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NEVA MAKGETLA: Cult of secrecy is at the heart of the rot in government

So much of the discourse around corruption revolves around evil individuals while the system is at fault

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by NEVA MAKGETLA



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Some time ago a government department asked me to swear not to disclose any information whatsoever that I got in my official capacity. I recognised the broad language – it originated long before 1994 to protect the apartheid state from whistle-blowers and public oversight. Despite the transition to democracy decades earlier, no-one in this particular department had thought to change it. Instead, they effectively retained the culture of secrecy and lack of accountability established in our undemocratic past.

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Too much of the discourse around corruption today fails to deal with this kind of effective protection for the powerful. Instead, it centres on evil individuals, extending at most to bewail weak investigative authorities and inadequate punishments. That approach is intellectually satisfying since, like any conspiracy theory, it gives an easy answer to the complexities of modern society. It's all down to a powerful cabal acting in its own interests.

But the cost of this approach is high. The democratic order ultimately consists of rules to prevent or at least limit the abuse of

government by powerful individuals and groups.

Those systems go beyond elections to a host of procedures to ensure decision-making across the state reflects the aims of the elected government. From this standpoint we have to ask how we can improve those systems so as to pre-empt corruption, not just how to catch and punish the corrupt after the fact. This is particularly true given SA's unusually deep inequalities, which consistently set economic power against political accountability.

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Two particular issues protect bad behaviour in government. First, pervasive secrecy

surrounds most decisions. Neither ministers nor officials have to publish the information they used, the people they consulted, or the analysis that led to their decisions. Instead of sunlight, the bureaucracy tries to control discretion through burdensome, sometimes impractical procedural rules that are supposed to enable internal policing.

Second, officials are still evaluated more against their adherence to bureaucratic plans than their successes and failures for society.

Consider the procurement process. Outside Gauteng, virtually all tender decisions are still deeply secretive. Officials do not have to publish the qualifications of the successful bidders or their cost compared to other bids. Obviously, this makes life easier for officials, but at a high price. Instead of openness, the system

relies on detailed procedural requirements, from strict deadlines and paperwork requirements to limits on interactions with experts around specifications. That in itself often means long delays and worse outcomes, especially for complex and innovative projects.

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In practice, hundreds of government agencies issue tens of thousands of tenders every year, so policing them is virtually impossible. It is no accident that reporters and independent investigators, rather than auditors, the Treasury or police, were the ones who tracked down most of the huge

frauds uncovered in the past few years.

Then there is the system of reward and punishment for officials. It still emphasises not actual service to the public, but meeting bureaucratic markers. More than a decade ago government promised to assess agencies and officials against socioeconomic outcomes. But they are now evaluated primarily in terms of annual performance plans with predetermined outputs expressed through key performance indicators (KPIs). The plans shed useful light on departmental priorities, but the KPIs focus narrowly on time frames and processes, for instance the submission of a draft just transition framework or a report on the number of tariffs modified. The actual long-run effect on society becomes irrelevant.

For what it's worth, back in the day I refused to

sign the secrecy oath. There were no visible repercussions. But the department did not change the language, and I have to assume most of my colleagues signed automatically.

However, unless we address this kind of secrecy and lack of accountability, we will end up with at best a revolving door for corrupt individuals.

- *Makgetla is a senior researcher with Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies.*

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As long as there is the iniquitous system of cadre deployment, this secrecy will remain. Cadre deployment thrives on