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RESEARCH REPORT

Understanding Systemic Corruption: The Political Role of Corruption in Weakly Institutionalized Political Systems

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Abstract

Corruption is one of the most significant threats to global peace and security in the 21st century. It undermines accountable governance, diverts much-needed state resources, and is often a driver of violent conflict. In some contexts, corruption has become systemic, defining both the political system and everyday life for citizens. While there are numerous analytical frameworks to understand factors driving corruption, none have sufficiently examined the political role of corruption in weakly institutionalized political systems. Using the political marketplace as an analytic framework, this paper examines the political role that corruption plays within these contexts. It argues that in weakly institutionalized political systems, corruption is in part driven by a material need for elite political dealmaking within and outside of formal institutions. Addressing corruption in these contexts therefore requires not simply an opposition to corruption ("anti"), but a fundamental transformation of the political system. The paper provides tools to analyse the political role of corruption and discusses the implications for addressing corruption in weakly institutionalized political systems.

Introduction

Corruption, commonly understood as the abuse of public authority for private gain,[1] is one of the most significant threats to global peace and security in the 21st century (Chayes 2015; 2020). It robs citizens of their voice in government, undermines the rule of law, and is often a driver of violent conflict (Chayes 2015; World Bank 2011; Johnston 2005; Cheng and Zaum 2013). While some countries have had some success in addressing corruption, in others, it has become systemic, defying traditional principal-agent anti-corruption approaches. How do we understand contexts where corruption has become part of political practice, and moreover, what can be done about it?

The last two decades have seen major advances in understanding corruption, yet anti-corruption practice remains mired in frameworks inadequate for contexts of systemic corruption. Despite immense investments in principal-agent style reforms, few have shown evidence of the capacity to sustainably address corruption in these environments (Johnsøn, Taxell, and Zaum 2012; Gans-Morse et al. 2018). The corruption industry that has arisen has largely treated corruption as a technocratic problem to be solved. The fundamental issue is that in weakly institutionalized political systems, corruption also serves a political function—but this has not yet been sufficiently explored in the literature. This paper seeks to do just that.

This paper puts forth two arguments. First, in systemically corrupt political systems, corruption has become part of how politics is practiced because holding and exercising political power in these contexts requires substantial resources to make deals within and outside of formal institutions. The need for these resources drives actors to engage in corruption. Once these practices are established, these political systems are extremely resilient – which is why the systems remain remarkably consistent even when key actors change.

Given the systemic and dogged resilience of corruption in these contexts, simply trying to end one corrupt behaviour without addressing the broader system is not likely to have a long-term impact. The political system needs to be fundamentally transformed. Therefore, my second argument is for a paradigm shift that embodies this mindset: shifting from anti-corruption to *transforming corruption*.

A corruption transformation approach shifts how we analyse these political systems and the types of tools that can be brought to bear in response. This shift from anti-corruption to transforming corruption has been implicitly encouraged in research findings for the last 20 years – yet anti-corruption is still operationalized as a narrowly defined approach focused on technocratic solutions with limited cross-sector collaborations. It is time to change that.

To make both arguments, the paper uses the political marketplace framework (PMF) as an analytic lens (de Waal 2015) drawing on political marketplace case studies from Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia.[2] In doing so, this paper seeks to provide researchers, practitioners, and policymakers with new analytic frameworks and tools to understand and transform corruption.

The paper begins with a discussion of the strengths and limits of existing anti-corruption theoretical models and practice. The paper then introduces the political marketplace framework (PMF), why politics in weakly institutionalized political systems demands corruption, and conceptual tools to analyse the political role of corruption. The paper then outlines the implications for anti-corruption practice and concludes with a discussion of the paper's main findings and areas for future research.

The Logic(s) of Corruption

Systemic corruption means that corruption is the norm in how the political system operates at every level, not an exception to normal practice (Médard 2002, 379). It is not a one-off transaction, but part of the informal rules that define how political actors interact (Wathne 2021, 15). Within this, corruption refers to a various specific behaviours ranging from bribery or influence peddling to cronyism or outright embezzlement (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016, 8–9).[3] However, what is considered a corrupt behaviour varies based on context. Systemic corruption is perpetuated by networks that act according to stable practices and norms that emerged through design or dysfunction for political or social functions (Jackson 2022, 6). Put differently, systemic corruption means that engaging in corruption is part of daily life and how politics is practiced. This goes beyond corruption being normalized or the norm rather than the exception but focuses on how it is intertwined with the formal and informal rules of the political system. However, even in contexts of systemic corruption, there are still limits and rules on what is considered acceptable behaviour (Schatzberg 2001). Historically, our understanding of corruption has failed to recognize the nuances of how corruption has been intertwined with the formal and informal rules of the political system thereby hindering anti-corruption approaches.

Historically, Western conceptions of corruption have framed it as a rational choice, principal-agent problem (P. M. Heywood 2017; Menocal et al. 2015; Wedel 2012). The principals, those in charge, entrust certain authority and tasks for agents to carry out. In theory, the agents are accountable to the principals. There can be multiple layers to principal-agent relationships. For example, in democracies, the ultimate principals are the voters who delegate governing authority to certain individuals by electing them to office. The elected officials then appoint officials to make up their cabinet who then staff government departments and so on. In authoritarian settings, the overarching principal may be the military dictator or king. Within the principal-agent framework, an agent is theorized to be more likely to engage in corruption when they have an opportunity to do so, believe that they can do so undetected, or that If they are caught, they will not be punished. This has become known as the Klitgaard Equation: Corruption = monopoly + discretion – accountability (R. E. Klitgaard 1988). Implicit within this framework is economic interest as a driver of corruption whereas the conditions outlined in the Klitgaard Equation determine the likelihood an individual will act on that economic interest.

While this was originally a framework to identify settings where bureaucratic corruption may be more likely, it has been used as a framework to more broadly understand conditions that foster corruption (Johnston 2005, 25).[4] Consider, for example, police officers who extort bribes from taxi drivers at a checkpoint. Under a principal-agent framing, this would be seen as the police officer having too much discretion or a lack of oversight from their commanding official. From this framing, the police officer engages in corruption because they can benefit, and they may not be punished for it.

This rational choice, principal-agent framing of corruption led to an array of institutional anti-corruption approaches aimed at reducing opportunities and incentives for corruption that have dominated anti-corruption work for much of the last thirty years (Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2013, 453; Wedel 2012; Johnsøn, Taxell, and Zaum 2012). These included efforts to reduce political actors' monopolistic authority, create institutional checks and balances, increase transparency to reduce information asymmetries between principals and agents, and a host of prosecutorial reforms aimed at holding public officials (elected and appointed) accountable (e.g. Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016). Principal-agent style anti-corruption efforts often focused primarily on formal institutions and processes. The problem is that in many places around the world, especially in weakly institutionalized political systems where corruption is systemic, principal-agent style anti-corruption approaches have not worked (Johnsøn, Taxell, and Zaum 2012; P. Heywood 2018; Miller 2023a; Gans-Morse et al. 2018; Borges et al. 2017; Menocal et al. 2015; Johnston and Fritzen 2021).

As Klitgaard himself argued, in contexts of systemic corruption "calling for better agents, improved incentives, better information, more competition, less official discretion, and higher economic social costs is well and good. But who is going to listen? Who is going to act? The usual anti-corruption remedies may not work" (2000, 3). One of the core critiques of P-A is that it assumes the presence of "principled principals", meaning actors who are interested in acting with integrity, an assumption that may not hold in contexts of systemic corruption (Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2013; Marquette and Peiffer 2018). In practice, this ignores the broader political or socioeconomic context that may influence whether engaging in corruption is in fact in the principal's interests, or pressure they may be under to engage in corruption regardless of whether they agree with it (Wedel 2012; Wathne 2021; Johnston and Fritzen 2021; e.g. L. Hoffmann and Patel 2022). In sum, the choice to engage in corruption is not simply an economic cost-benefit analysis—it is also a social and political one.

The limitations of principal-agent style anti-corruption approaches are most apparent in the so-called fragile states, but also in more stable, institutionalized states like Indonesia or Mexico. These so-called fragile states include countries like Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Haiti which have been labelled fragile as they score high on levels of economic, environmental, human, political, security, and societal vulnerabilities (OECD 2023). These states are often emblematic of the changing nature of war (and violent conflict more broadly) and fracturing of political authority in the 21st century (Kaldor 2012). While fragile states has become short-hand in policy and research for certain types of states, it describes states by their deficiencies and shortcomings in comparison to a Weberian ideal, and says little about how they actually function (Boege, Brown, and Clements 2009). In practice, these states are better described as weakly institutionalized political systems.[5]

The mismatch between these weakly institutionalized political systems and principal-agent style reforms is the issue of how political power is defined and exercised. Principal-agent style reforms are based on rational legal authority characteristic of Weberian-style states with strong rule of law where political power is formally defined and exercised—contemporary states such as the United States, Belgium, or Japan.[6] However, this describes only a minority of political systems. In contrast, in places like Senegal, South Africa, Mexico or India, political power is a blend of formal and informal institutions. Similarly, in places like Sudan, Mali, or Iraq, how political power is exercised is extremely contested and the formal political institutions are dominated by informal rules and practices. While there is a gravitational pull towards analysing political systems by their formal rules and structures, the informal dynamics have always been just as important. As Leftwich argued, governance is the "web of formal or informal institutions, rules, norms, and expectations which govern behaviours in societies and without which the very idea of human society is impossible" (Leftwich 2004, 10). These formal and informal institutions are the real "rules of the game" (North 1990). The fact is that in much of the world, the Weberian state does not exist. There is significant overlap between the public and private spheres, and competition between formal and informal institutions that provide differing rules for how political power should be exercised.

The shortcomings of rational choice, principal-agent style anti-corruption reforms spurred new thinking about corruption and ways to combat it. This began with a reconsideration of the factors that were driving corruption and how corruption should be understood. Corruption research now coalesces around four conceptual frameworks – principal-agent, corruption as a collective action problem, social pressures, and functionality – each emphasizing analysis of a different set of factors at play.[7] While some scholars argue that specific frameworks best conceptualize corruption generally (e.g. Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2019; Rothstein 2021), a growing number of scholars acknowledge the overlap between the frameworks and encourage context-driven analysis of corruption to understand which framework is most helpful for understanding corruption in a given political system (e.g. Wathne 2021; P. M. Heywood 2017; P. Heywood 2018; Jackson 2022; Johnston and Fritzen 2021).[8]

The first conceptual corruption framework is the previously discussed principal-agent/ formal institutional framings (it is possible to steal and get away with it), though with clearer eyes about the limitations of these approaches and where they are contextually appropriate (Wathne 2021). Johnston (2014, 34) argues that we should think about anti-corruption analogous to Rustow's (1970) argument about democracy: that the factors that lead to democracy are different from the ones that sustain it. Similarly, the strategies that help keep corruption in check – mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability, checks and balances, all legally enshrined – strategies that reflect a principal-agent framing, are different from the strategies that built the political foundations necessary for these reforms to be enacted in the first place (Johnston 2014, 34). As previously detailed, evidence suggests that principal-agent reforms by themselves are unlikely to be successful in contexts of systemic corruption but may be successful in contexts with strong rule of law. In fact, evidence suggests that under some circumstances, principal-agent reforms may even do harm through their unintended consequences or in how they are weaponized against opponents (Johnston 2014, 57–87; Olson 2023).

Second, are frameworks that advocate understanding corruption as a collective action problem (e.g. Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2013; Mungiu-Pippidi 2013; Rothstein 2021).[9] This shifts from an individual-level focus to begin to illuminate the collective nature of corruption (Marquette and Peiffer 2018). In this environment, an individual refusing to engage in corruption is unlikely to change the status quo, it simply means they will lose out on what they might have benefitted from. Or as Wathne puts it, "The system is not going to change, so why bother trying? . . . Why should I be the only one who does not benefit from the opportunities that exist? Why be the only one to put my neck on the line?" (Wathne 2021, 7). To continue the earlier example of the police officers soliciting bribes: instead of focusing on whether the police officer has too much discretion and the principal too little visibility into their actions, combined with a lack of accountability, a collective action approach would look at how widespread the police officer's bribery practice is, whether them accepting or refusing a bribe would really change anything, and if they did refuse it, would it spark a backlash. The collective action problem begins to reveal the difficulty in shifting practices that have become pervasive and normalized. Here, a third approach offers insight to unpack the social pressures that sustain corrupt behaviours and block action against them.

This third approach focuses on the norms, values, and social pressures that justify engaging in corruption as well as justify not trying to oppose it (Wathne 2021, 7–9). This approach focuses on unpacking what has been termed "a culture of corruption" to understand the social pressures that drive and sustain corruption (Smith 2007), at times making corruption into a collective action problem. Key within this are social norms: a group's expectations about how a member of that group should behave in a given situation (Scharbatke-Church and Chigas 2019, 25; Baez-Camargo and Passas 2017; Kubbe and Engelbert 2018). Social norms are enforced through social sanctions like ostracization or public ridicule. In contexts where one's social network is key to access jobs or government services as well as be a safety net for daily survival, social sanctions can be quite powerful. To return to the police officer example, this approach asks whether the extortion is sustained through social norms within the police officer's team at the checkpoint. Perhaps an individual officer does not want to solicit bribes (individual attitude) but knows that is what his fellow officers expect and not doing so may mean he is ostracized from the unit or even demoted. Anthropologists and sociologists have long recognized the importance of these dynamics in shaping why individuals engage in corruption (e.g. Blundo 2015; de Sardan 1999; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014; Torsello and Venard 2016), though this thinking has only more recently been applied to anti-corruption work (e.g. Scharbatke-Church and Chigas 2016; Jackson and Köbis 2018; Baez-Camargo and Passas 2017; L. K. Hoffmann and Patel 2017).

The last set of factors driving corruption focuses on the function that corruption serves (Marquette and Peiffer 2018; 2021). This area of research often focuses on the problem-solving purpose that corruption plays in daily survival (Wathne 2021)—or as Obadare calls it, the "necessity of everyday corruption" (2019; as cited in Marquette and Peiffer 2021). In the example of the police officers, this approach asks what function the officer soliciting bribes fulfills. It could be to respond to the social pressures as previously outlined, or it could be to respond to their material needs if they had not been paid. Asking what purpose the corrupt act serves can illuminate drivers that the previous approaches do not consider.

While these conceptual frameworks have significantly advanced our understanding of corruption and the factors driving and sustaining it, there is an additional type of function of corruption that has not been sufficiently explored in the literature – the political function. By this, I mean a focus on the political purpose that corruption serves. This goes beyond stating that corruption has become commonplace or entrenched to specifically examine what role corruption plays within the political system and why the political system seems to demand corruption. In weakly institutionalized political systems, there is evidence that corruption supplies the needed grease for the political institutions to function (Thompson 2018), but the reality of this has not been closely examined in contemporary political systems. This paper grapples with the political function of corruption. If we can understand how corruption has become part of the political system, what are the implications for a new type of anti-corruption approaches? These are the gaps that this paper seeks to address.

The Political Marketplace Framework

The political marketplace framework (PMF) is a theory of the practice of contemporary politics, inductively developed from observing how elites take and hold power in certain countries (de Waal 2015). It builds on the neopatrimonial[10] school of thought (e.g. Chabal and Daloz 1999; Bayart 2009; Bratton and Van de Walle 1997) but seeks to explain how neopatrimonial states have evolved in response to globalization and the changing nature of violent conflict (de Waal 2015, 32; Kaldor 2012). The key focus is examining the 'real politics' as they happen within and beyond formal positions of power and written rules (Mbembe 1992, 30). In this paper, the PMF serves as the foundational theory of political practice, a critique of traditional conceptions of corruption, and a toolkit to better understand, analyse, and respond to corruption in systemically corrupt contexts.[11]

A political marketplace (PM) state is one in which transactional politics, meaning elite bargains and competition, dominate formal institutions. Political power is treated as a commodity that is bought and sold as if you were buying it in a market. The market supply and demand for political power sets the price. In these countries, there is no state monopoly on violence, and violence can be used to increase one's bargaining power if you cannot afford the prevailing price of power.

There are four core conditions of PMF countries (de Waal 2015, 19). First, that political finance, meaning the funds that political actors to buy loyalty or political services, are in the hands of individuals who have political, military, or economic interests distinct from the state. Second, that control over the means of coercion is dispersed or contested. For example, there are competing armed factions outside state control. Third, political disputes are not resolved by formal institutions and procedures. Lastly, that PMF countries are integrated into the global order in a subordinate position.

Political marketplace countries are not all the same. For example, Iraq's PM has a rentier structure (Al-Kli and Miller 2023), Nigeria's is a rivalrous oligopoly , whereas the DRC is better described as an amalgamation of interlocking and embedded political marketplaces (Schouten 2021, 5; Miller 2022). What connects these countries is the dominance of transactional politics and the presence of the four previously described core conditions.

The PMF was developed from a close study of politics in the Horn of Africa—Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Somaliland, South Sudan, and Eritrea (de Waal 2015). It described these states in market terms because that was "the vernacular of everyday politics in Sudan", a language that also provided insight to other countries in the Horn of Africa (de Waal 2015, 9). It has since been used as an analytic lens to better understand politics in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Liberia, Nigeria, Syria, and Yemen among other weakly institutionalized political systems, as well as a lens to analyse thematic issues such as starvation and humanitarian response (Sarkar et al. 2021), decarbonization (Sarkar 2023), and mediation (de Waal, Spatz, and Sarkar 2022).[12]

The PMF is a theory of politics focused on elite actors and how they make deals with each other. It focuses on the elite because the empirical evidence suggests that these are the actors who dominant and shape the political system. However, the PMF is not the only factor explaining the politics in the previously mentioned countries. These countries also have competing political ideologies defined by democratic ideals, sectarian and ethnic identities, and religious beliefs among other factors – all of which intersect with, but are dominated by PMF dynamics (Kaldor and de Waal 2020; Kaldor and Radice 2022). A key question pertaining to corruption is how to transform these systems so that the transactional politics of the elite do not dominate democratic and civic ideals that exist.

There are many paths to becoming a political marketplace, each specific to a country's own history and political experience (see case studies for details), though there are some common patterns. For example, in his study of late-20th century Africa, Bates (2008) argued that declining state revenues in the 1970s and 80s triggered fiscal crises that many left states across Africa with insufficient resources needed to function. Politicians, faced with fewer state resources and increasing public demands for reform, turned to predation and corruption in order to finance their own political survival. This created cycles of violence and predation that fuelled ethnic conflict, insurgencies, natural resource extraction, and undermined national economies. Versions of this story can be found in Nigeria, Venezuela, South Sudan, and the DRC—paradigmatic political marketplaces—as well as in countries like Sierra Leone and Cameroon which may not be full political marketplaces, but certainly qualify as weakly institutionalized political systems (Ellis 2016; Schouten 2021; Craze 2022; Acemoglu 2012; Burgess and Corrales 2023; Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999). While the paths to becoming a political marketplace are many, research suggests that once these dynamics become established, they are extremely difficult to dislodge (de Waal, Spatz, and Sarkar 2022; Sarkar 2023).

The Price of Political Competition: When Power Requires Money or Violence

The PMF flips the script on analysing corruption—from treating corruption as an abrogation of normal political practice to recognizing it as a key component of it. Successful actors in political marketplace contexts need resources to forge deals, buy loyalty, and political services—including violence. These are the "twin currencies" of cash and violence (de Waal 2015; Benjamin Spatz 2020). Corruption is one method to accumulate these resources. The PMF provides an analytic lens to identify this political function of corruption and how it differs from corruption as a means of self-enrichment.

Consider Nigeria's elections as a paradigmatic example of how these twin currencies are used and how corruption fits into the political system. Nigeria is nominally a federal republic, but in practice, it operates as a multi-level political marketplace dominated by executive office holders financed with oil rents. Political competition is constant and political authority is not defined by rules, but by deals among the elite. This competition plays out behind closed doors and in formal processes, most notably, elections.

As Kew wrote, "elections are the apex of the political cycle in Nigeria. They are so important, in fact, that political leaders have rarely allowed public preferences to get in the way of their preferred results" (2010, 499). While elections are held and many actors work for them to be free and fair, historically, Nigerian elections have been heavily manipulated through the use of money and violence. For aspiring candidates, elections are exorbitantly expensive, and campaigns are not funded by donations from everyday citizens. To even register as a candidate with a political party, aspirants have to pay fees as high as $240,000 USD, which often exceeds the total four-year salary of the office they hope to win (Nweje 2022).[13] In addition, party primaries have been described as a competition in buying delegates (Interview 211 2022; Interview 201 2022; Interview 225 2022).[14] In the 2023 election cycle, some All Progressives Party Plateau state gubernatorial candidates are believed to have spent more than $167,000 just trying to bribe their way into the party's nomination.[15] In same the party primary, some individual delegates are alleged to have collected almost $4,000 in bribes (Interview 225 2022).

This is more than 10 times what 40% of Nigerians lived on in a year (NBS 2022). Overall, gubernatorial candidates in Plateau are estimated to need more than $4.4 million USD to even consider contesting for office. On the presidential level, Bola Tinubu, who went onto win the presidency, is alleged to have spent between $10,000 to $25,000 on bribes for each delegate during the presidential primary (Hassan 2022). As Chidi Odinkalu said, "party delegates are, in Nigerian parlance, chopping from all sides of the mouth. The presidency is under the auctioneer's hammer" (Nweje 2022). Election day also brings with it its own set of costs for buying voters, stoking violence, and funding one's campaign staff.

In addition to attempts to buy political support—political aspirants also turn to violence. In 2023, this violence included thugs hired to disrupt opponents' rallies, burn down electoral offices, and in rare cases, assassinate opponents (Edozie 2023; Shuaibu 2022; Agha 2023; ACLED 2023).

All of these things, whether it is buying delegates or votes, or hiring young men to instigate violence – require money, and lots of it. And that's only to get into office. That does not include the money you will need later on for favours and to ensure continued political support. In addition, prices continually fluctuate according to market conditions. The cost of politics is so high, that outside of the country's millionaires and billionaires, few can afford to finance it by themselves and there is little culture of voter-funded campaigns. This has given rise to diverting state resources or turning to Nigeria's infamous "godfathers." Godfathers are influential, wealthy individuals who leverage these resources to decide who succeeds in elections and in elected office (Albert 2005). By some accounts, godfathers are "the most decisive force in Nigerian politics [emphasis added]" (Thurston 2015, 2). Political aspirants strike deals with godfathers to back their candidacies in exchange for favours, contracts, and influence once they are in office. This is almost akin to taking a loan from a godfather that will be paid back using the resources attached to the political office. Not only has this become common within Nigeria, but doing so has become seen as a right of officeholders (Joseph 1987; Falola 2021).

Even though Nigeria is an electoral republic, actually winning office let alone being able to govern while in office, requires substantial resources to make deals, buy support, and in some cases, buy violence for situations where a well-placed bribe falls short. In Nigeria, this all happens within the formal electoral process, but it is the informal deals that can influence who is successful. This speaks to the demand for resources transactional politics within political marketplaces. This is where the PMF offers a lens to understand these transactions and how they relate to corruption.

Corruption is one means to accumulate the resources needed to compete for power within a political marketplace. The price being both variable and set by the market. As previously discussed, this corruption is not primarily about personal enrichment, but about accumulating sufficient resources to be able to buy and trade political power. This is the political function of corruption.

There are two points worth clarifying. First, focusing on the political function of corruption is not to argue that corruption for self-enrichment does not happen in parallel. This surely happens. The PM system facilitates and allows it. However, I argue that in order to understand how to address corruption in systemically corrupt political systems, we need to distinguish corruption's political function from its self-enrichment function because the policy responses are different. Addressing the political function of corruption implies a transformation of the political system, whereas addressing the self-enrichment side implies reforms within the current system. This is further discussed in the implications section.

Second, focusing on the political function of corruption is not to argue that this is an acceptable status quo – it is not. As emphasized throughout this paper, corruption has extremely negative consequences—most of which are borne by the poorest and most vulnerable in society. They are the ones who are not able to access clean water, safe roads, functioning hospitals, or quality schools when the funding for them disappears into politicians' pockets. The argument here is that unless we understand the role corruption serves within the political system, we are unlikely to be able to sustainably change it.

Tools for Analysing Corruption: Political Budgets, Exposure, Goods, and Prices

The PMF introduces several tools to understand how corruption is functioning within the political system. These tools are the concepts of *political budgets, political budget exposure, demanded goods, and the price of loyalty and violence*. Each is a tool to examine how political finance, meaning the overall money flows through the political system to facilitate deals, fund patronage networks, and purchase the previously described political services. Political finance can be described as the "blood pumped through the arteries of transactional politics" (de Waal 2023, 8). Applying these concepts to a country like Somalia or the Democratic Republic of the Congo can illuminate who has power, where the power is coming from, how it is being channeled, and how secure an actors' hold on power may be. This is all guided by the old adage, "follow the money". From this, the actual shape of the system and levers of power and potential anti-corruption actions begin to emerge. In this section, I introduce the concepts and in later sections, outline their implications for addressing corruption.

This is not a forensic accounting approach. The goal is not to trace every pound or kobo, but to get a broad sense of the types of political financial flows. If political finance is the lifeblood of transactional political systems, then these concepts help to take a pulse of these flows, examining where there are blood losses and transfusions, where the veins are, and where surgery is needed.

Political Budgets

Political budgets are the funds that actors have to trade in the marketplace (de Waal 2015, 22). The size of one's political budget can indicate their relative power within the marketplace. Political budgets are not new features of political systems, though globalization and the changing nature of violence has opened new sources and mechanisms through which they can be funnelled.[16]

There are several components of a political budget worth examining. First is the source. These can come from licit or illicit sources—including by engaging in corruption. Within political marketplace research, there are common sources of political budgets that emerge across cases: government budgets, natural resources, criminal enterprise/licensed predation, and businesses/private wealth, and violent conflict/conflict economies.

The second component worth considering is the way in which actors move money into and out of their political budgets. For example, if an actor is tapping infrastructure contracts as a source of funds, how exactly are they doing it and who is involved? And third, where is the money stored or does it go directly to who the political actor is paying for something? In practice, these questions can be difficult to identify with concrete evidence (the so-called smoking gun), but well-placed actors within these systems often have a broad sense of how money is moved and who is involved.

The following sections discuss some of the common sources of political budgets and the way they are funded based on existing PMF cases. In practice, these sources and mechanisms are often overlapping in complex political budget systems.

Government Budgets

Government budgets are a common source of political budgets across all PM countries. For example, defence, infrastructure, and energy sectors are notorious for corruption. Mechanisms for channelling government budgets into political budgets are context specific, but there are three which stand out and cut across sectors and countries: patronage, cronyism, and direct budgeting. Some of these mechanisms are technically allowed—what is often referred to as legalized corruption—whereas others are manipulated and diverted into political budgets.

Patronage hiring into civil service positions is a major way to have a large political budget without the money necessarily needing to pass through your hands. In this scenario, civil service jobs are offered in exchange for loyalty. For example, in Iraq, political budgets stem from the government contracts and civil service positions allocated by the elite who control different ministries (Al-Kli and Miller 2023). In Iraq, these positions have historically been better paid and more secure than jobs within the broader private economy.

The second common mechanism is through government contracts. This can be a way to not only give business to potential allies but do so at a significant markup as a means of bribing them without ever having to touch the money. This mechanism thrives in opaque procurement processes and when there is little transparency into who has a stake in the companies (i.e. beneficial ownership). These contracts can be used to buy the support of influential actors, repay them for campaign debts (e.g. Nigeria's godfather deals), or for the use of the militias controlled by these allies. For example, in the midst of the Syrian civil war, government contracts for wheat, and oil were inflated and targeted at allies who in turn provided militias and avenues to circumvent sanctions (Mehchy 2021).

The third way government budgets are channelled into political budgets is through budget lines that are designed to blend in and disappear. These are budget lines that are in plain sight and give the officeholder significant discretion over how the funds are in fact used. For example, this includes positional allowances for certain amounts of unaudited spending, perks provided to the officeholder (e.g. cars, security, furniture), but it also includes local funding for local level projects that often go unnoticed and are unaudited. For example, in Nigeria, zonal projects are seen as the personal fiefdom for senators to award to their local allies when the funding is in fact the funding is supposed to support local development (Miller 2023b; Adebayo 2020).

Natural Resources

Natural resources such as petroleum (oil and natural gas), timber, gold, and other rare earth minerals are common sources of political budgets. One of the dominant ones is oil.

Iraq serves as an exemplary PM funded by oil rents. Specifically, Iraq is a rentier marketplace meaning that transactional politics dominate its formal political institutions and that oil-financed state funds for salaries and contracts are the central type of political budget fuelling the political system (Al-Kli and Miller 2023). Oil accounts for 77-93% of government revenues, 25-50% of GDP, almost 100% of foreign exchange earnings, and in turn, this money funds directly or indirectly almost 75% of national employment[17] (IMF 2015). Success within Iraq's political marketplace is tied to one's ability to distribute public sector jobs and commercial contracts. Oil has been a particularly lucrative source of political budgets, but as is discussed in the later section on political budget exposure, is subject to bust and boom cycles that can have dramatic implications for the configurations of power in PMs.

Businesses & Private Wealth

Wealthy businessmen and women hold outsized influence across the globe, but in PM countries, they are especially influential as sources of political budgets.

Consider the following example from Nigeria. On the eve of the Nigerian presidential election in 2019, reports began emerging of armoured trucks coming and going from the home of a major political party leader in Nigeria—Bola Tinubu. Tinubu was then a former governor of Lagos, an All Progressive's Party (APC) chieftain, renown kingmaker, and one of the wealthiest politicians in the country (Hassan 2022). Seen against Nigeria's history of widespread vote buying and election manipulation, this was extremely worrying. When asked about the armoured trucks, Tinubu said:

> "Is that my money or government money? . . . I'm on my own, and I'm committed to my party, so even if I have money to spend in my premises, what's your headache? Excuse me, if I don't represent any agency of government and I have money to spend, if I have money, if I like, I give it to the people for free of charge as long as not to buy votes" (Channels Television 2019).

It was his belief that since the was his own wealth,[18] he could do with it as he pleased as long as he was not attempting to buy votes. It is worth noting that Tinubu did not deny that he was handing out cash to people on election day by the literal truckload. He just denied that it was being used to buy votes. Without more information, it is difficult to tell exactly what was happening, but it does highlight how personal wealth can be a source of political budgets.[19] Examples of businesses and private wealth as sources of political budgets can be found across political marketplace countries such as Somalia (Majid et al. 2021) and Somaliland (de Waal 2015).

Criminal Enterprise & Licensed Predation

While political budgets are often seen as what is paid to individuals or groups in exchange for loyalty or services, political budgets can also be key political actors using their authority to allow things to happen in lieu of payment. This includes acts such as allowing smuggling rings to happen or even giving approval for groups to raid and pillage certain areas of the state.

For example, in 2013, South Sudan was in the midst of a civil war with President Salva Kiir struggling to remain in power. Oil rents—once the main source of political budgets within South Sudan—had collapsed after Kiir shut down oil production in 2012 due to a dispute with Sudan over transit fees. In effect, this was a political marketplace under conditions of austerity (Craze 2022). Since Kiir did not have cash to buy the support of militias, Kiir paid them with licenses to raid and kill hostile groups (Craze 2022, 13). Government-backed Bul Nuer militias attacked southern Unity state with impunity, stealing livestock, killing and displacing people—thereby also providing an opportunity to take over land.

Examples of acquiescence and collusion for certain criminal enterprises or licensed predation can also be found in DRC (Schouten 2021), Iraq (Skelton and Saleem 2020; Dodge et al. 2018), Nigeria (Barnett 2021; Miller 2022), Sudan (Patey 2023), and Syria (Kanfash 2021).

Violent Conflict & Conflict Economies

Violent conflict in political marketplace contexts embodies trends in how conflict dynamics have changed since the end of the Cold War. The rise of "New Wars" characterized by identity politics, guerilla warfare, civilian casualties outpacing combatant, and a blurring of the line between war and so-called "peacetime" are prevalent within these contexts (Kaldor 2012).[20] Outbreaks of violence and sustained insecurity create new rent-generating opportunities (Nordstrom 2008), that as Keen (2008) argued, create incentives for wars and violence to continue. One of those incentives is how war and violent conflict can create opportunities for political budgets.

There are three main ways that violent conflict creates opportunities for political budget: control over rent-producing resources, cover for illicit schemes, and a demand for certain types of government spending. The first, control over resources, is likely what comes to mind when thinking of how violent conflict can generate political budgets. This includes militias taking control of oil fields or diamond mines as has happened in Nigeria and the DRC (Ellis 2016; Maxwell and Fitzpatrick 2021). The second way is a general sense of insecurity that makes it easier for actors to operate the previously discussed illicit schemes. The third way is how violent conflict can create a demand for certain types of state spending (domestic and international) that may be leveraged for political budgets. This includes the funds to fight in the conflict (e.g. defence spending,[21] arms deals, hired mercenaries, etc.) as well as respond to the aftermath (e.g. humanitarian aid, reconstruction resources, etc.). Together, these create a conflict economy ripe with opportunities for political budgets. A striking example of this is Nigeria's security votes.

Security votes are officially budgeted funds given upon request to certain federal, state, and local officials for security-related issues (Page 2018). Outbreaks of violence can justify requests for security votes. In practice, security votes are used as opaque slush funds and sources of political budgets. This is made possible by the fact that security votes are distributed in cash, are unaudited, and historically have amounted to more than $670 million USD annually. To put this in context, security votes amounted to more than "70 percent of the annual budget of the Police Force, more than the Nigerian's annual budget, and more than the Nigerian Navy and Nigerian Air Force's annual budget combined" (Page 2018).

What is perhaps more striking than the degree to which these funds are channelled into political budgets, is that this is no secret. When you ask everyday Nigerians about where politicians are getting the funds to buy votes and pay off opponents, they consistently bring up security votes. One interviewee speculated that some politicians even stoke violence so they can justify requesting a security vote (FGD 2022). Security votes may happen behind closed doors, but the public is well aware of what is happening and how violence may be used to ensure the flow of money.

The example from Nigeria is a brash story, but not a unique one. Violence conflict and conflict economies as sources of political budgets can be seen across PM countries (e.g. Jaspars, Adan, and Majid 2020; Kanfash 2021).

Political Budget Exposure

One key aspect of political budgets is political budget exposure, meaning how secure one's political budget is. This is an expansion of the original formulation of the political marketplace theory. Political budget exposure is important because it can lead to the rise and fall of actors within the political marketplace.

Three main factors determine political budget exposure. First, by how diversified (or not) the sources of an actor's political budget are. Actors dependent on a single, conditional, or unpredictable funding source are highly exposed to any shocks to that source. For example, actors who depend on proceeds from a diamond mine are suddenly out of luck if a rival militia takes over the mine. There is a similar story for political actors who fall out of favour with their patron but do not have other sources of political budgets to fall back on. In contrast, political actors with multiple sources of political budgets are less exposed to the risks posed by the loss of a source. In a very real sense, they have a diversified portfolio that can withstand a certain degree of shocks. The riskier their political budget is, the more likely they may make unscrupulous deals or use violence to access other sources of political budgets.

The second factor of political budget exposure is the security of how political actors move funds to and from their political budget. This is the question of what channels these actors use to move funds. For example, is the actor in question moving money in cash, payouts folded into contracts, or through domestic or international banks? Each carries its own risk of being blocked, stolen, diverted, or traced. For example, those who move funds through domestic or international bank accounts need the expertise to know how to do so without raising red flags that could leave the transaction frozen or rejected.

Closely related to how political actors move funds is the question of where they keep them when they are not being used – the proverbial war chest. This may be a literal war chest (i.e. safe) as is the practice for some Nigerian politicians, but it could also be bank accounts registered to shell corporations or managed by cronies. Navigating the financial channels to move money and store it within banks requires financial expertise – bankers, lawyers, financial advisors, and so on – a segment that Frank Vogl has deemed "the enablers" (Vogl 2021). Middlemen who are technically doing their job, but by doing so, are enabling a sophisticated type of transaction in the political marketplace, and likely, kleptocratic practices that also enrich these politicians (e.g. Burgis 2021).

These three aspects of political budget exposure are interrelated and subject to different risks. Consider, for example, political budgets based on oil rents flowing through government contracts and stored in the bank accounts of shell corporations. The overall oil rents will have boom-and-bust cycles, meaning that one day the federal account is flush with cash, and the next, it could be running dry. Savvy political actors have multiple ways to divert the oil rents into their political budgets—whether at through the oil company, in the process of when the rents are remitted to the federal government account, or disguised ways it is distributed to them from the account. While prudent political marketplace operators may save for the inevitable bust and continually seek to look for other sources of political budgets—constant escalating demands, rising demands, and generally short time horizons mean that few have the capacity to do so. In addition, there is the continual risk that they could lose access to the bank account. These combined risks make their hold on political power tenuous, and in some cases, those who are desperate to hold onto power more brutal (e.g. Al-Kli and Miller 2023).

As previously stated, one's political budget exposure is key because it can lead to the rise and fall of key actors within the marketplace. Sudan provides a case in point.

From 2000 to 2011, Sudan experienced an oil boom that financed high levels of state spending, and most importantly—President Bashir's political budget (de Waal 2019). Bashir expertly wielded these resources to maintain patronage networks, outbid opponents, and maintain control over militias. However, this came at an ever-increasing cost. In 2011, South Sudan became an independent country, taking with it 75% of the oil fields once under Sudan's control. This sent shock waves through the political economy of Sudan and upended political finance. While oil rents, once the mainstay of political budgets, had drastically decreased, the demands for political finance were at an all-time high (Patey 2023). This created space for actors with control over lucrative resources that could replace what was lost. In 2012, gold was discovered in Darfur. At this point, General Hamdan Dagalo, commonly known as Hemedti, comes on stage. The gold trade was initially under a commander of the Border Guards (former 'Janjaweed') who told the central government to keep out (de Waal 2019). In an attempt to gain control, Bashir armed Hilal's rival, Gen. Hemedti, who eventually defeated Hilal to become one of the top gold traders—a fortunate position to be in for a transactional system requiring a large political budget.

In addition to the mercenary contracts, largely going to the RSF, sources of political finance were increasingly decentralized, and no longer directly flowing through Bashir (de Waal 2019). This affected Bashir's ability to make deals and maintain centralized control, eventually contributing to his downfall.

When Sudan lost the majority of its oil – one of the largest sources of political budgets – it gave new importance to alternate sources of political budgets. Hemedti capitalized on this by gaining control over the artisanal gold mines and mercenary contracts—fuelling his rise as a top player within the marketplace (Patey 2023). In sum, a shift in political budget exposure altered the power of key actors within Sudan's political marketplace.

Demanded Goods

What are marketplace actors specifically buying or selling? Yes, political power broadly, but what are the specific goods that they are demanding to be able to do that? This may include votes, the support of political party chieftains, and paying influential actors to not challenge their power. This could also be paying for the support of armed groups, especially if one's grasp on power is tenuous. This also includes purchasing the services of the previously described "enablers", the bankers, lawyers, and public relations agents who help to move actors' money, facilitate connections, all the while helping them craft desirable public images. Identifying what goods are being demanded within the PM can indicate where there are significant weaknesses within the political system, with the implication that this is where reforms and action may be most needed.

Price of Loyalty and Violence

What is the going rate for one's political support? Or in the case of violence, what is the going rate of a militia, thugs to interrupt a rally, or the kidnapping of an opponent? These can be understood as the price of loyalty and the price of violence. These prices fluctuate according to the market supply and demand. Understanding whether these prices are increasing or decreasing is a signal of the level of political competition and size of a political budget required to be competitive. While they may seem abstract, they are very real prices of which astute political market operators are well aware.

Implications for Anti-Corruption Efforts

If corruption serves a political function– a response to the material demand for resources to engage in the political marketplace – as I have argued, the key implication is that in order to address corruption, the demand for corruption must be addressed. In other words, anti-corruption efforts should address the function that corruption plays in the political system.

There are two ways to do this. First, by finding alternate ways to for actors to fund their political budgets outside of engaging in corruption. While that is one approach, it simply perpetuates the dominance of transactional political systems that have dire consequences for their populations (Sarkar et al. 2021). A better option is needed.

The second way is to fundamentally change the way the political marketplace operates so that actors do not need immense resources to buy and sell political power. This is about reducing the price of loyalty, negating the need to use violence, and constraining political competition within the intended political processes of the state. This second option calls for not simply opposing corruption (i.e. being "anti"), but fundamentally reshaping the political system—or in the language of this sector, transforming corruption.

Transforming Corruption

In the late 1990s, after a decade of attempts to resolve conflict with mixed results, John Paul Lederach advocated for a new approach: conflict transformation. He argued that bringing a conflict to an end was not enough because it did not necessarily address the factors behind the conflict or change the way that future conflicts may be handled. Instead, Lederach called for a new approach focused on transforming the way society deals with conflict and in doing so, transforming the relationship between conflicting parties (Lederach 2003). I make a similar argument about corruption.

Anti-corruption implies a focus on opposing a specific kind of behaviour. Given the many factors demonstrated to drive corruption and the functions that it fulfils—especially within systemically corrupt environments—this narrow aperture is analytically and pragmatically insufficient. Opposing something is different than articulating a different vision of what should be happening. Fundamentally, addressing questions of corruption is about addressing questions of power, who holds it, how they exercise it, and who can oppose it. Our analytical framework for addressing corruption should reflect that.

I argue that a shift is needed: moving from an opposing corruption (anti-corruption) to transforming it. Corruption transformation is about transforming the way the political system operates so that corruption is not a necessary feature of politics or daily life.[22]

Shifting to a transforming corruption mindset changes the type of questions we ask and the policy and programmatic solutions that can be brought to bear. This emphasizes a robust analysis of the factors driving corruption within a particular context drawing on multiple conceptual frameworks outlined at the beginning of this paper (including its political functionality), and an open consideration of ways to address those factors.

The Way Forward: Not a known path, but a direction of "True North"

To date, there is no political marketplace country that has transformed corruption to the point that corruption is no longer systemic. In that sense, we do not have "success cases"[23] to yet look to for lessons of how to effectively transform political marketplace countries. However, we are not without guidance on how to forge a path. Evidence from countries that have managed a degree of transforming corruption offer some lessons I argue are also applicable to political marketplace countries, though with some important caveats. Some of these efforts to transform corruption are not part of the traditional anti-corruption toolbox. Not only is that okay, I argue that is exactly what is needed.

Across research of countries that have effectively transformed corruption, there are common themes: the strategies were indirect, long-term strategies that made it possible for citizens to debate and contest who holds political power, how that power is exercised, and the ability to oppose it (Mungiu-Pippidi and Johnston 2017, 253; Johnston 2014; Jackson 2022; Kaufmann 2015; Médard 2002, 397). This is a finding that consistently emerges from studying how countries as diverse as Georgia, South Korea, Taiwan, Uruguay, Chile, Estonia, and the United States addressed corruption, as well as how changes occurred at the subnational level.

Johnston refers to this as “deep democratization”:

> “Deep democratization is a continuing process of building workable rules and accountability by bringing more voices and interests into the governing process. It is “deep” in a double sense: it draws force from many levels of society, reflecting the lasting interests of the humblest as well as the elites; and it extends deep into the institutions and processes of government, making these social interests a factor in policy-making and implementation, not just slogans at election time. The clash of interests and values; contention over the acceptable sources and uses of wealth and power, and over accountability; and disputes over the nature and significance of rights are of the essence in deep democratization and, I will suggest, in checking corruption" (Johnston 2014, 4).

While there is a normative argument to be made around the importance of individuals having the ability to have a voice in how they are governed, this is also an empirical one. Evidence suggests that democratic political systems matched with well-functioning bureaucracies lead to better human security outcomes for the average citizen compared to other forms of government (Sen 2000; Norris 2012). Strategies, like Johnston’s “deep democratization", are about making it possible for citizens to force their governments to consider their interests and to hold leaders accountable if they do not. It is worth noting that many countries that operate as political marketplaces claim to be democratic even if the reality of their politics is not.

While there is no conclusive evidence on "the path(s)" to transform corruption within political marketplaces, these findings give us a sense of what "true north" is that we can navigate by: making it possible for citizens to debate and contest who holds political power, how that power is exercised, and the ability to oppose it.[24] This opens up a much wider toolbox of corruption transformation approaches than have not traditionally been considered as part of an anti-corruption agenda.[25] This means also looking to other sectors – peacebuilding, development, and human rights among others – for strategies on how to build coalitions capable of transforming corruption. In political marketplace contexts, this means not starting with a public awareness of the negative aspects of corruption, something that most citizens do not need to be convinced of, but asking what would enable them to be able to challenge it. As Johnston (2014, 103) notes, this may be focusing on what would "begin to change" the political system or allow future changes, instead of immediately going after corrupt actions or a complete transformation of the system.

Consider this north star and how it opens up new approaches to addressing corruption within the context of Nigeria. As discussed throughout, Nigeria is a paradigmatic political marketplace state. It is also one which also captures the imagination for the mental image of a systemically corrupt context. Stories of politicians caught with suitcases of cash in the middle of the night, governors who pay thugs to destroy a road so that rural citizens cannot reach the polls, and Tinubu's armoured trucks on election day (ACLED 2023; Channels Television 2019). In addition, many anti-corruption approaches have met their match in Nigeria (Adebanwi and Obadare 2011). Anti-corruption commissions who have successfully contributed to the conviction of officials only see those same officials later pardoned by leaders who gave awards to the commission for their "achievements." Yet, embracing a corruption transformation approach, tells us to ask different questions – what would enable citizens and interested officials to be able to address corruption and what would mitigate the demand for it? Here, we find more interesting and clear-eyed answers.

As previously discussed, one of the key points of political competition within Nigeria's political marketplace plays out during elections. During elections, corruption reaches a fever pitch. Many anti-corruption programs focus on encouraging citizens not to sell their votes or work as thugs-for-hire instigators for politicians. However, as Hoffmann and Patel (2022) have shown in their research, this misses the point. Nigerians are largely opposed to vote-selling but see it as a practical necessity given the dire economic conditions of the country. Research has long showed that political organization let alone social cohesion is extremely difficult in conditions of economic precarity (Guyer 2004; Bates 2008). This was also true in Western nations where widespread corruption once simply part of politics (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Stokes 2013). The impact of economic precarity is even more severe when combined with conditions of violent conflict as can be found across Nigeria. The core point is that it is difficult to oppose how those in power are exercising that power if one's attention is focused on daily survival. Whereas an anti-corruption approach may focus on changing attitudes towards vote-selling or increasing monitoring to prevent it from happening, a corruption transformation approach asks what needs to happen to enable average citizens to be able to reject the practice not only on an individual level, but as a normalized practice within elections.

Understanding exactly what is needed begins with a deep understanding of the context and the specific factors driving corrupt behaviours—this is especially true for political marketplaces (de Waal et al. 2020).[26] Sometimes this may mean addressing daily precarity, other times it may simply mean focusing on rebuilding trust between conflict-torn communities (Johnston 2010). There is no one answer because the reality of each context is not only unique, but it is dynamic. Understanding the path towards the north star starts with a deep understanding of the terrain that lays ahead—the reality of the political marketplace—and an openness to different ways forward.[27]

Conclusion

At its core, corruption is a question about political power—the difference between how it is intended to be used and its reality. The last three decades have demonstrated that corruption—especially systemic corruption—is not simply a technocratic issue that can be solved with the "right" fix. It is also about political power. Addressing corruption requires grappling with its political role within the political system.

This paper has advanced two main arguments, and in the process, a third. First, that in weakly institutionalized political systems—countries like the DRC, Somalia, Iraq, Venezuela, and even Indonesia—corruption is driven not just by economic, social, or practical reasons, but also by political ones. Corruption in these contexts can supply the resources elite actors use to make deals within and outside of formal institutions. These deals range from bribing one's way through a primary to hiring a militia to take over a gold mine or intimidate a rival. While distasteful and extremely detrimental to the broader public, these deals are some of the defining features of how these political systems operate.

Secondly, given the political role that corruption can play within weakly institutionalized systems, I have argued for a paradigm shift from anti-corruption to transforming corruption. Addressing the political role of corruption in these contexts requires a transformation of the political systems—something for which I have argued traditional anti-corruption approaches are not adequately equipped. Opposing a corrupt behaviour—the meaning of anti-corruption—is not synonymous with articulating a vision of what should be happening beyond the individual behaviour. Fundamentally, as others have argued as well (Johnston and Fritzen 2021; Médard 2002; Mungiu-Pippidi and Johnston 2017; Pallavi, Khan, and Slota 2022), addressing corruption is about addressing who holds power, how they exercise it, and who is able to oppose it. Our analytic framework for addressing corruption should reflect that. Shifting to a transforming corruption mindset changes the types of questions we ask and the types of policy and programmatic solutions that can be brought to bear.

Lastly, in my use of the political marketplace framework as an analytic lens, I have shown how the PMF can be used to analyse how these political systems operate, and more importantly, what the political role of corruption is within each system. I presented several conceptual tools—*political budgets, political budget exposure, demanded goods, and the price of loyalty and violence*—to examine how, political finance, meaning the overall money flows through the political system to facilitate deals, fund patronage networks, and purchase the previously described political services. This framework was developed from countries that meet specific PM conditions, but as demonstrated in the course of this paper, it is also a useful tool for analysing a range of weakly institutionalized political systems. While it is not explored within this paper, the PMF may also yield some insights into the political role of corruption in more institutionalized political systems like the United States, Russia, or China where the role of political corruption has not disappeared, but arguably been integrated into legal political processes.

The path towards addressing systemic corruption in weakly institutionalized political systems is certainly an uphill climb fraught with numerous challenges. However, with a better understanding of the reality of how these political systems operate and the political role of corruption, we can better understand the challenges ahead and the paths that are more likely to lead to a different future.

Appendix A: Listing of Political Marketplace Case Studies and Thematic Papers

Concept	Source
Foundational Theory	(de Waal 2015)
Country	**Research Papers**
Democratic Republic of the Congo	(Schouten 2021; Maxwell and Fitzpatrick 2021)
Ethiopia	Waal 2015; 2018)
Eritrea	(de Waal 2015)
Indonesia	Forthcoming
Iraq	(Skelton and Saleem 2020; Al-Kli and Miller 2023; Dodge et al. 2018)
Nigeria	(Miller 2023b; 2022)
Somalia	(de Waal 2015; Majid et al. 2021; Jaspars, Adan, and Majid 2020)
Somaliland	(de Waal 2015)
South Sudan	(de Waal 2015; de Waal et al. 2017; Boswell et al. 2019; McCrone 2021; Craze 2022)
Sudan	(de Waal 2015; 2019; Gallopin et al. 2021; Patey 2023)
Syria	(Kanfash 2021; Mehchy 2021)
Theme	**Research Papers & Policy Briefs**
Mediation	(de Waal, Spatz, and Sarkar 2022)
Humanitarianism	(Sarkar et al. 2021)
PMF Toolkits	(Ben Spatz, Sarkar, and de Waal 2021)
Theories of Change for PMs	(de Waal et al. 2020)
Traumatic Decarbonization & Peacemaking	(Ben Spatz, Sarkar, and de Waal 2022)

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*Note that interviews are included as references organized under "Interview" or "Focus Group Discussion" (FGD) and then their interview number.

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Endnotes

[1] This is one of the most commonly used definitions of corruption used by researchers and organizations (e.g. Transparency International, n.d.). For a broader debate on how to define corruption, see (Philp 2002; Heidenheimer and Johnston 2002; Torsello and Venard 2016).

[2] These case studies are listed in Appendix A and available at https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/political-markets-justice-and-security-program/.

[3] For examples of how informal practices which some may consider corruption are not necessarily considered corrupt behaviors within specific contexts, see (Ledeneva 2017a; 2017b).

[4] For a deeper discussion of the evolution of the "anti-corruption industry" see (Johnston and Fritzen 2021, 1–22).

[5] Weakly institutionalized political systems are also called hybrid political orders (Boege, Brown, and Clements 2009), competitive authoritarian states (Levitsky and Way, 2010), neopatrimonial states (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997), and new despots (Keane, 2020). Those that are nominally democratic are also called electoral autocracies (Evie et al. 2023).

[6] It is worth noting that while states such as the United States and United Kingdom are now based on rational legal authority, each has a history of personalized political power that did not always embrace the public-private dichotomy epitomized by Weberian structures.

[7] For a thorough discussion of these different schools of thought, see (Wathne 2021; Wedel 2012).

[8] For a discussion of these see (Marquette and Peiffer 2019).

[9] Marquette and Peiffer (2018; 2019) argue that principal-agent and collective action frameworks for understanding corruption are compatible with each other – because principal-agent problems exist alongside and within collective action – though this view is heavily contested by Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell (2019).

[10] Neopatrimonialism is a type of hybrid regime in which patterns of patrimonialism—personal rule—co-exist with, and suffuse, rational-legal institutions (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997, 62).

[11] A similar approach was used in using the PMF to analyse contemporary mediation efforts. See (de Waal, Spatz, and Sarkar 2022).

[12] See Appendix A for a listing of PMF case studies and thematic research papers. These are also available online at https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/political-markets-justice-and-security-program/.

[13] The two leading political parties, the All Progressives Party and People's Democratic Party, fixed the cost of the presidential nomination form at approximately $240,000 and the cost of the gubernatorial nomination form at approximately $120,000.

[14] Note that all interviewee names have been removed for the protection of interviewees.

[15] Bribes for individual delegates ranged from $558-900 (Interview 225 2022).

[16] It is worth noting that political budgets were once vital to politics in countries like the United States and United Kingdom. For example, machine politics in the US fostered corruption which "was not random greed but was finely organized and articulated to maximize its electoral support" (Scott 2002, 222). Research suggests that political machines have historically occurred in contexts with electoral competition and rapid social change where political power was fragmented, social cleaves divided the population, and the population was impoverished (Scott 2002, 228).

[17] Note that this statistic is based on formal employment and does not include informal employment.

[18] While Tinubu claims his wealth is legitimate, there are reports that his wealth originally stems from corrupt dealings from a firm contracted to collect taxes on behalf of the Lagos State Government when Tinubu was governor (Clowes 2022; Hassan 2022).

[19] While the focus here is on licit sources of political budgets as they relate to political marketplace countries, the same tools of analysis may lead to insights about other political systems in which wealthy elite have an outsized influence on the political process (e.g. the United States).

[20] It is worth noting Bates' (2008) previously mentioned argument that the rise of identity-based violent conflict may be a result of the breakdown of political order and a response to elite predation that forced populations to bound together into groups to defend themselves.

[21] Defense spending is notoriously opaque and rife with examples of political corruption (e.g. Perlo-Freeman 2017).

[22] It is worth noting that Lederach's argument for conflict transformation also sees conflict as an opportunity – this is where my analogy to corruption transformation ends. I do not argue that corruption is an opportunity, but I do argue it is part of every political system and often indicates that something within the political system is not working.

[23] Rwanda is often pointed to as an exemplary case of how a country with significant levels of corruption can address corruption. This should be treated with caution. Rwanda's path to address corruption was unique and its endpoint may have addressed certain types of corruption, but let others continue, all the while providing little room for the civil liberties that its political system claims to protect. For a discussion of this, see (Marquette 2021, 5–6).

[24] Roy, Khan, and Slota's (2022) power, capabilities and interests approach offers one toolkit about how to design strategies and programs capable of addressing corruption within a given context.

[25] For examples of proposed new approaches, see (Jackson and Köbis 2018)

[26] For example, Johnston (2014, 50) recommends focusing on four different reform tasks – increasing pluralism, opening safe political and economic space, reform activism, maintaining accountability – as primary or secondary foci depending on the particular syndrome of corruption in a given context.

[27] For specific steps on how to conduct a PMF analysis, see (Ben Spatz, Sarkar, and de Waal 2021). For guidance on formulating specific theories of change for political marketplace contexts, see (de Waal et al. 2020).

About Us

The World Peace Foundation, an operating foundation affiliated solely with the Fletcher School at Tufts University, aims to provide intellectual leadership on issues of peace, justice and security. We believe that innovative research and teaching are critical to the challenges of making peace around the world, and should go hand-in-hand with advocacy and practical engagement with the toughest issues. To respond to organized violence today, we not only need new instruments and tools—we need a new vision of peace. Our challenge is to reinvent peace.

https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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