigns to manipulate public opinion, disseminating false information and conspiracy theories through various media (United Nations, 2024; Bradford, 2023). They frame anti-corruption efforts as politically motivated or foreign interference. This includes employing PR firms and "dark money" to fund favourable narratives. In Eastern Europe, troll farms spread narratives discrediting anti-corruption activists (Freedom House, 2024). In Zimbabwean SOE contexts, failures might be blamed on sanctions or external sabotage rather than corruption, deflecting public anger.

Reputation Laundering and Strategic Philanthropy

Corrupt individuals attempt to "launder" reputations by engaging in strategic philanthropy, sponsoring community projects, or investing in visible social initiatives (Transparency International, 2024a). This cultivates a positive public image, masking illicit wealth and undermining public perception of their corruption.

DIRECT INTIMIDATION, HARASSMENT, AND VIOLENCE

This is the most extreme form of retaliation, directly targeting the physical and psychological well-being of anti-corruption actors.

Threats, Harassment, and Surveillance

Whistleblowers, journalists, activists, and judicial officers frequently face direct threats to their lives, families, or livelihoods, ranging from anonymous calls to cyber-stalking (Amnesty International, 2024; Committee to Protect Journalists, 2024). Inadequate whistleblower protection often leaves individuals exposed. Corruption Watch (2023) documented job loss and intimidation for South African whistleblowers. In Zimbabwe, those exposing SOE corruption face public accusations and veiled threats, creating a hostile environment (TIZ, n.d.-b; U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, 2023a).

Physical Violence and Assassination

In extreme cases, corruption retaliates through physical violence, including assaults, abductions, and assassinations, serving as a brutal warning. The assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia (2017) and other journalists underscores these risks (Reporters Without Borders, 2023; Global Witness, 2024). Environmental defenders investigating illicit operations, often tied to corrupt SOEs, are particularly vulnerable.

INFILTRATION AND INSTITUTIONAL CAPTURE

This is arguably the most sophisticated and damaging counter-tactic, where corrupt networks infiltrate anti-corruption bodies or systematically capture key state institutions.

Infiltrating Anti-Corruption Institutions (ACIs) and Law Enforcement

Corrupt networks place moles or sympathetic individuals within ACIs, police forces, and prosecutorial bodies to leak information, sabotage investigations, or tamper with evidence (UNDP, 2024; World Bank, 2024). Reports from Ukraine and Kenya document instances of sabotage from compromised elements within investigative bodies (Transparency International, 2023d; International Crisis Group, 2023). In Zimbabwe, concerns exist about the capacity and independence of elements within the justice system when dealing with complex SOE corruption cases, suggesting vulnerabilities.

Judicial Capture and Legislative Manipulation

This involves corrupt networks influencing the judiciary and legislative processes for favorable legal outcomes or to enact protective laws. Judicial capture manifests through bribery, political appointments of pliable judges, or intimidation (Hope, 2024). Legislative manipulation involves lobbying for laws that create loopholes, decriminalize corrupt acts, or grant amnesties. South Africa's State Capture inquiry revealed manipulation of legislative processes to benefit corrupt actors, including through SOE contracts (Zondo Commission of Inquiry, 2022). In Zimbabwe, criticisms of legislative changes (e.g., Patriot Act) and slow high-profile convictions raise concerns about the resilience of legislative and judicial bodies against undue influence.

The totality of these counter-tactics illustrates that fighting corruption is a battle against a well-resourced, adaptable, and often ruthless adversary. SOEs, with their significant financial flows and political connections, are particularly susceptible to these multifaceted counterattacks.

CONCLUSION

The results demonstrate that corruption in State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) is not a static governance deficit but an adaptive, strategic, and resourceful force that actively resists reform. Five interrelated counter-tactics are found in transnational, African, and Zimbabwean contexts: the weaponization of the law, political patronage and interference, reputation management and disinformation, direct violence and intimidation, and institutional capture. These tactics collectively indicate that corruption is about defending vested interests as much as it is about illicit enrichment, and involves both overt compulsion and institution manipulation.

At the global level, sophisticated forms of lawfare, disinformation, and offshore financial structures illustrate how corruption comes back with transnational structures. In Africa, these are complemented by institutional vulnerability and political patronage, and state capture is best illustrated in the South African Eskom and Transnet cases. In Zimbabwe, SOEs like ZINARA and the Grain Marketing Board present the perfect example of the interaction of these global and regional trends in an environment characterized by selective justice, legislative manipulation, and intimidation of actors of accountability.

The image that surfaces is one of corruption as a perceptive enemy—one that responds to pressure, capitalizes on weaknesses in institutions, and uses political and legal institutions to insulate itself. Above all, the presence of fierce "fight-back" reactions is not evidence of failure at anti-corruption but evidence that accountability efforts are beginning to pose a real challenge to entrenched interests. This insight presents the imperative to rethink anti-corruption strategies: breaking away from technical, reactive solutions to pro-active, strong systems capable of resisting and pushing back against inevitable counter-attack.

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